

Architecture and the Ethics of Authenticity

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Silos, mills, sheds, and refineries: Across most of Oklahoma's gently rolling prairie countryside these artistically uninformed structures often provide the only vertical punctuation to a landscape otherwise made of mostly horizontal lines. One of the pleasures of teaching architecture here is to participate in the intellectual progress of students -- many of whom hail from rural areas and have traveled little -- as they eventually come to regard these structures with much the same admiration expressed for them some 80 years ago by Le Corbusier in his rallying polemic against the arbitrariness of nineteenth century architecture; *Vers Une Architecture*.¹ Like Le Corbusier, many of my students would have their work emulate these structures' unselfconscious formal muscularity, frank materiality, and technological pragmatism; aesthetic qualities that emerge indirectly from having only usefulness in mind. Most students would gladly trade in whatever cultural élan they gain along the way in studio, during summer semesters in Europe, or in architectural history class, for the ability to create work with such qualities, and I wouldn't disagree with them.

The yearnings of today's students to capture the authority of unselfconscious design emerge from a different, and more radical, sense of the arbitrary than Le Corbusier confronted. In place of what in hindsight appears to be the relatively narrow problem of the arbitrariness of the prevailing style and the backwardness of taste, they experience aesthetic pursuit itself as arbitrary. When pushed to answer: "Why this form? Why this material?" Le Corbusier would have cited the pressing, inescapably rational logic of contemporary technology, industrial production, and the Zeitgeist coalescing to not merely permit, but to require, a modern

approach to architecture. Though architects found these ideas to be adequately motivating for many years, these justifications eventually proved to be hollow. Instead of providing worthy goals and ideals, the belief in the necessity and the transformative effects of modernism turned out mainly to legitimize only another set of aesthetic preferences. As Virginia Postrel heralds with undisguised pleasure: "Modern design was once a value-laden signal -- a sign of ideology. Now it's just a style, one of many possible forms of personal aesthetic expression."² All that is left after giving up on the quest to 'get it right' in the metaphysically and ontologically strong sense, is to 'get it right—for me.' Although aesthetic pursuit is still considered an important facet of a fully human existence, it is primarily as a form of individual pleasure-taking and self-discovery; not as a vehicle for societal improvement.

Since aesthetic preference can no longer find cover behind such notions as progress or advancing human solidarity, to express oneself aesthetically these days is to be utterly exposed. This more radical sense of the arbitrariness of aesthetic preference has, of course, occurred within the context of the demise of positivism in all the arts: The idea of aesthetic progress has become sheer naivety, vanity, nostalgia or all three. We can no longer count on necessary beginning points, nor on convergence towards important ends. Movement occurs, surely, but it is rudderless at the same time it is willful. Arthur Danto perfectly diagnoses this radical sense of the arbitrary: "It is part of what defines contemporary art that the art of the past is available for such use as artists care to give it. What is not available to them is the spirit in which the art was made."³ The safest response to the challenge "Why this form?" is

"Why not? Do you have something better?" The Corbusian reply, "Because it is the correct form,"⁴ can no longer be given.

What remains after draining off a sense of common purpose and direction in one's artistic work is that the expression of aesthetic vision through the art objects one creates for public display, if the object is truly the result of personal vision instead of the deliberate repackaging of popular taste, must ultimately be an attempt to advance one's will. Form can no longer be good because it is heading us in the right direction, but only because enough people assert a preference for it. Thus, the entirely reasonable yearning arises for things that take their forms by necessity, rather than by the assertion of someone's artistic willfulness over the rest of us; a preference for 'mere real things' over art objects. Sensing the willfulness behind the art object, a willfulness whose objective cannot be trusted, we sensibly recoil. Such real things as silos and sheds –though quite likely imposing structures which alter their immediate environments – are created without the added imposition of willful artistic intent. They can stay enmeshed with the countryside, or we can single them out for aesthetic appraisal. Artworks, contaminated with aesthetically informed intentions, only rarely merge with the scenery. Instead, they all too often seek us out; they won't leave us alone. They try too hard. We seek refuge from them in the real and the everyday. "Why are you asserting all this art on me?" we ask. We cannot live in such a suffocating environment as the thoroughly artistically intentioned one. Adolph Loos' story of the "Poor Little Rich Man" whose environment is so completely designed that he "was precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring"⁵ comes back to haunt us again, but attuned to a slightly different situation. Whereas Loos was satirizing 'total design,' we are concerned instead to avoid 'total art.' What we desire from the silo or shed (or for that matter, a relaxed interior with a 'lived in' look) is nothing less than artless art.

