

Unit 19 Environmental ethics and buildings

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Papers presented:

1. Yashiro, Japan – How environmental ethics could be introduced as shared tacit code of conduct in building practices?
2. Halliday, UK – Can environmental policies deliver?
3. Yuichi Takamasa, Japan – Revision of ‘proposal to promote sustainable buildings’
4. Howard Liddell, UK – How an ethical dimension can transform design in practice
5. Hiroto Kawamura, Japan – Towards an ecocentric architecture
6. Valtonen Heimo, Finland – Promoting ethical principles in construction and real estate business
7. Susan Mellersh-Lucas, Australia – Ecologically sustainable design through reflective practice
8. Takao Akagawa, Japan – The necessity to involve investors in decision making for global sustainability
9. Seiki Tagawa, Japan – Environmental ethics and project management of architecture
10. Peter Graham, Australia – Building ecology – A systems approach for developing ecological literacy for students of building professions

Because we are in a time of ecological crisis caused by humans, many people are desperately fighting for the ethical consideration of the natural environment in the architecture and design industry. In the past (and still today in many places) the consideration for human needs has outweighed the consideration for the needs of the natural environment. This anthropocentric view has meant that many of our actions have caused terrible damage to the natural environment. Architects and designers of the built environment in particular are aware of the enormous negative impact that their profession has on the natural environment. One of the main roles of an architect is to provide shelter from the natural elements. In the past it was considered ethical to stamp out or control the natural environment entirely, in order to protect one’s family or community. Luckily ethics can change and now architects are increasingly concerned with protecting the natural environment.

In order to reverse or at least stop the terrible damage that the built environment has had on nature, it is necessary to encourage extreme changes in design ethics. Some papers presented during the session explained the need for a code of conduct or some kind of accreditation system for assessing the environmental ethics in building design. In fact some of the papers described situations where this kind of accreditation system is already in place (UK, Liddell).

Creating ethical design principles for architects and designers to be guided by is helpful and supportive of those who wish to practise ethical design. If an architect is not guided by these principles, however, can they be considered unethical? What if they disagree with the principles? What if they believe the ethical guideline is not well informed or is short sighted? What if the ethical guideline is not holistic? What if there is a conflict of ethics, for example between the natural environment and the social/cultural environment?

In the breakout session “Environmental Ethics and Buildings” discussion it was mentioned that the ecological crisis we are facing must be met with strict ethical design principles or even regulations, to which all builders and designers must adhere or else be deemed “unethical” by the profession (Liddell, Halliday). It is an ambitious idea, intended to prevent further ecological damage. However changing ethical guidelines into regulations is a dangerous and risky thing to do.

A rule is not necessarily the same thing as an ethic or moral philosophy. Rules are made to be broken. People find ways to get around rules.

Furthermore, rules are specific and must be followed to the letter but above and beyond the letter remains within the territory of moral decision making. If rules are also imposed on this moral ground there is no flexibility for ethics. Obviously different areas of the world have different needs in terms of sustainable building design. Different social classes, different climates, different cultures, different cities, different suburbs, different individuals all have different needs. Flexibility to meet these different needs is a crucial aspect of sustainable design. If the needs are not met at a social and cultural level, a design may be unusable or rejected and therefore result in a waste of natural resources, space, energy, etc., creating more damage to the environment. If a regulation is implemented to protect the natural environment and ecology at all costs, it may be incompatible with the social or cultural environment and end up damaging the natural environment.

In the “Environmental Ethics and Buildings” session the focus on ethical principles for protecting the natural environment outweighed the focus on more

holistic environmental ethics.

The relatively new concept of environmental ethics (or environmental philosophy) is a result of the growing anthropogenic ecological crisis, which forces us to question our relationship to the environment around us, and the way we live on the earth (Fox). It relates to the ethical questions asked by any moral person about her/his effect on the world around her. This includes her effect on other human beings. The environment and human beings should not be separated. As one participant mentioned in this session "Man is nature". So in reality environmental ethics is not specific to the natural environment. We must not make the mistake of separating the natural environment and the social/cultural environment when we consider ethical design for the built environment. If these elements of environmental ethics are considered separately, or if one is considered more important than another there may arise a situation where there is a conflict of ethics.

In this session the issue of a situation where there is a conflict of ethics was not fully discussed. Examples of positive action towards implementing ethical guidelines and principles were demonstrated during the session, but the ethical guidelines predominantly addressed ecological design issues. The examples given were of 'first world' companies who have won the luxury to design according to their principles after a hard fought battle to see (natural) environmental ethics become standard design principles (UK). The luxury to not compromise one's ethics is considered by some to be a question of personal choice.

The general opinion was that to compromise one's ethics was equal to prostituting one's body and there was a sense of pride (Halliday) among the people who were able to avoid doing this. However the question of whether not compromising one's ethics results in the prostitution of one's family or community was not asked. The situation where a small compromise of one's environmental ethics in a building design may prevent a complete overhaul by someone with no environmental ethics was not discussed. Implementing environmentally ethical regulations may prevent such a situation. However regulations are rigid and may create a situation of conflict between what is considered appropriate for sustainable natural environmental design and what is appropriate for local social or cultural taboos.

If there is a conflict between the most environmentally ethical action and the most socially or culturally ethical action it must be addressed with a balanced approach (i.e. not favouring social/cultural above natural and vice versa). This is one of the greatest (and most exciting) challenges for designers. Despite the

urgency of environmental needs we cannot become blinded to social/cultural needs, because if we do, it will eventually have bad repercussions for the environment again.

As Sandy Halliday summarised, the general attitude of people attending the session was slightly bitter, in the sense that the fight for environmentally ethical decision-making and construction is such a continuing uphill battle. There is a sense of frustration at the lack of opportunities for people to put their ethics into practice and the lack of support for people who choose to design ethically. However, Halliday also mentioned that there is a strong sense of self-satisfaction and pride from the people who choose not to 'prostitute' themselves with unethical designs. In this session the results of environmentally ethical construction and design were considered far more rewarding than the results of unethical ones. It is this healthy sense of pride and satisfaction in 'doing the right thing', which defines the power of ethics. The drive for environmentally ethical action must come from within (Mellersh-Lucas). It must be an internal desire to respond to external needs in the most sustainable way possible at all (personal?) costs. The power of ethics lies in this desire so if there is no desire and action is driven only by regulations the power of ethics is lost. I believe, that to be truly sustainable, ethical design must be driven by desire rather than coercion. This is where education for sustainability plays a crucial role in shaping the desires and wishes of all stakeholders in the built environment arena.

The session on "Environmental ethics and buildings" was highly stimulating and inspiring even though it left many questions unasked. It was very affirming to hear about people who are practising ethical design. A result of the session was to create a network for supporting people who choose to put their ethics into practice. I truly hope this network can become a strong and viable means of communication between the people who attended this session, who are so passionate and determined to see sustainable action in the built environment.