

## On Honesty in Architecture: A Historical versus a Material Approach

Mateja Kurir

Independent Researcher, Ljubljana, Slovenia

[Mateja.kurir@gmail.com](mailto:Mateja.kurir@gmail.com), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5090-2318>

**Abstract:** The question of honesty in architecture is essential for the field for several reasons. Honesty as a concept has been traditionally understood within the realm of the truth as such in architecture: to be honest meant to be able to express the truth in architecture, according to one of the most established theories, presented by John Ruskin. The aim of this paper is to approach honesty from a different standpoint, coming out from 2 different positions: the first comes out of philosophy, the other from architectural theory.

The thesis, presented in the paper dealing with a new understanding of honesty in architecture, is as follow: whenever a broad discussion about honesty in architecture has been posed, a significant break with the past in architecture has been initiated. I would like to claim that these changes were not just a matter of material honesty in architecture, which is a widely accepted argument, but that when a significant rupture appeared in architecture, this was predominantly a reflection of societal changes. Architecture changed significantly when society changed: it reflected those systematic changes within society. In the paper, the period of the Renaissance, Neoclassicism, Modernism and Contemporaneity within architecture will be taken into consideration to discuss the topic of honesty in architecture.

**Keywords:** honesty, history, material, philosophy, break, environmental crisis

### Introducing Honesty In Architecture

The question of honesty in architecture is essential for the field for several reasons, which seems to arise from the core of the profession and has been raised by several authors since the Renaissance (Summerson, 2011). Honesty as a concept has been traditionally understood within the realm of the truth as such in architecture: to be honest meant to be able to express the truth in architecture, according to one of the most established theories, presented by John Ruskin (Ruskin, 1989). Within this theory, which was published in the renown essay *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the truth in architecture is defined as the honest display of materials and structures within a building. This theory, to which I will later refer to as the material approach to honesty in architecture, seems to be the predominant within the profession. An obvious counterpart to this understanding of honesty is an *architecture of deception*. A deception within architecture is usually understood as that architecture, that covers and disguises the materials from which it is made of.

The aim of this paper is to approach the understanding of honesty in architecture, which will be in many ways also discussed here equally to the meaning of honest architecture, from a contemporary viewpoint, which starts from the conceptual core of architecture as such. I will try to approach and understand the question of honesty in architecture from 2 different positions. The first comes out of philosophy, the other from architectural theory. I will try to show a correlation between the two at the end of this discussion.

### 1. Methods

The thesis about honesty in architecture, presented in this paper, is as follow: whenever a broad discussion about honesty in architecture has been posed, a significant break with the past in architecture has been initiated. With this thesis, I would like to also propose a new approach to honesty in architecture, starting from these conceptual breaks in architecture, rather than from the material approach to honest architecture. I would like to claim that these changes, which brought a decisive change in how architecture was understood and presented, were not just a matter of material honesty in architecture, but that when a significant rupture appeared in architecture, this was a reflection, a response to the societal changes. Architecture changed significantly when society changed: it reflected those systematic changes within society. I will name this entry point to honesty in architecture a historical approach, that I am introducing here as a counterpart to the material approach. The historical approach to honesty in architecture literally means, that honest, true architecture is actually the manifestation of the social, economic, and cultural achievements of a specific period; that if an architecture is honest, that it presents the *Zeitgeist* and the challenges of a certain period. When architecture can answer the core and essential challenges of a certain era, then it can be called *honest*. In this paper, the period of the Renaissance, Neoclassicism, Modernism and Contemporaneity within architecture will be taken into consideration to discuss the topic of honesty in architecture. A previous detour to philosophy, and its definition of honesty, will be taken in the paper as the starting point of discussion.

## 2. Honesty Within Philosophy

If we are to be asked, what is the main aim of philosophy, that would be to define the truth. The truth is always given and understood in philosophy *within and through language* (Agamben, 2021). We do not understand truth (and any of the other binding terms) as such, but we can understand it only as it expresses itself within language. Language is the tool and meaning of philosophy. For this reason, I am starting this detour of what honesty means in philosophy with a sketch of the possible understandings of the term.