The Declining Fortunes of Authenticity

The attraction of unselfconscious design stems from more than the hypocritical desire to cloak aesthetic preferences in claims of necessity in order to surreptitiously have one's way. It is symptomatic of a desire to

overcome the limitations of what Charles Taylor has identified as our culture of authenticity; a culture which so prizes the living of authentically individual lives that the exercise of choice and self-expression are all that are left as ultimate goods.⁶ The apex of such a culture is to live the life of the 'artist', and most architecture students indeed cite the desire to exercise artistic creativity as the primary reason they enter architecture school (The opportunity of making the world a better place runs a distant second.)⁷ Taylor argues that when choice and self-expression are elevated over a regard for the content of one's choices, culture becomes susceptible to the paired dangers of the trivialization and flattening of all values. We architecture professors oblige our students' desire to be creative artists by giving them instruction in the compositional techniques of what can only be called neo-modernism, (or modernism lite: modernism *sans* its bloated ideology), which, with its premium placed on abstract composition and turning away from forms of the past, turns out to be an ideal medium for the expression of one's individuality but inevitably an uncomfortable fit with the imperatives of community. Thus, while neo-modernism no longer entails the moral baggage of improving the lot of mankind, this void in values has been amply filled by its ability to facilitate students' personal journeys of expression much more ably than could, say, classicism, with its anachronistic ontology of correctness. Architectural neo-modernism is tailor-made for the culture of authenticity, for not only does it eschew ontologies, in its employ one could never be accused of pandering to popular taste.

This freedom of self-expression modernism encourages, however, does not come without cost. For now, in addition to the desire to clothe the personal exposure they experience just for having design tastes, students also feel the tremendous burden of having to somehow justify a design vocabulary which is presented as at bottom a matter of personal preference, and therefore beyond justification in the strong sense of having an ethical, ontological or metaphysical basis. Grain silos and mill buildings do not have to account for themselves in this way. Somehow, their status as mere objects insulates them from all this.

This status is not, however, invulnerable. It has, in fact, long been under attack by the art

world. Ever since Duchamp presented his readymades, art has repeatedly subverted and blurred the status of mere objects. Since the idea of aesthetic progress is now, ironically, a thing of the past, a work of art no longer has to take certain forms to be progressive, hence it can now look like anything. Danto greets this turn of events with enthusiasm: "These artistic possibilities are but realizations and applications of the immense philosophical contribution of the 1960s to art's self-understanding: that artworks can be imagined, or in fact produced, which look exactly like mere real things which have no claim to the status of art at all, for the latter entails that you can't define artworks in terms of some particular visual properties they must have.... This alone finished the modernist agenda..."⁸ Thus, the question of art's telos which occupied much of twentieth century theory and history has been supplanted, as Walter Benjamin predicted⁹ (though in an unexpected way—not as a denigration of its aura brought on by the availability of widespread cheap mechanical reproduction, but instead as a preoccupation with the limits of aesthetic production itself), by the question of authenticity: "What makes the difference between an artwork and something which is not an artwork if in fact they look exactly alike?"¹⁰ As a result, the ability to aesthetically appreciate the structures of the Oklahoma prairie is simultaneously easier to come by, for it is made a less foreign idea by these developments in the art world, but it is also compromised by the prospect that these objects could easily become fodder for artistic appropriation. This instability makes emulation of their aesthetic qualities all the more elusive.

