

# The Project as Encounter with the Others: An Ethical Opportunity in Design

PHILIPPE D'ANJOU  
Florida Atlantic University

## Introduction

How to address the issue of ethics in design education can be approached by acknowledging the primacy of the human person in the design act and in the project.

Ethics in design education is a matter of getting the students to develop an attitude that arises from moral sentiment. An ethical design cannot be limited to obeying to codes and professional regulations. For a project to be ethical it has to come from an ethical designer, and for a designer to be ethical he has to be an ethical person. To be ethical means that an existential conversion needs to happen in the design learning process in order to awake the moral sensitivity of the students and that moment of conversion represents the crucial threshold for integrating ethics in the pedagogy of design.

What is at stake when engaging in a project in design is no less than the human condition, for the designer, the user, and humanity as a whole. From that perspective, "humanity" is the primary concern of design because designing means to recreate the world at both the physical and the existential levels of reality and for both the designer and the others. In that sense any project represents a nexus where the designer encounters the others and the self; beyond the artefactual project exists the human project, the designer's and the others'. Being a place of human encounter, the project is therefore an opportunity for choosing humanity, self and others, in its fullest dimension as human persons. This stance implies that a project has to be contemplated in regard to its intrinsic oughtness, i.e., the value aspects of design

choices. And with the notion of the human person as a paradigm for design and the project comes the unavoidable issue of care; caring within the scope of the responsibility for the others and for the self as being of the others and for the others; the solicitation that is implicit in the relationship self-others.

Design education can gain a deeper ethical stance if the human person, and the project apprehended as place of communion where the human person is defined as such, comes first as design concern and attitude along with object making and process. Design education would thus aspire to have the students consider the project in the light of enlightening oneself and acting for the improvement of the conditions of life in community; it is a pedagogy of pointing at people's life that is somehow addressed in those terms, and the fundamental value of the human person is then the primary end to integrate in design pedagogy.

Because design is centered on intentional action it is the direction of that action that is critical in design education. Pointing toward the human person comprehended as transcendence and existential projects that define the essence of the being may be a solid basis for disclosing ethics in design education. Toward what end should design and the project lead the human person? That is what the student is responsible for.

## Project Ontology

Sartre offers an interesting view on the notion of project that will enlighten our enquiry into the world of project related to design. On the one hand, project refers to a goal, which is

freely chosen, that a conscious person establishes, it is for instance the case with building a house. On the other hand, project refers to the moving-forwardness aspect of the consciousness of a person who tries endlessly to reach his being. For Sartre consciousness is nothingness that tries to actualize itself by looking ahead toward some object in the world. In that regard temporality which is brought into the world by human's existence is the supportive aspect of the actualization. Besides, an individual does not have a past, present, or future but he exists as the internal relation of the three as transcendence. This means that the significance of existence is to go from what a person is, which is made with the person's actions in the past, to what the person is not yet, foreseeing that person's being in the future. In that sense the individual chooses a project for himself and he is constantly into that dynamic consisting of moving away from being toward a new being. The relation of identity in the present is always denied. Thus the individual is never a static essence in the present; he is never himself. Sartre says that consciousness is before itself, behind itself, but never itself. That "toward-being" is driven by a freely chosen project. Here lies the basis of the ontological meaning of project. Humans are caught in a perpetual transition between past identity and freely reinventing themselves. The transitory nature of human's existence is always oriented toward a goal; the individual is projecting toward something, this is the very sense of project which defines the ontological structure of humans. The moving-forwardness of consciousness always aims at some end which are objects and that reveals it as freedom. The dynamic ontological structure of consciousness is constituted from that sense of project that consciousness is the exhaustive projecting-toward-an-object.

In that spirit, the pedagogy of design should make that aspect revealed to the student. He is projecting his existential project when he chooses and designs the artefactual oriented project. The design project is at some level his existential project that allows him to define his being. But by choosing a project and designing it, the student chooses a way of being for the others; the artefactual project turns out to become the existential project of the others since they will be "designed" by it if realized concretely. In that regard, the students should be aware of that relationship

and engagement between the project of the self and the project of the others at the existential level through the artefactual design project. Therefore the relationship becomes one of communion. The project takes its place in the ontology of the project as communion where the student encounters the others.

