

Book review

ARCHITECTURE, PROFESSIONAL ETHICS, AND THE PROBLEM OF THE PUBLIC GOOD: A REVIEW OF TOM SPECTOR'S ARCHITECTURE AND THE PUBLIC GOOD (2021)

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Abstract. This article reviews Tom Spector's *Architecture and the Public Good*, examining the relationship between architecture, professional ethics, and the concept of the public good. The analysis situates the monograph within broader theoretical discussions on publicness, capitalism, and the social role of the architectural profession. Drawing on Spector's engagement with thinkers such as Habermas, Warner, Fraser, and Rorty, the article discusses the fragmentation of publicness, the shifting boundary between public and private spheres, and the ethical implications of architectural practice under contemporary conditions. Particular attention is given to the relationship between architectural aesthetics and ethics, as well as to the profession's position within market-driven environments. The review highlights the theoretical scope of Spector's work and its contribution to ongoing discussions on architectural ethics, professional responsibility, and the public dimension of architecture.

Keywords: public good, ethics, Tom Spector, counter-publics, review.

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1. Introduction

At the center of Tom Spector's research lies the interaction between ethics, architecture, and philosophy, and the monograph *Architecture and the Public Good* constitutes a continuation of his earlier scholarly work, focusing on the relationship between architecture and the public good, the

relevant concepts, their meanings, and their impact in real-life situations. As an architect, the author builds on firmly grounded theoretical positions and, through this work, initiates broader discussions about the architectural profession and the importance of professional ethics under conditions of capitalism, while deepening and expanding the conceptual field of the "public" and the "private" and gradually moving toward proposals and possibilities for putting this knowledge into practice within architectural practice. This publication is not merely a theoretical work or a manifesto-like piece of professional critique; rather, it is a carefully considered, well-argued, and deliberate invitation for architecture professionals to reconsider their role in society, their responsibilities, and their modes of action, to achieve real change in designed and realized buildings. In this review, the monograph is examined not only as a theoretical reflection on the public good and architectural ethics, but also as a normative attempt to reconstruct the social legitimacy of the architectural profession under contemporary conditions of capitalism.

The book offers a broad analysis of issues related to publicness, capitalism, ethics, social responsibility, and even the influence of the internet and media on public space. This wide spectrum demonstrates an extensive thematic discourse that is strongly shaped by the author's academic as well as professional experience, without

excluding long-term reflection on these issues—an important strength of the publication that prevents it from becoming detached from real conditions by focusing solely on theoretical arguments. Although defining separately what constitutes “good” and what constitutes “society,” and what comprises the public good, is far from straightforward, Tom Spector extends the discussion considerably by examining other concepts such as the “private” and the “public,” explaining how feminist theory can enrich the understanding of the relationship between these two spheres (the private and the public) and raising the question of value in design. The author supports his arguments with a wide range of sources: Jürgen Habermas is employed to define and analyze the current condition of society, Michael Warner to articulate the concept and significance of “counter-publics,” and Richard Rorty to address the influence of ethnocentrism when working with clients in non-liberal political or cultural contexts.

2. Professional ethics as the foundation of the public good

First, the author begins to formulate and substantiate his arguments by grounding the significance of the architectural profession, discussing problematic aspects of contemporary professional practice, and examining the education of young architects and the early stages of their professional trajectories. Referring to a quotation by Roxanne Williamson, it is noted that: “What matters is not that genius seeks genius, but that under certain circumstances genius creates genius”. This points to a long-term and non-spontaneous process of professional formation; therefore, the ethical foundation of the profession, grounded in the public good, should be deeply rooted in the academic environment and form the basis of architectural education. The author observes that efforts to improve established perspectives and to effect change can already be identified in the 1996 report of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (U.S.A.), which recommended revising architectural school curricula to foster “establish a climate of engagement, clarify the public benefits of new knowledge, articulation of the public benefit of new knowledge, and stress the critical importance of ethical professional. Thus, the importance of ethical professional conduct reflects the central claim developed in the book: “The best opportunity for the architecture to justify itself is in the net public good that emanates from its protected status.” Continuing this line of thought, the author also draws attention to the continuation of professional practice beyond formal education. He analyzes the operating principles of architectural offices, collegial relations within them, and the emergence of the “star architect” prototype, as well as the subordination of young professionals to this figure’s professional advancement, not only among peers but also in the public sphere. The contribution of young architects to the overall process and its outcomes is often overlooked, while public recognition is typically reserved

