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Architectural masquerades in the age of greenwashing¹

There is the view that we live in the era of strong and well-justified ecological concerns—and there is the view that we live in the era of faking such concerns. Greenwashing has permeated our daily life to the point that it often actually obstructs acting in ecologically responsible ways. When it comes to architecture, fake sustainability agendas have infiltrated almost every discussion and threaten to reduce genuine ecological concerns to ridicule. A friend who recently wanted to rent an apartment in Vienna discovered that all buildings in the neighbourhood were painted green. The real estate agent explained, with enthusiasm, that this was done in order to make the area sustainable. At a conference some years ago, a very prominent architect described how his worries about CO₂ emissions led him to design apartment blocks with large balconies so that people can grow trees on them. For anyone concerned with ecology and our survival on this planet, the widespread proliferation of unintelligent claims that transform such concerns into mockery should be a cause of substantial alarm.

A particular aspect of this phenomenon is the use of narratives about sustainability in order to suppress aesthetic concerns in architecture, justify ugly buildings and promote aesthetic pollution in the built environment. Less than two years ago, in a debate on Norwegian television, an Oslo architecture professor openly stated that aesthetic concerns must give way to what is practical and sustainable.² Clearly, the response has to be that a built abomination is a built abomination; the fact that it is functional or sustainable cannot make it less abominable. Architecture, including its aesthetic qualities, is as much a public act as CO₂ emission, the public certainly has the right to protest against aesthetic pollution, and architects know this well. If they nevertheless seek to justify their designs by talking about sustainability and the reduction of CO₂ emissions—topics that fall far outside their normal competence unless they have engineering degrees—we should not overlook that the enthusiasm for such concerns that they parade is merely a way to conceal the deep anguish about the profound predicaments of architecture as a profession today.

Words, words, words

The faith that narratives about sustainability can justify visual ugliness fundamentally relies on the assumption that what matters in architecture is the stories associated with buildings and not their formal and visual qualities—that formal and visual aesthetic problems can be alleviated by using words. Some properties of architectural works, such as shapes and colours, are visual-formal in the sense that we can relate to them only visually, by looking at or imagining them. Other properties are conceptual—here belong the ideas associated with architectural works, their cultural role, “meanings”, the narratives that can be told about the building. These properties can only be thought conceptually and described in words. Here also belong narratives about sustainability

or CO₂ emissions. It is reasonable to assume that some aesthetic qualities depend on the formal, others on the conceptual properties, and some on the combination of both. The moment one denies the significance of the formal-visual properties in order to assert the importance of ideas, stories and narratives associated with architectural works, one has taken a strong conceptualist position.

For the past half a decade, since the debates initiated by *Arkitekturopprøret* started, hard-core conceptualism has been rehearsed over and over again by the architecture profession in the form of claims architecture is more than a superficial concern with what the building looks like, that visual concerns are shallow, that architectural works have more profound aspects such as their “meanings” and cultural roles, not to talk about such concerns as the use of modern materials or sustainability. Clearly, it is uncontroversial that architecture has cultural roles, that it must be sustainable, satisfy regulations and safety requirements. But it is a very strong conceptualist position if one says that for this reason the way it looks like, its visual-formal aesthetic qualities do not matter.

Conceptualism, at the same time, is deeply ingrained in contemporary architectural practice and architectural education. The rejection of visual-formal aesthetic concerns has been the core aspect of Modernism since its earliest days. Attacks on formal-visual aesthetic concerns proliferate in the writings of early modernist architects such as Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer or Adolf Behne, as well as in the resolutions of CIAM.³ The same tone one finds in Peter Eisenman’s dismissal of “pretty” architecture.⁴

In order to understand the strength of the anti-visual sentiments in contemporary architecture, it is enough to consider architecture schools’ admission criteria. Most architecture schools I know of admit students on the basis of their high school grades, including grades in courses such as chemistry or biology—without any attempt to check their artistic talent, graphical ability, capacity for spatial thinking, or even ensure that they are not colour blind. It is clearly assumed that visual-formal and aesthetic abilities are irrelevant in order to study architecture at such institutions. Architects educated in such a system can only believe that visual-aesthetic concerns are irrelevant, and that ugliness can be redeemed by the stories they tell about the buildings they design. Consequently, they will always seek to justify the design by producing a narrative about it that appears plausible in the given social context.

Anyone advocating visual-formal aesthetic concerns in architecture today is thus fighting a particular kind of an uphill battle. It would be quite naïve to think that things can be changed by convincing architects that they should design nice buildings and give up the fashionable narratives they use to justify their designs. Contemporary architects cannot do better than they were trained to do—they have been trained in institutions that have suppressed visual-formal concerns for decades. Their training has provided them with very limited tools to engage with visual and formal-aesthetic issues. It is fair that they become defensive when their work is criticised—and that in their defences they react by producing more narratives, more words. The reaction clearly manifests the faith, deeply inculcated during their education, that their verbal behaviour can compensate for visual-formal failures of their designs, that they can get away with any monstrosity if they have a good story. At the same time, this faith is precisely the root of the problem, because it makes them disregard visual-formal issues and concentrate on the verbal behaviour they can associate with their designs.