It is rather interesting that such widely used mundane terms like honest and honesty are rarely present in philosophical discussions. Nevertheless, I would say that when we talk about honesty, we are asking ourselves, what is to be honest and with whom should we be honest. The dictionary definition of ‘honest’ (Merriam Webster, 2023) involves being truthful and legitimate, as well as genuine and real, humble and plain. Honest can also significate respectable and reputable, worth of praise, marked by integrity. To be honest is closely connected with the pair of legality and legitimacy, which is a much broader presented theme in philosophy. What is certain, is that when we talk about honesty, when we talk about honesty, we do so from the very centre of ethics. Explicitly, honesty and the question of how to be honest is always connected with moral, ethical questions that arise when an individual, a group, an organisation is active in creating and exposing any subject within the framework of society.

The Scottish philosopher, economist and historian David Hume, who lived during the Enlightenment period of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is one of the few philosophers who discussed honesty in his work. He connected honesty with justice and injustice, and further on with equity. Hume wondered where honesty comes from – is it something given to human on a natural basis or is it acquired? In other words, is honesty something we are born with, or do we become honest through time?

He wrote: *“the sense of justice and injustice is not deriv’d from nature, but arises artificially ... from education, and human conventions”* (Cohon, 2018). For Hume justice, as well as equity, is therefore an artificial, not a natural virtue. For him, the same is true for honesty: honesty is a human-made virtue. When Hume explains the origin of honesty, he writes that a social convention created honesty with respect to property at the very beginning of all human communities. As humans, we are inclined to give and to obtain property for ourselves and our loved ones. Hence, there has been a need for honesty to appear at the very founding of any community, which represents a concept that is crucial for human’s survival from the mere beginning. Namely, if people were forced to be honest and to keep to their own property and not to steal from others, a large group of people could live together in peace. For Hume, it is only when people behave honestly that a community can flourish in symbioses, as one’s property is preserved within a group of other honest individuals. The same community, which abides by honesty, can then form a more complex society. This might be a first, very traditional definition of honesty: people need to be honest with respect to property in order to form a community.

Property is in many ways connected to architecture. And whenever we have property – especially in large accumulations, as it evolves within communities, or states – we are in the vicinity of the topic of power. The urge to have power over other people is one of the oldest there is: whenever we talk about a community, we talk about power. And of course, of abuses of power. I would like to bring to your attention a book *On Power in Architecture* (Kurir, 2021), which discusses the intersection between power and architecture from different philosophical perspectives. The book opens with a statement claiming that architecture has always been a decisive manifestation of power. The book explores architecture predominantly as a social art with an important social dimension, but also affects the life of an individual. Architecture is not only a battleground where power takes place, but also an open front of internal tensions, where ethics is at stake in our time of neoliberalism and perpetual crises. Namely, when we talk about architecture and power, as well as architecture and society, ethics is a crucial term to address.

## 3. Honesty Within Architecture and Architecture Theory

After this detour, I would like to move to the 2<sup>nd</sup> possible approach when it comes to talking about honesty in architecture, starting with the various changes within architecture expressed in architectural theory. Explicitly, I would like to present specific cases to support my thesis. My thesis is as follows: Whenever a broad discussion about honesty in architecture has been posed, a significant break with the past in architecture has been initiated. I would like to claim that these changes were not just a matter of material honesty in architecture, which is a widely accepted argument, but that when a significant rupture appeared in architecture, this was predominantly a reflection of societal changes. Architecture changed significantly when society changed: it reflected those systematic changes within society. I would like to claim this is evident on several layers within architectural theory. For this instance, I will touch briefly upon 5 architectural periods that are High Renaissance, Neoclassicism, Modernism, Postmodernism and Contemporaneity.

High Renaissance brought a major wave of change into architecture. As Fredric Jameson wrote in his book *Singular Modernity*, the main aim of the Renaissance was to *break with its past*<sup>1</sup>, that is with the Middle Ages, and to present a new source of knowledge and culture, the Antiquity. What could then be understood as honest architecture? Explicitly, to take the knowledge of Roman architecture, its vocabulary, and define it anew, propose a new canon of classical architecture. This was done in the books of Alberti, Serlio and Palladio and numerous others, and with architecture and its innovations in the works of Bramante, Brunaleschi, Alberti and several others. The vocabulary of classical architecture, which was researched in detail, has launched new standards, new concepts, a new architecture, that represented a new model for a different society of the time.<sup>2</sup> To be honest in architecture during the time of the Renaissance was to use this new canon of classical architecture and its elements.