for the founder of the firm or the central figure alone. Tom Spector emphasizes the flawed nature of this model, which extends across several generations and shapes subsequent patterns of professional behaviour, even when legal shifts do occur—albeit at a high cost.

It appears almost self-evident that when discussing the public good, the question of architectural expression is always raised, encoding within it a constant conflict. At the same time, architecture without artistic expression is not architecture. The architect is a representative of the public interest, and questions of architectural aesthetics cannot be separated from questions of ethics, just as the value of any architectural work is also the result of a particular moral choice (Štelbienė, 2015); likewise, the evaluation of an architectural decision cannot be reduced to a purely formal (aesthetic) set of criteria (Harries, 1997). Spector’s argumentation allows one to assert that the separation of aesthetic decisions from ethics in architecture most often occurs not within a neutral domain of “artistic autonomy,” but under the pressure of market conditions, when aesthetic expression becomes a means of generating reputation, symbolic capital, and competitive distinction. In such cases, aesthetics is not “free” but, on the contrary, is functionally subordinated to economic logic; consequently, the neglect of ethical questions only reinforces this dependency. “The profession may want to formally recognize that it derives in turn from public perception that the actions of architects provide important protections for its health, safety, and welfare. The public is unlikely to license someone simply for his or her art” – architects who are unwilling to recognize this, the author argues, place even the legitimacy of the architectural profession itself at risk in the long term.

Undoubtedly, as history also demonstrates, the architectural profession has always been subject to strong external influences, the impact of which has directly affected civil society in negative ways. Unfortunately, even today the achieved result is increasingly “is measured by how successfully the artist (architect) elevates his or her patrons above mere popularity”. The author of the book critically assesses such professional practice, in which architecture is reduced to the production of reputation and symbolic capital. Therefore, in analyzing the current situation—where the number of actors exerting influence has not diminished, and where a significant portion of responsibility remains tied to the ethical stance of the architect—Spector often emphasizes, even if not always providing a broader historical context, that the architectural profession and architects themselves should be understood as representatives of the public interest or the public good, rather than merely as market actors. The contemporary professional practice of architects, shaped by market logic, has a direct impact on architects’ ambitions and moral decisions. The author thus asserts the importance of the professional mission of the architect, grounded in ethics, which should be recognized not only within the architectural community but also by the wider public. He is convinced that the

professional mission of the architect is to serve the interests of society, rather than simply to function as market suppliers or project executors. Such a perspective, held by Tom Spector, is also common among other scholars in the field who address questions of architectural ethics in academic research.

3. Fragmentation of the concept of publicness and counter-publics

A significant portion of the monograph is devoted to the analysis of the concepts of publicness and privacy. Spector demonstrates that the boundary between the public and the private is not stable; its interpretation is constantly shifting and directly affects architecture's capacity to serve the public good. Drawing on the works of Jürgen Habermas, Michael Warner, and Nancy Fraser, the author argues that the concept of publicness formed during the Enlightenment has today become fragmented and narrowed, though it has not entirely disappeared. Particularly significant is the concept of "counter-publics" (author Michael Warner), which defines forms of publicness that exist in a constant state of tension with larger public. Unlike the bourgeois public sphere, which emerged from an increasing sense of autonomy, counter-publics often arise from repression and inequality; however, it is precisely the oppositional movements of counter-publics that, according to Warner, "seek to change opinion within the broader public no less, and often more, than to mount critical opposition to state authority," thereby offering the greatest potential for meaningful social change. In this context, thinking of publicness as encompassing "everyone" or as sufficiently represented by the state becomes inadequate. In discussing the conditions of publicness, Spector also integrates a feminist ethical perspective on the public and the private, asserting that the pathologies of public space are not inevitable but can only be overcome when the boundaries between the public and the private themselves become the subject of discussion. The experience of the pandemic further exposed the fragility of these boundaries, as publicness entered private space through digital technologies, and presence in place became a matter of public health. At the same time, this analysis makes it clear that architecture's capacity to act in relation to the public good is structurally limited: it depends on configurations of political, economic, and institutional power. Consequently, architectural ethics in Spector's texts is understood not as a tool capable of resolving everything, but as a continuous professional stance maintained amid unavoidable tensions.

