Architecture, ethics, and the theory of responsive cohesion

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ABSTRACT: Although architecture tends to be thought of primarily in aesthetic terms, it is in fact pervaded by profoundly ethical concerns. I outline the fledgling field of architecture ethics, proceed to outline the basic structure of ethics (i.e., the architecture of ethics, if you like), and then consider how the main approaches to ethics might be used to address the main categories of ethical concerns that arise when we consider the practice of architecture. In doing this I pay particular attention to a category that presents a unique challenge for ethics as it has developed to date – a category that I refer to as that of design fit – and present a new kind of approach to ethics, which I refer to as the theory of responsive cohesion, that enables us to address the design fit question (and a great many others besides).

Conference theme: Education of future architects
Keywords: ethics, architecture, built environment, responsive cohesion

1. INTRODUCTION
It is by now almost trite to note that architecture and, more generally, the built, or human-constructed, environment has a massive impact on people and the planet. Not only do the built forms that people live in have profound implications for their physical and psychological quality of life but the collective impact of these forms on the biophysical environment together with the ways of living that these forms both cater to and shape now rivals other forces of nature. Consider this single example: Herbert Girardet (2000: 19) provides figures that suggest that the “ecological footprint” of London, which is to say “the land area required to supply [the city] with food and timber products, and to absorb [its] CO₂ output via areas of growing vegetation,” is equivalent to approximately 94% of the land productive land area of Britain! And there are, of course, many more large cities in Britain than London (even if this might come as a surprise to some Londoners). In brief, then, it should be obvious that how we design and construct our built environments and how we live in them is a question of the first importance not only for the health, safety, comfort, and wellbeing of humans themselves but also for the preservation and flourishing of the whole nonhuman realm of nature. The fate of the “green bits” of the planet is now inextricably bound up with – indeed, effectively at the mercy of – the future of the “brown bits.”

2. THE ETHICS OF ARCHITECTURE
It should be clear that one does not have to be an “ethicist” to see that questions regarding what we build, how we build, and how we live in what we build raise profound ethical concerns. However, as Thomas Fisher (2000: 123) notes in his thoughtful consideration of the present state of architecture entitled In the Scheme of Things:
Architecture … has long been viewed as a branch of aesthetics rather than ethics. If anything, ethics has been thought of as applying to architects and not to architecture, to the actions of professionals, not the traits of buildings. Yet most people certainly talk as if architecture has an ethical component when we say that a building is good or bad …
Fisher is surely right: the formal discussion of architecture is dominated by an aesthetics framework of reference even though it is a fact of common experience that architectural processes and products raise profound ethical questions. In consequence, serious attempts explicitly to address ethical issues associated with architecture and the built environment have thus far been few and far between whether we consider approaches to this topic from the philosophical side or the design and architecture side. The study of architecture ethics, the ethics of architecture or, more generally, the ethics of the built environment, the ethics of the human-constructed realm, or the ethics of design is, therefore, still in its infancy (see Fox 2000a for more on this point as well as a fairly complete listing of the few books and paper-length contributions on architecture ethics that preceded that publication). Fisher himself concludes his book by calling for “a conversation about ethics” within the architecture profession.

Why is this important field of architecture ethics so underdeveloped? On the architecture side, we can cite the fact that architects are trained, obviously enough, in architecture, not the formal study of ethics. Thus, although thoughtful architecturally schooled commentators will often gesture in ethical directions in their lectures and writings, these gestures are generally viewed from the perspective of formally trained ethicists as amounting to little more than that. They are either not explicitly advanced within a developed ethical framework (such as those afforded by the major ethical theories) or, in any case, are not systematically argued. It might also be the case that some architects consider ethical issues to boil down to little more than the need to follow one’s “common sense” or comply with – or at least not fall foul of – a code of professional conduct such as those developed by the Royal Institute of British Architecture.
Architects (RIBA), the American Institute of Architects (AIA), or the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) (all of which are obtainable via the websites for these organizations). Alternatively, it might be the case that architects consider some complex ethical issues – including the wider ethical implications of what they do – as too messy to explore in detail (“Let’s not open that can of worms”) or as a “luxury we can’t afford” in the context of busy working days.