With the Enlightenment, this approach and vocabulary shifted significantly. The theretofore unity, which had been ensured by the Absolute and to which architecture responded with a homogenous use of classical architecture, disintegrated into several segments. Various authors doubted the elements of classical architecture and thereby triggered a small revolution. In *Nouveau Traité de Toute l'Architecture* (1706), Cordemoy developed an analysis of the orders of columns and advocated a discontinuation of their ornamental use or "architecture in relief". At the height of Rococo, he argued for architecture without ornaments and became one of the first opponent of ornament in architecture. His work strongly influenced jesuit Laugier, who published on the cover of the famous *Essei sur l'architecture* (Laugier, 1972)<sup>3</sup> an image of a "primitive hut", where four trunks support a rustically styled roof. For him, the primitive hut was a merger of culture and nature where humans find shelter. The French jesuit posited a rational prototype for the use of columns that was not part of the established doctrine. He even suggested the removal of all walls, which he thought should be replaced by columns. He thereby heralded architectural modernism and the construction of skeleton buildings. Architecture, applying the notion of reason during the period of the Enlightenment, changed significantly.

Prior to modernity, John Ruskin wrote in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* that when applying a material honestly, a building becomes more beautiful, and that using a dishonest material can be misinterpreted by the people experiencing the building, and can cause misunderstanding of the architecture (Ruskin, 1986). Modernist architecture altered further on the language of classical architecture. Emphasizing abstraction, transparency and technology, this architecture influentially advocated for a "break" with classical architecture. The pioneers of modernist architecture promoted a new architecture, which would be in line with the spirit of modern times, modern cities and of a modern way of living. Adolf Loos in his essay *Ornament and Crime* (Loos, 1998) advocated that architecture and the materials used should express simplicity and honesty. Le Corbusier advocated that architecture needs to reflect the "new spirit" if it wanted to represent the society and the individual of the time. He promoted this new notion in magazines as the *Espirit Nouveau*, or ground-breaking books as *Vers un Architecture* (Le Corbusier, 1986). In Germany, important movements, like the Deutsche Werkbund or Bauhaus, raised and devoted to the same task: to bring architecture to a fundamental change.

When Modernism came to a close in architecture half a century later and the era of Postmodernism started, books as *Learning from Las Vegas* by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour (Venturi et al, 1972), stressed the importance of symbolism in architecture. In a time of globalisation and multinational capital, commercial strips raised globally and were described as "The Great Proletarian Cultural Locomotive". Those urban changes anticipated in many ways the neoliberal situation we have been living in since the 70s, and once again introduced changes.

What about today? Our contemporary time is marked by a period of crises, which may result in the possible extinction of life on Earth. A long-lasting Cartesian paradigm, combined with the neoliberalism of the last 50 years, which is centered exactly on property and its excess as the added value, brought us to the explicit environmental and ecological crises. As we heard at recent conferences, such as the ECLAS and LINA conference in Ljubljana in 2022, by speakers Lučka Kajfež Bogataj (ECLAS, 2023) and Janez Potočnik, we urgently need an action for degrowth, as the neoliberal notion of constant growth has brought us where we are. While IPCC reports the need to act to diminish the impact of climate change, the study of the University of Leeds (Fanningan et al., 2022) highlights the excess of all planetary boundaries of our western society, and shows we need to look at the natural sources in a broader perspective: it is not enough to diminish CO2 level.

<sup>1</sup> As Fredric Jameson argues, it was with the relation of the Renaissance to the Middle Ages that the first real break with a previous period was established in history. For him, the Renaissance was constituted through its break with the Middle Ages. Ibid: Jameson, 2012, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid Summerson, 2011, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid Laugier, 1972. The image of the primitive hut on the cover of the book is the work of Charles Eisen.

We need a complete change, to reduce the use of natural resources significantly. As a society, we need to evolve from the neoliberal paradigm and as well as from the traditional relations to property, as understood by Hume, in order to regenerate.

Contemporary architecture and urbanism have an important role in all of this. Solutions should be applied on a micro and macro level, on the level of buildings, but also on the level of urbanism and infrastructure. The publication of ARUP, *Designing for Planetary Boundary Cities* (ARUP, 2021), tackles explicitly the topic of planetary boundaries and architecture. We have the measures and the tricks to change the profession, we *only* need a complete change in the attitude, which would eventually stop the all-encompassing green washing we are facing for the last 20 years and change the course of the capital to support these efforts.