4. Architecture, capitalism, and the public good

In analyzing the relationship between architecture and capitalism, Spector adopts an ambivalent yet consistent position. On the one hand, architecture is a product of the capitalist economy and cannot exist outside it. On the

other hand, precisely the fact that the benefits provided by architecture cannot be fully equated with economic goods creates the conditions for asserting that it may distinctively serve the public good. The author identifies several long-term tensions: the inability of the architectural profession to directly monetize the outcomes of good design, increasing income inequality, the moral risks generated by globalization, and the weakening of the concept of the public good. At the same time, however, he emphasizes that globalization is not merely a problem—rather, in a certain sense, it represents a logical extension of the concept of the public good, provided that what the public good actually is could be more clearly defined.

It is also important that Spector critically evaluates the identification of architecture with infrastructure and the proliferation of the concept of "soft infrastructure," which, according to him, may erase the distinction between infrastructure and institutional architecture in an effort to render the latter more politically and economically acceptable. Nevertheless, the author proposes thinking about publicness as a quality inherent to buildings and places, manifesting itself with varying degrees of intensity, and argues that in this way, it becomes possible to identify the factors that promote or inhibit this quality.

5. Conclusions

Considering the overall scope of the study and the synthesis of the author's practical and theoretical experience, Tom Spector's monograph is a significant theoretical work that makes an important contribution both to the academic discussion on the meaning of architecture and to the theory of architectural ethics, while simultaneously attempting to reconstruct the social construct of the architectural profession itself. On the one hand, Spector's strength lies in his broad theoretical spectrum (Habermas, Warner, Fraser, Rorty) and his ability to demonstrate that the public good is not a natural given: it fragments, is contested, and often becomes the site of intersection between different forms of publicness and counterpublics. On the other hand, this very breadth of theoretical scope results in the book's deliberate adoption of a normative tone—it does not so much empirically "prove" its claims as it argues why architecture ought to possess an ethical core and how such a core might resist market logic. At the same time, one might wish for further elaboration by the author through a broader and more interdisciplinary engagement, examining to what extent the relationship between architecture and the public good differs from that of related fields such as urban planning, engineering, landscape architecture, and others, and whether the very existence of interdisciplinary practice might itself be understood as a form of ethics. One of the strongest aspects of the book is its analysis of capitalism, where the author avoids a naïve anti-capitalist stance yet reveals the dual relationship between architecture and the economy: architecture inevitably enters the logic of capital, yet the

value it provides cannot always be reduced to an economic measure, and it is precisely this “misalignment” that opens space for the argument of the public good. This position allows the book to be read as a serious attempt to define what kinds of professional ethical principles may be realistic today, when the field of design operates amid globalization, growing inequality, value relativism, and a fragmented public sphere. The author’s grounding of the concept of the public good is indeed close to the discourse of the public interest developed in public interest design and architectural practice (Abendroth & Bell, 2016); however, Spector deliberately chooses a different strategy—not methodological or project-based, but normative and philosophical. It is precisely this strategy that enables him to pose not the question of how architecture may serve the public interest, but why the architectural profession should have the right to claim a distinctive social

status at all. At the same time, this leaves open the question of whether such a normative position can be sufficient without a broader interdisciplinary and empirical dialogue with planning, engineering, and other fields that structure the public interest.

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