The Ethics of Ethics and the Ethics of Architecture

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Abstract

In designing architecture we put forward ways in which to live, enabling particular patterns of living while limiting other possibilities. In this sense architecture has a normative function and can be compared to the way that ethical theories and moral codes purport to guide us on how to live. Given this, I suggest that ethical reflection about how we design—and in particular about how we constitute the relationship between designers and those they design for—can be used to help formulate ethical questions regarding how we speak and reason about ethics itself. Recognising Heinz von Foerster's criticisms of moral codes as an instance of this, I use the example of designing architecture to challenge and extend von Foerster's position, suggesting the recursive application of ethics to its own discourse.

Relating design and ethics

In relating systems thinking and design, one possible focus is that of ethics and especially those ethical quandaries that designers encounter. Similarly to calls for designers to learn from moral philosophy in order to grapple more fully with the challenges they face (e.g. Schrijver, 2013; Spector, 2001), integration between systems thinking and design can enable the ethical reflections of the former (such as e.g. second-order cybernetics, as discussed below) to inform the latter.

It is important, however, not to characterise such a relationship as one-directional. While, as Spector notes, moral philosophy is a "heretofore ignored source of guidance" (Spector, 2001, p. x) for designers to draw upon, it is not as if it is a consistent body of theory that can be straightforwardly applied: depending on which theories or ideas we refer to we receive different, and often directly conflicting, guidance as to what to do (see e.g. MacIntyre, 1981/1985, pp. 6-7). As I have discussed elsewhere (Sweeting, 2015c), some of the most common approaches to normative ethics (deontology, consequentialism) rely on procedures (predefined rules, optimisation) that have been shown to be unworkable in the complex situations that designers commonly encounter and deal with as a matter of course. The process of exchange between systems thinking and design that is a focus of both this conference series and recent cybernetics (e.g. Glanville, 2007, 2014; Sweeting, 2015a) is notable for working in both directions, with the seemingly messier qualities of design as it is practiced informing our understanding of systems as well as vice versa. Likewise, while we tend to think of the relation between ethics and design as the application of ethical theory to design practice, we might also look to the ethical qualities and quandaries of design activity itself with a view to informing our understanding of ethics more generally.

In this paper I explore this topic by taking architecture in particular as a focus. This is partly because it is my own discipline, but also because of the sorts of ethical questions that architecture prompts about how we design. Architecture is too big to be avoided (we don't opt in to it), yet it is also so intimate that it constrains and structures everyday life. While technological change is slow to impact on architecture, this bind mirrors many of the ethical complexities that follow from the reach of contemporary socio-technical systems (as discussed in this conference; e.g. Fiore, 2016). Ethical debates in architecture can, therefore, be understood as specific instances of wider issues.

The argument that I put forward here is somewhat unusual in structure. My concerns are not with ethical issues in architecture per se. Rather, by reviewing Karsten Harries' formulation of the shared concerns between architecture and ethics, I suggest that ethical questions regarding how we design architecture—and particularly those regarding the relationship between designers and those they design for—parallel similar questions regarding how we speak and reason about ethics more generally, such as those raised by Heinz von Foerster (1992) regarding moral codes. I use the example of designing architecture to challenge and extend von Foerster's position and, building on this, suggest how we might question instances of ethical discourse in ethical terms.

The normative function of architecture

One major contribution to architectural debates about ethics is that of philosopher Karsten Harries (1987, 1997), who has suggested understanding architecture in ethical terms because of the way it puts forward an ethos or way of life. Referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1953/2009) summary of the philosophical questions as those of the form "I don't know my way about", Harries characterises the role of philosophy as helping us to navigate profound uncertainties about how to live and goes on to recognise common cause with architecture in this task (Harries, 1987, p. 29). As an attempt to recapture something of the social mission of modernist architecture, Harries contrasts his account with the context of postmodernist architectural theory and practice in which he wrote, as well as with the way that philosophy has tended to treat architecture in largely aesthetic terms as a branch of the philosophy of art.

In trying to work through how architecture might fulfil what he describes as its "ethical function", Harries turns to phenomenology, the work of Martin Heidegger and the theme of dwelling. As his argument develops it becomes entangled with some of the difficulties that come with these ideas, such as in characterising some communities as being more or less rooted or authentic than others, a position that has been effectively critiqued by Neil Leach (2005) amongst others.