Joseph Margolis' reassuring and fortifying answer to the question of authenticity is to dismiss it as either a non-question or else the end of art, for, he argues convincingly, a work of art has never been able to be reduced to the mere matter from which it is made. A work of art can only ever be understood as such by considering amongst its raw materials its cultural context; its emergence out of its culture as well as its historical situation.¹¹ Thus the mere fact that Duchamp, pop, and more contemporary artists made great hay by intentionally making artworks physically indistinguishable from mere real things has no standing at all. This visual similarity between

Duchamp's *Bottlerack* and *Fountain* and Warhol's *Brillo Box* and real bottleracks, urinals, and Brillo boxes can only be understood from the point of view of the intentionality built into the artwork by the artist and the cultural, historical context in which those intentions were sown. Lacking these culturally emergent properties, Margolis thinks, art simply fails to exist.¹² For Margolis, then, it is the status of art, not of mere real things, that is at risk.

The question of what makes something a work of art is not, of course, quite the inverse of the problem troubling my architecture students. They are less concerned with identifying the characteristics that enable art to preserve its status, than they are with preserving the characteristics that enable the mere real things they admire from acquiring art's tarnish of arbitrary willfulness. Margolis' diagnosis, however, is a helpful starting point for this project as well. Silos, grain elevators, and sheds retain their amateur status as mere real things as long as they aren't produced with the taint of willful artistic intent. The real problem is that it appears that what students yearn for is an oxymoron; the unselfconsciously-designed work of architecture. Students' desires to design objects as unassailable as grain silos and cow sheds (or medieval Italian hill towns if they've been to Europe), then, becomes a cruel catch-22; they can only hope to achieve the aesthetic qualities they most admire if they don't try to pursue them. Active pursuit of these qualities turns the real object into an artistically intentioned object, and hence it loses the very quality that made it desirable in the first place: It loses its quality of authentic unselfconsciousness by its artistic intentionality. Yet, how can the aesthetic component of design—a component that goes back to the earliest formulations of what a work of architecture should provide—just be ignored? An architect can never design just a grain silo or a shed; she can only design these things weighted down with the cultural baggage of aesthetic sensibility and intent. She can only design a 'silo' or a 'shed.' Her very education, and her growing self-awareness as a designer, prevents the removal of the scare quotes because she can no longer design within a tradition or without artistic intentionality.

This situation can only be termed perverse, but it degenerates still further from perverse

to dismaying in the face of most of the roadside vernacular of contemporary times. Sheds and mills may have been the noble prairie vernacular in Le Corbusier's day, but the K-Marts and fast food joints that make up the folk building or utilitarian design of our times could hardly be more base. Thus, a more ready-at-hand and less nostalgia-prone source of aesthetic value is sadly unavailable either. We can predict with smug certainty that these structures will never find their LeCorbusier to look upon them with erstwhile aesthetic favor (thus omitting Robert Venturi's *ironic* appreciation of such environments). The perversity of the quest for authenticity acquires a tragic dimension when it emerges that the search for the elusive quality of architectural authenticity is both part of, and made all the more difficult by, students' developing self-awareness evolving from their search for a uniquely individual design vision. This search for one's individual voice, if Taylor's diagnosis is correct, characteristically leads further into the self and away from the engagement with the world that would guard against such searches lapsing into triviality. This search too readily becomes merely an exercise in exercising one's power of choice as evidence of one's emerging individuality.

Between Art and Mere Thing

What is desired is a meeting ground, an intermediate position between the mutually exclusive categories of artwork and mere real thing, where objects can be admired for their own sakes without taking on the additional burden of artistic willfulness. This is a category Heidegger, presciently, sought to provide with the concept of 'equipment.' "Only a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood are for us such mere things."¹³ "A piece of equipment, for instance, footgear, also rests in itself as finished like a mere real thing, but it does not have the character of having taken shape by itself like the block of granite. On the other hand, equipment displays an affinity with a work of art insofar as it is something produced by the human hand...Thus a piece of equipment is half-thing...and yet it is something more; at the same time it is half art-work and yet something less..."¹⁴ Grain elevators and sheds, as big pieces of equipment, fit well into this mediating category which doesn't tarnish everything as an artwork simply because it is brought forth with an eye towards aesthetics. Heidegger's

philosophical subtlety allowed him to elicit out a mode of existence that makes the practice of culling everything into the mutually exclusive categories of artwork/mere real thing appear clumsy, inelegant, and undiscerning. The attraction of this intermediate category immediately presents itself.