Narrative-enhanced design

The architects of the Moxy hotel in Trømse—the building that received *Arkitekturopprøret*'s 2023 ugliness prize—were thus quick to point out that they concentrated on function and sustainability, that a building so close to the airport needs to be functional, and even that in the case of a building so close to the airport it is important that its materials do not disturb the airplane instruments.⁵ Similar narratives were proposed by the defenders of another building that ranked high in the same competition, the Voldsløkka school in Oslo. We are told that “good architecture is not only about the façade of the building” and that the way the building looks should be seen in relation to its other qualities, that a modern building must fit in modern times and even that the architect’s forming of the façade may, someday, prove itself to belong to the aesthetics of the future?⁶ Obviously, in both cases, the problem is not with the functioning of these buildings, structural issues or that they do not comply with the regulations. The problem is that so many people think they are ugly, and no narrative about function, material or regulation compliance can answer to this problem.⁷



Voldsløkka school, Oslo

At the same time—and this is the core predicament of architecture profession today—the qualities that these narratives pertain to are something that other professions are competent to do equally well as architects or, often, even better. The problem is that is not merely that architects are failing in one aspect of their work—the problem is that this aspect is the one aspect in which their competence should shine over other professions. Or, that if they cannot achieve quality in this aspect of their work, it is not clear who them, since pretty much everything else they do can be done by other professions as competently, or even with greater competence.

Since formal properties are not reducible to conceptual properties, an infinite number shapes can correspond to any narrative. Any narrative can be used to justify any shape. The content of the narrative therefore needs to be phrased in a way that will get approval from the given public, and re-direct attention away from formal-visual aesthetic issues. Consider the project for the National Museum in Oslo. For our discussion here it is less relevant that the building won the ugliness prize for 2022. But it is significant that in his interview for a Danish conservative *Kristligt Dagbladet* its architect actually claimed that the building is based on the classicist principles (how on Earth?) and actually expressed the concern that when architects concentrate too much on contemporary fashions, such architecture quickly loses its relevance.⁸ Formal-visual aesthetic concerns have become so irrelevant in contemporary architecture that *any* narrative can be presented to defend *any* architectural shape, even when this shape dramatically contradicts the narrative.



National Museum, Oslo

Sustainability as a narrative

Architectural styles today are first and foremost styles affirmed in architects' verbal behaviour and the purpose of what architects say is to provide them with reputation and commissions. The role of design is secondary, as any design fits any narrative anyhow. Narratives follow fashions and insofar as they reflect the dominant social concerns and these concerns make them fashionable. Since today global warming and CO₂ emission are genuine and widespread concerns, architects can comfortably respond to criticism about the aesthetic failures they designed by talking about their efforts to solve ecological problems. As if ugly buildings were by themselves the solution to global warming or CO₂ emissions.

The Norwegian debates caused by *Arkitekturopprøret's* ugliness prizes finely illustrate this faith that aesthetic failures can be justified, or at least their discussion avoided, by talking about solar cells or reduced CO₂ emissions. The statement by the Oslo architecture professor cited earlier—that aesthetic concerns must give way to what is practical and sustainable—is an excellent example of this strategy of evasion. Similarly, in the case of the Voldsløkka school, its defenders respond to aesthetic criticism by pointing out to the ecological concerns that motivated the design and the fact that the building has solar panels on the façade.⁹

It may be pointed out that such narratives are not merely an empty talk that serves architects in order to promote themselves or get commissions. Ugly or not, buildings with solar panels still produce electricity, even when they are aggressively destructive for the urban environments of old cities. This indicates that architects who design such buildings have other, genuine, even if non-aesthetic, motivation and aims. It may seem unfair to reduce their verbal behaviour to self-promotion strategies and efforts to conceal their insufficient formal-aesthetic abilities.

However, consider the Brattørkaia Powerhouse in Trondheim —a massive block recently placed in the city centre. We are told that it will produce more energy than it will consume during its lifespan, that it is covered with almost 3000 m² of solar panels and that it is “the northernmost energy-positive building”.¹⁰



Brattørkaia, Trondheim

If we look closer this achievement starts to look more problematic. Trondheim is at 63° geographical latitude. In winter, when energy is needed, short daylight periods are insufficient to produce enough energy; in summer the panels may produce plenty of energy, but this energy cannot be stored. The project description proudly explains that the building includes “ample space for energy storage” for the placement of such installations once when future technology enables this. The ecological significance of the building is thus based on a science-fiction scenario.

At the same time, it is not clear why solar panels should be on the facade: it would be equally possible to place them in a field outside the city. We do not expect buildings in urban areas to produce food for their inhabitants or to have water sources independent of urban water supplies—and there is equally little reason for urban buildings to provide electricity on their own.

