

CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION

Developing a framework of ethical dimensions invoked by the design profession

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Developing a framework of ethical dimensions invoked by the design profession

JNUSTA: *In your view, is ethics best “transmitted tacitly” or overtly taught “within a seminar on professional practice”? Jeffrey Chan thinks neither approach works well – what do you think?*

Kok Ming: Jeffrey brought up a relevant and challenging issue that design or architectural education face all the time. He has highlighted the limitations of the design studio and the seminar on professional practice in addressing the teaching of ethics. He suggested the role of the Jury Review as a plausible alternative that might work better.

I think there is a need to discuss this topic from a broader perspective. First, we need to understand and define the various ethical dimensions that the design profession engages. At the core, it is about how the consideration for human morality influences design decisions leading into design action that can be evaluated as good or bad, sensitive or irresponsible, prudent or wasteful, relevant or showed blatant disregard of important principles, etc. Some frameworks for ethical guidance have been established to inculcate consciousness and facilitate the deliberation. There is the professional ethics which governs how the practice of a specialised knowledge and skill in service to the public are to be carried out. There is also the environmental ethics which guide us in making design choices that will impact the environment and its natural systems, which has repercussions on our well-being and the common habitat.

Ethics and its relationship with design certainly exist in a crucial way but architectural education has not strategically integrated it into the curriculum. It is unlike history, social sciences, technology and their relationship with architecture are already well established issues interwoven into design teaching. For instance, in the current teaching of construction, it can involve review of past methods, examination of social condition that influences the evolution of a technique and finally the exploration of the building technique to yield expressive architectural qualities. Likewise, it is possible to infuse different levels of ethical considerations into the design teaching and their supporting knowledge.

I am suggesting that we should first establish the framework for understanding ethical dimensions in an overall architectural professional training and design education. This will enable us to identify the different platforms in which we can introduce ethical awareness, develop moral reasoning and cultivate keen judgment to facilitate the design learning process. The idea is to have a system in which various aspects of ethics and design are infused into the curriculum. There could be primary learning platforms in which ethics and design are engaged in a major way. For instance, environmental ethics is the spine for sustainability literacy, as no design endeavour for ecological paradigm can divorce itself from the awareness. Secondary platforms are possibly supporting modules in which various notion of ethics are introduced to highlight design responsibility. As an example, a topic on envelope design either in a construction class or an environmental system lecture should emphasise how a bad leaking detail is a reflection of professional negligence.

A piecemeal-cum-additive responses to introduce this knowledge and value system can be a challenge in the long run. They are often hard to sustain as they are not well integrated into the overall curriculum. As an add-on, they occupy curriculum time inefficiently or as an elective, they benefit a few. Ethics should not be tacitly taught. They should be explicitly conveyed and demonstrated. To teach ethics in architecture, one needs to rethink the overall curriculum structure strategically. It is important to identify various learning platforms in which ethics can be a means to scaffold the application of various design knowledge and facilitate wise design choices.