### **Project as Communion**

There are two directions that appear crucial for the student in design education to reach genuine ethics in the project. The first direction is to have the student conquer his own autonomy, because there is no true morality without autonomy. The second direction is to have the student enter within a communion with the human universe.

Therefore it appears important that in design education the students should be brought to develop a sense of engaging at that level of communion through the project. They should become awoken to the reality of the project as being more than the artefact or the object into which people will inhabit. The students should understand that they dwell among the users of their projects, the project is where communion happens and that in both its making and its use. At this point, within the perspective of communion between the student as a human person in the becoming and the users as human persons in the becoming, design education could reach beyond the teaching of the making of built environments and spaces as material embodiment toward the teaching of community of being within the collectivity and the cosmos. From a personalist perspective we may say that design teaching should place the student in the position of engagement for the community and the community for the human person, with the reciprocal engagement resting on the respect of the human person. Through the relationship with the others as communion in the project, the student is faced with the fact that he creates his being only among the beings of the others; i.e., he becomes a human person only among other human persons. The project is the place where that can happen.

Thus, design education needs to consider the notion of freedom in the exercise of the project as needing to be oriented toward the relationship self-others. Indeed freedom is always situated in my relation to the others. If

we are to refer to the aristotelian concept of action, it means that the freedom of being able to "do" be replaced by the freedom of being able to "act" in a communion way; freedom is therefore conditional. The condition of freedom is the project incarnated, the peopled project that is alive, as opposed to the factual project, the project of a thing that is dead. That concept of incarnated project reveals the making of the self, the making of the others, and the making of the relationship self-others. Therefore the project in design education represents the incarnation of the communion between the self and the others where the notion of "person" is the paradigm of the act of design, and where humanity is the end of the project. To learn to design in the context of the paradigm of the human person is to learn the making of both the person, which is the self and the others as community of beings that constantly define the selves, and the artefact, which is the habitable built environment that provides a setting for the disclosure of the selves.

Engagement relates to action as the core dimension of human existence in the world. It is through action, and its corollary intention and values, that the person engages the world and establishes her being and partly the being of the others. We find in design that the action, designing, is circumscribed and inhabited by the artefactual oriented project, for instance a building in the case of architecture. According to an existentialist understanding of the human, people create themselves through their actions; a human is his actions. And the actions are freely chosen since a human is free, which means that a human is always responsible for what he is. Also, we can say that design designs and that the action of design in that sense emanates from both agencies the designer and the product of design that is the artefact; the two aspects finding their essence in the project. In turn, the project is the entity that gathers all levels of people involved, such as the designer himself, the other professionals, the clients, the users, the community, etc. But also it concerns humanity as a whole because indeed the world will not be the same after a project comes into reality. There is the world before the artefact and the world after the artefact. And again the project is the place and moment of encounter within a communion to reinvent the self and the others in the world, i.e., to reinvent humanity.

The engagement situates within the project and through the project, toward oneself and toward the others. By engaging in a project we engage the self in its becoming and the others in their becoming. The important element is to have the students become aware of that dimension of the action of design.

### The Dimensions of Action

It may be relevant to refer to the concept of action so as to situate design and the project in their ethical signification. Design may be understood primarily as "human action", which means action inhabited with intentions and values; we can say that design is ontologically an intentional action and finds its foundation in freedom of choice. In that regard, acting is to modify the reality of the world, it is to create oneself, to relate to each other, and to enrich the world with values. We can say that humans are in essence their actions. If we refer to Aristotle, there are two basic types of actions: *poièsis* or doing and *praxis* or acting. In the perspective of doing, the action aims at the domination and organization of the external world, it is an action for which the end is the production of an artefact that is outside of the agent; it concerns the world of *technè*. The result is the artefactual outcome of the action. Contrary to doing, acting is an action that does not aim at the making of an external work but it aims at the formation of the agent, his skill and his virtues. What matters here is more how the agent carries on the action and what he becomes than what is produced out of the action as an artefact. Acting is reflective and is its own end, which is to act well so as to make the agent a better person who acts for the good.