My concerns, however, are less with the direction in which Harries develops his account than where he starts it. Harries' observation that architecture puts forward a way of life does not have to be thought of in terms of grand themes such as dwelling and authenticity, nor in the sense of modernism's social agenda. It can instead be understood in much more prosaic terms: in an everyday sense, architecture enables particular patterns of living while limiting other possibilities. This impact makes designing architecture ethically significant even where there do not seem to be grand issues at stake, such that Harries' position can be reformulated in less escalated terms. Whatever architects' intentions, we can understand architecture in similar terms to ethical theories, moral codes and the like in that it is normative in orientation, putting forward ways in which others are to live. While this is by no means an exact analogy, it raises a number of possibilities worth pursuing further.

Designing for others

While debate over the ethical qualities of buildings themselves is a significant area of discourse in architectural theory (e.g. the way a building might embody an ethical quality, or might be an agent in an ethical issue), the issue of how architecture is designed is an area of concern in its own right. This goes beyond issues of professional ethics and is not limited to only how architects respond to explicit ethical challenges in their work such as, say, environmental impact. In even the most straightforward circumstances there is still the question of the relationship between designers and those they design for, where there is an asymmetry between those with agency over design

decisions and those affected by these decisions and the norms they establish. That is, questions of ethics in architecture regard not just buildings and their consequences but also the processes and relationships through which buildings are produced.

Designing architecture involves something of a bind, which can be summarised as a combination of significance, contestability and asymmetry. Most design questions are not satisfactorily a matter of the preference of the designer, as they impact on others in significant ways. However, neither can they be resolved objectively (for reasons that are well established; see for instance Rittel & Webber, 1973). It follows that even though they are not a matter of personal preference, many design decisions can nevertheless only be a matter of opinion.

With similar situations in everyday contexts we will often try to find consensus amongst all those who will be affected by the decision. In some specific contexts such as healthcare, participative design methods have bridged this relationship (as presented at this conference by Sanders, 2016). It is difficult, however, to apply such strategies more generally: the impact of architecture is so great that we cannot in principle consult every stakeholder (consider, for instance, the passer by and the future user), let alone find agreement amongst them. I return to how designers respond to this challenge below.

Applying ethics to itself

This is suggestive of a further parallel. If there is a sense in which we can see architecture and theories of normative ethics in similar terms, then the *designing* of architecture, in turn, sits parallel to the *setting out* of such theories. That we can ask ethical questions of the former suggests that we might also do so of the latter, such that how we speak and reason about ethics might also be questioned in ethical terms.

It is not common to turn ethics on itself in this way. As normative ethical theories and moral codes are put forward on the basis that they give guidance as to ethically good actions, they do not invite reflection on how they themselves are discussed or propagated, with the complexities of such issues tending to be hidden under the catchall of application or behind assumptions of self-justification. Whereas the field of meta-ethics is oriented towards theories about the status of ethical theory, the analogy via design suggests that we could also apply ethics to itself, leading to the recursive field of the ethics of ethics. That is, if we recognise how we reflect on, reason and speak about ethics as something that we do, it is something to which, in turn, ethical considerations apply.

In addressing this sort of self-reflexive question it makes sense to turn to cybernetics, a field specifically concerned with forms such as this, notably in the case of second-order cybernetics (the cybernetics of cybernetics) as developed by Heinz von Foerster (1992, 1974/1995, 1979/2003) and others, and which has close connections with both ethics and design (e.g. Glanville, 2004, 2007, 2014; Herr, 2015; Sweeting, 2015a). Indeed, to understand von Foerster's (1992) much referenced remarks on ethics in terms of the application of ethics to itself is in line with recent interpretations of his work that have emphasised its recursive qualities (see e.g. Riegler & Müller, 2014).

Von Foerster (1992), like Harries, draws on Wittgenstein, founding his argument on a quotation from the *Tractatus*: "it is clear that ethics cannot be articulated" (Wittgenstein, 1921/1974, 6.421, von Foerster's own translation). That is, in putting ethics into words, such as in moral codes, we concern ourselves with what others should do rather than with our own actions. Von Foerster suggests that, instead, we keep our ethical consideration implicit in our action, putting ethics into practice rather than words. In

doing so he criticises moral codes in ethical terms as leading towards moralisation and away from responsibility.