We should also ask ourselves, if do we really need more infrastructure, more resources to build it? Some estimates are saying that in Europe, 50% of all cities will shrink in the next 30 years, leaving a lot of unused building behind. The scenarios of the United Nations for population growth shows a decline of some 40 million Europeans in the next 30 years, although the world population will grow. This might suggest that in Europe we already have enough buildings we will need in the future. Architecture might consider radical ideas as not to build anymore and the introduction of bans for demolishing existing buildings. An approach, that used to be drastic, but seems it will become our reality, is not to use any natural resources, to reuse, to share and adapt.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In my opinion, for it to be honest in this day and age, architecture should address the environmental crises we face and search for tangible solutions. In our society, which is traversed by hedonism and permissiveness, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the Anthropocene and increasingly severe environmental crises and determined by neoliberalism and the fantasmagoria of media management, architecture needs to strive for degrowth.

From a historical viewpoint, honesty in architecture could be understood as a response to the urgencies and necessities of a certain time. These responses changed architecture fundamentally. Staring from the Renaissance, when the key necessity was the Break with the Middle Ages, to Neoclassicism, when the main theme was reason, to modernism and its technology, to postmodernism and its symbolism, the key question for our time is the ecological crisis. I would suggest that honest architecture is the architecture that answers to the essential, key questions of its society. In our contemporary time, without an environmental agenda, architecture cannot tackle the main issues we face and can therefore not operate honesty. Architecture needs to be honest to the planet and its inconvenient truth, not to be honest to property.

## References

- Agamben, G., 2021. *Moč misli: razprave in predavanja*. Ljubljana: Beletrina.
- ARUP, 2021. Designing for planetary boundary cities. ARUP. Last accessed 1.10.2023 online: [Designing for Planetary Boundary Cities.pdf](#)
- Benjamin, W. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorism, Autobiographical Writings*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978
- Benjamin, W., 2002. *The Arkades Project*, Cambridge MA: Belknap Press.
- Cohon, R., 2018. "Hume's Moral Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Last accessed 1.10.2023: [David Hume \(Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy\)](#)
- Conrads, U., 1975. *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-century Architecture*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- ECLAS Conference, 2023. Scales of change: conference proceedings: commemorating 50 years of Landscape Architecture study programme at University of Ljubljana. Biotechnical Faculty. [video recordings of the lecture of Lučka Kajfež Bogataj on Planetary Boundaries is available here, Last accessed 1.10.2023: [ECLAS 2022: SCALES OF CHANGE, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, 12. - 14. 9. 2022 \(1/3\) - YouTube](#)]
- Fanning, A.L., O'Neill, D.W., Hickel, J., and Roux, N. (2022). The social shortfall and ecological overshoot of nations. *Nature Sustainability*, 5(1), 26-36. [doi:10.1038/s41893-021-00799-z](#)
- Giedion, S., 2009. *Space, Time and Architecture*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heynen, H., 1999, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Jameson, F., 2002. *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London, New York: Verso.
- Kurir, M. (ed.), 2021. *O oblasti v arhitekturi*. Ljubljana: Maska; Društvo Igor Zabel za kulturo in teorijo.
- Laugier, A. [Marc-Antoine], 1972 [1755]. *Essai sur l'architecture*, Geneva: Minkoff Reprint.
- Le Corbusier, 1986. *Towards a New Architecture*, New York: Dover Publications.
- Loos, A., 1998. *Ornament and crime: selected essays*. Riverside: Ariadne Press.
- Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2023. Last accessed on 1.10.2023: [Dictionary Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)
- Summerson, J., 1963, 2011, cop., *The classical language of architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Ruskin, J. , 1989, *The seven lamps of architecture*. Dover Publications.
- Tafuri, M., 2007, *Progetto e utopia, Architettura e sviluppo capitalistico*, Editori Laterza, Roma – Bari.
- Venturi, R., Brown, D.S. in Izenour, S., 1972. *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge (Mass.); London: The MIT Press.
- Vidler, A., 2002. *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Vidler, A., 2008. *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.