A basic feature of equipment is serviceability. "Both the formative act and the choice of material—a choice antecedently given with this act—and, accordingly, mastery over the conjoining of matter and form, are all grounded in such serviceability."¹⁵ Clearly, for Heidegger, a grain silo is equipment, not a mere thing, and hence is a halfway object. Perhaps it is just this halfway quality that makes such things so appealing. They are approachable and human when the work of art can be overpowering, and the mere real thing utterly mute, indifferent, and impenetrable. But it also suggests the possibility that this category of existence is so highly unstable as to be of little help. Heidegger's example of the peasant shoes in van Gogh's painting, ironically, gives further credence to this worry, because here, the equipment has expressly been turned into an artwork, an article that now has the added ingredient of self-consciousness that art adds and can never subtract. The very act of taking the peasant shoes out of context to examine them as equipment has rendered them no longer the very thing they were intended to exemplify. This problem doesn't appear to be isolated to Heidegger's choice of example. The problem is, as Margolis intimates, that as soon as an item of equipment is singled out, dislodged from its work function for aesthetic regard, it rapidly loses that quality that made it an item of utility in the first place. But only by singling out a pair of work shoes, or a grain silo, for scrutiny as an impressive object in its own right, can awareness of the existence of its aesthetic qualities even arise. This process of an object's sliding between categories happens all the time, when, for example, a piece of pottery, a finely turned wood bowl, or a well-made sword is brought out of its cupboard and displayed on a shelf. Equipment is a category of object that, to the degree the object becomes the subject of aesthetic scrutiny, appears to annihilate itself. Such objects can tolerate only a few furtively sly glances before they begin to succumb to the degradation of being regarded as art.

Though Heidegger's formulation may be inadequate for these purposes, the sought-after intermediate category may yet exist. Both the categories of folk art and of industrial design appear to do much the same work as does Heidegger's equipment, but with greater conceptual stability, because both incorporate a concern for use and a sophisticated aesthetic consciousness from the start. Folk art is distinguished from contemporary art, not by regard for the everydayness of things, certainly not by a difference in craftsmanship or attention to materiality, but instead by its willingness to accept quite severe cultural and material constraints on its items of production. The characteristic that most distinguishes folk art from contemporary art, then, is the level of questioning each is willing to sustain. Folk art, unselfconsciously, doesn't interrogate its very conditions of existence the way contemporary art has become compelled to do. By accepting its existential givens, folk art doesn't suffer from the exacerbated willfulness of the contemporary artwork. Though as a category, folk art is both stable and clearly occupies an intermediary position, it is something of a stretch to attribute either LeCorbusier's or my students' high regard for prairie vernacular as a form of folk art appreciation. For while the prairie vernacular may well enjoy the untroubled cultural fit of folk art, part of its appeal is its absence of the sentiment and ties with the past that partly defines folk art.

Industrial design provides a category of existence between artwork and mere real thing too, but not without discarding some of the aesthetic resources common to both folk art and architecture. While the category of industrial design may well fit a grain elevator, its not grain elevators per se that architecture students are hoping to achieve, but instead, works of architecture with the visual authority of grain elevators. The situation is better characterized as an architect 'doing' industrial design, or perhaps achieving culturally resonant industrial design. Once this chasm between architecture and industrial design is acknowledged, it appears that one may do one or the other, but not both simultaneously. But the possibility of having both simultaneously is more what the attraction of unselfconscious design entails. Thus, while these intermediate categories hold promise, they each come up short in certain crucial aspects.