It is, however, the *Northern* façade of the building that reveals the full scale of the architectural fiasco. Solar panels are certainly not going to be placed on the Northern facade, nor can they serve as an excuse for its unimaginative ribbon windows. Yet, this is the building's most important façade, since it looks onto the harbour and greets all thousands of visitors and tourists that arrive by ship. The narrative about solar panel merely diverts attention from the real problem, which is the front street-and-harbour façade of the building.



Brattørkaia, Trondheim, northern façade towards the harbour

What is actually going on is that this massive monstrosity has been placed at the end of one of the city's Baroque plan axes and next to the historical railway station. Not to mention that it looks on the harbour. The building is on an architecturally difficult site whose architectural complexities, we may infer, the architects decided to avoid by presenting a narrative about sustainability and by loading it heavily with solar panels in order to make the narrative credible. Clearly, the role of these panels is symbolic, but since we know that sustainability is important, nobody will dare complain. The concerns about sustainability that the architect paraded are thus merely a fig leaf that conceals their lack of architectural confidence to engage with a difficult architectural problem of designing a building in a historical context.

Conclusion. Sustainability is the new Decon

Modernism came to dominate architectural production internationally in the years after World War Two. Its rise reflected the commercial interests of architecture offices that had too much work during the era and were not able to pay the drafting costs of ornamented facades. Popular architects' narratives in those days pertained to something called "the spirit of the time" and sought to justify the omission of ornamentation from contemporary architectural production. As the aesthetic failure of Modernism became obvious in the late 1960s and the 1970s, new narratives that denied the relevance of visuality and sought to emphasize architecture's "meanings" or "the spirit of the place" came to the forefront. New fashionable narratives proliferated over time. In the 1990s, for instance, the verbal behaviour that provided attractive commissions had to include dis-words such as disruption, dislocation, deflection, deviation, and distortion and emphasize the unease and disquiet that architectural works were intended to cause.¹¹ When architects today talk about sustainability, this belongs to the same traditional strategies used to avoid aesthetic responsibility. Certainly, the humankind is facing serious problems with global warming and CO₂ emissions but there is no reason to believe that symbolic placements of solar panels on buildings will help with it. It is much more efficient to build solar panel plantations outside urban areas. The use of solar panels in contemporary architecture is symbolic, hardly different from painting entire city blocks green, and merely serves to justify architects' incapacity to address aesthetic problems. And, as long as radical changes are not introduced in architectural education and bring about changes in the profession—we can just wait for the next narrative to replace it.

NOTES

¹ This paper is a revised version of my presentation at the BUA conference, Oslo, 4 May 2025.

² Tine Hegli, according to *Nettavisen Nyheter*, 30.11.2023, 23.29.

³ See Branko Mitrović, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Fraud*, San Francisco: Oro Books, 2022, 17-18 for a survey of anti-aesthetic statements by the prominent founders of the Modernist movement.

⁴ Taylor, John. "Mr In-Between. Deconstructing with Peter Eisenman." *New York Magazine*. October 17, 1988, 46-52, 48.

⁵ <https://www.nrk.no/kultur/arkitekturopproret-med-pris-til-arets-styggeste-og-peneste-nybygg-1.16646489>

<https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/raser-mot-stygge-bygg-i-debatten-tilforer-ingenting-positivt/s/5-95-1491170>

<https://www.arkitektur.no/aktuelt/arkitektur/groess-medaljen-vi-liket-at-folk-har-forskjellige-syn-paa-arkitektur/>

⁶ <https://www.dagsavisen.no/nyheter/innenriks/2023/09/01/debatten-raser-om-voldsloekka-skole/>

<https://norconsult.no/prosjekter/voldsloekka-skole-solcelleanlegg/>

⁷ <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/XbLv7r/god-arkitektur-handler-ikke-bare-om-byggets-fasade>

<https://norconsult.no/prosjekter/voldsloekka-skole-solcelleanlegg/>

⁸ "Selvom bygningen ser moderne ud, har vi tegnet bygningen ud fra den klassiske arkitekturs principper om langtidsholdbar kvalitet, så bygningen faktisk skulle blive bedre med tiden og indgå med en naturlighed i bybilledet. Jeg tror selv på arkitektur, der holder mange år frem, og jeg er selv meget kritisk over for al for samtidsbundet arkitektur, der vil være smart i en fart med en plastic-fantastic-tilgang til byggerierne, så de mister deres relevans på kort tid, når moden skifter." <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kultur/arkitekt-bag-nyt-norsk-museum-aeldre-bygninger-er-som-aeldre-mennesker-dem-skal-man-have>

⁹ <https://www.dagsavisen.no/nyheter/innenriks/2023/09/01/debatten-raser-om-voldsloekka-skole/>
<https://norconsult.no/prosjekter/voldsloekka-skole-solcelleanlegg/>

¹⁰ <https://www.snohetta.com/projects/powerhouse-brattorkaia>

¹¹ The preference for these words was introduced into architects' verbal behaviour already by Bernard Tschumi and Mark Wigley already in the late 1980s. See Mitrović, *Architectural Principles*, 82.