

Architettura verso una nuova sfida etica

Architecture towards a new ethical challenge



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Joseph Rykwert has lectured and taught at many major schools of architecture throughout the world and has held visiting appointments at Princeton, the Cooper Union, Harvard Graduate School of Design and others. He has been a British Academy visiting professor at the University of Bath and he has held senior fellowships at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts, Washington, and the Getty Center for History of Art and the Humanities. He holds honorary degrees from the University of Edinburgh (1995), and many other universities among which Toronto (2005), Rome (2005) and Trieste (2007). He is a member of the Accademia di San Luca. In 2000 he was awarded the Bruno Zevi prize in architectural history by the Biennale of Venice, and in 2009 the Gold Medal Bellas Artes, Madrid. He has been president of the international council of architectural critics (CICA) since 1996, and is the recipient of the 2014 RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) Royal Gold Medal. He is the author of fundamental essays the most part of which have been translated in many languages, including Italian.

What is the most pressing challenge that architecture is asked to resolve today?



The most Pressing Challenge to any architect seems to me the ethical one.

Always to see the client as a person, as an interlocutor however anonymous they may seem, however committee-like the commissioning process — and to see their work as a dialogue with the client.

And then architects are also ethically bound in their attitude to the existing environment and to the use of materials, learning to respect the ecologies both of production and of place. If the ethical stance is defied, perhaps that architect must learn to walk away from the job. Nor is the excuse that others will not do it as well as they valid. After a particularly awkward session with my dentist I asked him what he would say if I asked him to 'pull the lot and give me a nice set of dentures'. I would suggest you go to another dentist was his answer.

With respect to the design of the contemporary city; what is the role of architecture in managing urban phenomena?



Increasingly, the shape and bulk of buildings in mid-city circumstances is out of the control of the architect but results from calculations by real-estate experts, structural and service engineers, planning regulations. That is by now a familiar commonplace. The architects' role is sometimes limited to choices of surface materials, and the relation of the building's bulk to the public realm. In this matter, again, the architects' choices will be as much formal as they are ethical.

Architecture and design have established an exchange that is both operational and perceptive; buildings are conceived as objects and objects are conceived by those who design buildings. Between architecture and design, is it possible to define boundaries or intersections?



'Total design' is a century-old slogan. It was, after all, the guiding principle of the Bauhaus, not always explicitly stated. From the textiles of Annie Albers or salt-cellars of Walter Gropius to the urban projects of Marcel Breuer — whatever he may have committed in his later career — there was a claim of a common approach: formal economy, material inventiveness, rational exploration of the working method. Such conditions do not determine the shape of twenty-first century 'object buildings', whose guiding principles seem brand-recognition and attention-grabbing formal devices not necessarily related to the objects' working requirements or to the material of which it is made — and which seems to invite a tedium rather more exhausting than the weariness attributed to excesses of rationality. Again, what goes for a sanitary fitting, seems equally true of a forest of skyscrapers.

When giving advice to students, what is the most valuable tool that an architecture or design student ought to acquire during their studies?



The most useful advice to students is to cultivate the capacity for asking questions. Ready answers are easier and quicker to provide: but the right, the searching question may produce the unexpected, indeed the necessary solution to a worrisome problem.