Contributing to the instability of the status of such objects as grain elevators in our culture is what Michael Benedikt (following Joseph Pine and James Gilmore) has identified as the effects of the "experience economy" on our perceptions and valuations of things in the world.¹⁶ In a mature capitalist economy such as ours, the repackaging of goods and services as experiences of various kinds—a dining experience instead of dinner, a shopping experience instead of a department store—in order to differentiate goods and maximize return on investment tends to appropriate large sectors of the world into commodities for private consumption, and architecture is no exception. To the degree that a building or a work of art is perceived as an experience, it loses its status as a material thing; as something with an independent existence. The upshot may be "a disturbing shift in modern culture, namely, the loss of a healthy balance between what is real life and what is not—between what is authentic and what is not—and the balance between these qualities that architecture has historically been instrumental in providing."¹⁷ Benedikt's diagnosis of architecture's slide into experiential subjectivity dovetails well with Danto's insights on the art world and with Taylor's on the quest for individuality. For all three, authenticity becomes the pivotal topic. Danto sees it as a one of the most interesting topics in contemporary art. For Benedikt, the problematization of authenticity signals a retreat from some of architecture's most long-standing values. And for Taylor, the search for personal authenticity has deviated from the culturally healthy mode of self-discovery as a dialogic process engaged in reciprocally with others into a kind of connoisseurship of subjective personal experience and self-expression.

A Different Approach to Authenticity

The accumulated effects of authenticity's subjective turn can be observed in another example drawn from the Oklahoma vernacular, though not from the prairie this time, but from an aging part of Oklahoma City: from the district known as Bricktown. In Bricktown, a derelict zone of aging warehouses is undergoing rehabilitation at great public expense into a themed outdoor mall dining and entertainment district. Even the very name "Bricktown" suggests the careful aesthetic framing for the purpose of

commodification what was formerly nondescript yet real. Between what were once the loading dock backsides of mostly three-story brick buildings a canal has been dug to provide both identity for the development as well as another dimension to the experience of a visit as the hoped-for boatloads of tourists glide up and down its three-block length. At Bricktown, structures never designed with 'experience' in mind become co-opted into service by this subjective attitude toward authenticity and begin to lose their material reality in the process. The questions concerning authenticity begin to multiply. Which buildings are new? Which recreate and simulate the old? Which are intact? And which have suffered such a blurring of the material and the experiential that it is no longer possible to tell? The pressing into service of these old utilitarian structures as a new backdrop for tourist experiences brings the problem of maintaining the status of mere real things into fresh relief.

While Bricktown illustrates the thorough subjectivization of authenticity, it also suggests a way back. Though only marginally successful as a tourist experience, the district has increasingly become a popular destination for local residents who are seeking a more intensified urban environment than is usually available to them. The locals use Bricktown in piecemeal fashion as it suits them: for lunch, a picnic, a rendezvous point, a place to kill a little time. By so doing the locals have begun to fold Bricktown into the everyday life of the city, and the district is becoming a real place all over again, despite the intentions of its boosters. Its not (nor will it ever be again) the same kind of real place it once was, but it is on the road back to a new reality through public appropriation. This process illustrates well what Taylor terms the dialogic nature—the negotiation, and the openness to outside interpretation required for the process of establishing a non-deviant non-trivial authenticity to reestablish itself.¹⁸ By encouraging multiple and possibly contentious appropriations of their buildings, architects can aspire once again to creating objects with at least some of the status of mere real things.