There is little emphasis put on that aspect of design learning in design pedagogy. In general the students are asked to "do" (design) a project, which is the artefact oriented reasoning. But if we integrate the perspective offered by the concept of *praxis* (acting) as a core element of design pedagogy, in the development of a project, we may start to envision the possibility to awaken the students to the development of a moral attitude that leads to practical wisdom.

But there is something to take into consideration when discussing the notion of

action in those terms. The question is can we ontologically separate the action into two types. According to existentialism any action makes the human be what he is, man is his actions regardless of how a person categorizes them. It means that learning to design and choosing a project are one same reality, the making of the self. In these terms doing is also acting because both types of action belong to the same ontological structure of human action. The point is to orientate design pedagogy to make that reality conscious, in other words to have the students grasp the fact that regardless of how they apprehend the act of design and the project, doing or acting, they are defining their essence as persons engaged in the world. In order to achieve that it is essential to have the students shift their view point from considering the project as pertaining to the outer world, outside of themselves, to considering the project as existential dimension of the essence of the self, i.e., the making of the being.

In design education the issue of ethics may be addressed within that perspective consisting of envisioning the project as the making of self and the others through the making of the artefactual. And because the project designs the self and the others, the student confronts the ethical dimension of design at the time of choosing a project and designing it. A student is in the position where he has to choose between what can be the project and what ought to be the project. That choice is a free choice and it is through the consciousness of that reality that the student is empowered with true freedom of choice as to how to exist among the others as a being for the others. The project is a human communion where that choice takes place. The focus here is on a conscious conversion at the moment of choice for a project and of choice in the action of design. The concept of care, for oneself and for the others apprehended as human persons, is of a particular interest and importance as a way to have the students grasp the ethical aspect of design and project.

### Conclusion

The project in design calls for more than the envisioning of the artefactual; it calls for the conscious envisioning of oneself into the world and of the others into the world within the scope of a human communion. That brings the

project into a different sphere of consideration that concerns the project of the project; the human project, self and others, through the artefactual project and the design act. Design pedagogy could focus on bringing the students consciously to choose communion as a posture in the project so they could choose ethics as the way to engage within that human communion. The concepts of human dignity and caring for the self and the others, as the attitude to develop in design learning, can be the path for reaching the awakening and grasping of the ethical sensitivity by the students at the moment of engaging in a project. This can happen if there is enough emphasis put on the human person considered as transcendent consciousness that exists through existential projects and among the others as the center of concern of the act of design. In such a perspective the students when learning design could ethically address the artefactual and the existential aspects of the project at both the individual and the social levels within a communion of ethical beings.

### References

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth, 1996.
- Barnes, H., *Existential Ethics*, Phoenix, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Boutinet, J.-P., *Psychologie des conduites à projet*, Paris, PUF, Que sais-je, 1993.
- De Beauvoir, S. *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Paris, Gallimard, 1947.
- d'Anjou, P., "Theoretical & Methodological Elements for Integrating Ethics as a Foundation into the Education of Professional & Design Disciplines", *Journal of Science & Engineering Ethics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2004, pp. 211-218.
- Findeli, A., Bousbaci, R., "L'éclipse de l'objet dans les théories du projet en design", Paper Presented at "Design-System-Evolution", conference of the European Academy of Design, Brème, 2005.
- Fry, T., "A Total Rewriting of the Past, Present and Future of Design", Chicago February Lecture, 2001.
- Mounier, E., *Le personnalisme*, Paris, PUF, Que sais-je, 1949.
- Ricoeur, P., *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Seuil, 1990.

Sartre, J.-P., *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, Washington Square Press, New York, 1992.

Sartre, J.-P. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. traduit par Philip Mairet, New York, Haskell House, 1948.

Willis, A.-M., "Ontological Designing", Paper Presented at "Design Cultures", conference of the European Academy of Design, Sheffield Hallam University, vol. 23, 1999, pp. 115-127.