Von Foerster's critique of moral codes resonates with the summary I have given of the challenge of designing for others in terms of contestability, significance and asymmetry. Given the contestability and significance of answers to complex ethical questions, the asymmetry of moral codes is ethically suspect. The proponents of a moral code may justify themselves by understanding what they put forward as being true, removing one element of the bind. Such a position, however, relies on assertion and is undermined by the general level of disagreement of such matters, with rival premises not just in conflict but incommensurable with each other. As Terry Eagleton (2003, p. 229) has noted, we might expect to agree on general principles and diverge on particulars, yet we have no common view on many everyday ethical questions.

Keeping ethics implicit

Understood in these terms, we can think about one element of the ethical challenge of designing architecture in terms of avoiding moralisation. This is not surprising given the high-handed tone adopted by the modern movement and critiques of architects as pursuing their own agendas at the expense of those they design for (e.g. Till, 2009). It is possible, however, to run this connection in the other direction, to take positive examples from design practice and see how they might inform von Foerster's position and the issues he raises.

While von Foerster's account has much to commend it (and is worth exploring in more detail than the brief summary I have given), it is difficult to see how such a stance can be maintained in practice. There are, for instance, situations where ethics needs to be discussed explicitly, where not doing so would lead to acquiescence rather than responsibility, where our responsibility includes responsibility for others and so cannot be confined to the personal, or where our actions articulate ethics whichever way we compose our language. To take designing a building as an example, we cannot in the end keep ethics implicit because architecture itself is an articulation of a way of living, as discussed above. Indeed, intervening in the lives of others is the very point of the discipline: one would not want an architecture that was not a significant act in the world, creating new possibilities in some way.

Designers have many ways of responding to this challenge, often by involving other stakeholders in the design process, whether through participatory design methods or more standard forms of consultation. As I have suggested elsewhere, the core methods that designers use in addressing the complex situations they face take a conversational form that, seen in cybernetic terms, implicitly involves a number of ethical considerations (Kenniff & Sweeting, 2014; Sweeting, 2014, 2015b, 2015c). For instance, the interactive way in which designers work enables them to think though the eyes of those others they design for (Cf. von Foerster, 1991) even in the drawings and models they construct primarily for themselves, for instance in the way they "walk through" a plan. Similarly, design activity involves the pursuit of internal not just external purposes (external purposes shift during the process as new criteria emerge) and the taking of personal responsibility (objective methods being unworkable).

This is not to say that designers always do this or do so effectively. Still less is it a claim that design practice is always ethically good or that designers' ideas are ethically authoritative, as is clear, indeed, from the history of that architecture which has been put forward in heroically ethical terms. We can, however, understand design as being ethical in a different sense, as implicitly involving and being concerned with ethical

considerations and questioning, in a similar sense to that advocated by von Foerster. This is significant for von Foerster's position in two ways. Firstly, while von Foerster's call to keep ethics implicit can seem idealistic, not just in design but also in complex social situations more generally, we can see design as a way of acting, applicable even in complex and ethical charged circumstances, in which this is achieved to at least some extent. Secondly, the context of design offers a realm in which to develop von Foerster's position, circumventing the difficulty of extending it either theoretically or through case studies given that such articulation may, according to its own account, lead to moralisation.

Like conversation more generally (Glanville, 2004), design requires ethical considerations of this sort in order to be practiced well in its own terms. That there are ethical considerations already implicit in core design activities suggests that we need not see the relationship between ethics and design, as is so often the case, in terms of trade-offs between the two. This is to shift the focus of the relationship between ethics and design away from the application of ethical theories or standards with which to correct practice. Instead of making judgements about what is ethically good, which is often impossible or even counterproductive, we might instead focus on how and to what extent designers incorporate ethical consideration within their design activity, a question that can be addressed independently of the contestability of the results of such considerations.

Such an approach might be extended to how we speak and reason about ethics itself, understood, as introduced above, as an activity to which ethical considerations apply. For instance, it is striking that the two most common forms of normative ethical theory—consequentialism and deontology—exclude the sort of implicit ethical consideration that I have noted to be present in design. In following predefined rules or optimising against set goals, one cannot take the views of others into account, take personal responsibility for one's action or pursue purposes internal to it because, by adopting such an approach, one's course of action is already set. This accounts in part, I suggest, for what Alasdair MacIntyre (1981/1985) has observed to be the "shrill tone" of modern ethical debate, something which is in desperate need of reform, a task which, perhaps surprisingly, design might contribute to.

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