Thus, the trick is not necessarily to emulate primal, primitive siloesque forms to achieve an architecture of toughness and necessity, but rather to design buildings with enough

generosity towards appropriation that people are encouraged to take possession of them. Though the direct path from artwork to mere real thing is foreclosed to the artist (or architect), a building can be appropriated back into realness, as Benjamin thought, by its public: "Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception—or rather, by touch and sight....Tactile appropriation...occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion."¹⁹ Buildings that encourage the Benjaminesque distracted inhabitation of them, rather than constantly requiring people to take notice of how cleverly they are assembled, are the ones most likely to garner the same kind of affection that the vernacular structures of the Oklahoma countryside enjoy. Students who want to emulate those qualities must become, to some degree, psychologists and sociologists of human use of form and space, for only then can they provide the necessary amount of, but not too overwhelmingly much, artistic assertion in their designs to intrigue but not bully. Their buildings may again aspire to the status of mere real things, just not the same kind of unselfconsciously designed real things they have come to appreciate: The realness of accommodating human activity with a certain laissez-faire generosity will impart to their works all the authenticity currently available. Things go from aesthetically distanced to immediate through repeated contact, use, and appropriation for many diverging ends. They then become knit into the fabric of a real life, their autonomy crumbles, and aesthetic distance collapses. They become part of the dialogue of authenticity. Happily, against the odds this is what has begun to happen at Bricktown. That places such as Bricktown can begin the journey back to mere real thing is a heartening demonstration. It intimates that the quest for an architecture not crippled by aesthetic self-consciousness is still a possible and worthwhile pursuit. It also provides architecture students with a handy measuring rod for the progress of their own journeys through self-definition. They can measure their progress by the degree to which they feel secure enough to release a certain amount of control in their work for the sake of encouraging others to possess it and make their own interpretations.

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- ¹ Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture*. New York: Payson & Clarke LTD. 1927. See esp. 25-31. "Thus we have the American grain elevators and factories, the magnificent FIRST FRUITS of the new age. THE AMERICAN ENGINEERS OVERWHELM WITH THEIR CALCULATIONS OUR EXPIRING ARCHITECTURE." 31.
- ² Postrel, Virginia. *The Substance of Style*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003. 9.
- ³ Danto, Arthur C. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. 5.
- ⁴ Le Corbusier. "Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light." 29.
- ⁵ Loos, Adolph. *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays 1897-1900*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982 (for the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, and The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies. 125-127.
- ⁶ Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. 4: Taylor speaks of "the dark side of individualism is a centring on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society."
- "self truth and self-wholeness are seen more and more not as means to be moral, as independently defined, but as something valuable for their own sake." (64-5) This quest for authenticity as a personal retreat into the innermost reaches and genius of the self, however, is ultimately self-defeating. "Authenticity involves originality, it demands a revolt against convention." (65) The search for authenticity, to avoid flattening of meaning and triviality, requires the personally liberating strategies of "(i) creation and construction as well as discovery, (ii) originality, and frequently (iii) opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality." but it also requires "(i) openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creation loses the background that can save it from insignificance) and (ii) a self-definition in dialogue. That these demands may be in tension has to be allowed. But what must be wrong is a simple privileging of one over the other..." (66)
- ⁷ American Institute of Architects. "Preliminary 2003 Internship and Career Survey Results" 60% report 'putting creative abilities into practical use' as the most important reason for entering the profession. Washington: American Institute of Architects, 2003.
- ⁸ Danto, *After the End of Art*. 16-17.
- ⁹ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Arendt, Hannah, ed. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 219-254.
- ¹⁰ Danto. *After the End of Art*. 125.
- ¹¹ Margolis, Joseph. *What, After All, Is A Work of Art?* University Park: Pennsylvania State University

Press, 1999. 68. "Artworks are physically embodied and culturally emergent entities."

¹² Margolis, 32. "If, by the impossible, Danto were right, then there'd be no art at all...To admit art in the first place means denying that the *perception* of an artwork, or the *visual appearance* of any artwork, could possibly be confined to whatever was relevant to the perception, or the mere appearance, of 'mere real things' (in Danto's idiom)."

¹³ Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art" tr. by Albert Hofstadter in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, eds. New York: Modern Library, 1964. 653.

¹⁴ Heidegger, 659.

¹⁵ Heidegger, 658.

¹⁶ Benedikt, Michael. "Reality and Authenticity in the Experience Economy" *Architectural Record*, 11/01.

¹⁷ Benedikt.

¹⁸ Taylor. Esp. 33.

¹⁹ Benjamin, 242.