On the philosophical side, we can cite the fact that Western ethics has, at least for all earthly purposes (i.e., setting aside any putative duties we have in respect of God), been overwhelmingly focused on our obligations in respect of people. This anthropocentric focus of interest has run from the origins of Western ethics in Athens in the fifth century BC, through the Christian dominated period (initiated by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century) until the Renaissance and beyond, and on through the development of the more secular, rationally grounded forms of ethics that have characterized philosophical discussions from the eighteenth century to the present. Indeed, it is only since the 1970s that (some) philosophers have begun to devote serious, systematic attention to ethical questions in respect of non-human entities such as other sentient beings, living things in general, and ecological systems. These post-1970s developments have gone under the general name environmental ethics. However, in their concern to escape from the anthropocentric legacy of Western ethics, environmental ethicists have, in the main, been overwhelmingly concerned with the ethics of the natural environment (including non-human animals and other living things) and have largely ignored the built environment. Thus, just as the non-human world has constituted a major blind spot in theorizing associated with traditional, anthropocentrically focused forms of ethics, so the built environment has constituted a major blind spot in theorizing associated with the development of environmental ethics to date. The upshot is that the field of environmental ethics has not yet realized the full implications of its own name.

But even if architecture ethics is still in its infancy as a formal field of inquiry, it is undeniable that the actual practice and products of architectural practice do issue in a great many ethically relevant concerns. As Wasserman, Sullivan, and Palermo (2000: 31) state in their first-of-its-kind textbook Ethics and the Practice of Architecture: “Architecture, in its many manifestations, is as much an ethical discipline as a design discipline.” Nowhere is this more true than in the field of sustainable architecture: achieving a sustainable way of living is clearly not just a technical issue (although it is often discussed as if it were) but also (and fundamentally) an ethical one. As Terry Williamson and Antony Radford (2000: 57-58) state: “If ethics deals with the standards by which human actions can be judged right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, then the notion of a ‘sustainable’ architecture … is fundamentally an ethical issue.”

But what do we really mean when we say that an issue is an “ethical” one? The most straightforward definition of ethics is this: ethics is concerned with the values we should live by. That is, ethics is not concerned with “values” in some vague, wishy-washy sense, such as whether I prefer my hair long or short or whether I prefer blue to green; rather, it is centrally concerned with the values that I (and you) should live by, with those values that we are, for various reasons, rationally obliged to respect. This central concern of ethics is therefore referred to by philosophers as normative ethics, because it is concerned with the norms, or standards, that we ought to meet, or at least strive to meet, in our conduct. There is always this obligatory aspect when we talk about ethical values as distinct from other kinds of values.

Now, if we think of ethics as being concerned with the values we should live by, then it is helpful to think of the kinds of ethical concerns that are raised by the practice of architecture as falling into at least six (not entirely exclusive and not always compatible) categories. I will, for convenience, refer to these categories in my discussion below as the “Big Six” of architecture ethics. These Big Six categories of architecture ethics are:

(i) Basic forms of professional conduct. This category covers issues that are relevant to professional life in general such as honesty, fair dealing, honoring commitments, gaining and maintaining sufficient skills to perform tasks competently, respecting and advancing the profession, and so on.

(ii) Physical impact of the product of architectural practice (i.e., a built form of some kind) upon people who have direct contact with it (because they live or work in it, use it in other ways, or live close enough to be directly affected by it). Many of these kinds of issues are dealt with these days under the rubric of “health and safety.”

(iii) Psychological impact of the building upon people who have direct contact with it (again, because they live or work in it, use it in other ways, or live close enough to be directly affected by it). This category is concerned with such things as whether a building is experienced in a quite straightforward way as, say, drab, dreary, and depressing or inspiring and enlivening. Needless to say, these matters that can affect people’s “quality of life” just as surely as those covered in the previous category.

(iv) What we might call cultural fit or symbolic resonance (e.g., building an immigration centre – or any building for that matter – in the shape of a swastika would be widely regarded as deeply offensive). This is distinguishable from the previous point in that a building could be experienced as inspiring and enlivening were it not for – or perhaps even in spite of – its offensive cultural or symbolic resonances.

(v) Physical impact upon the environment. This concern is clearly of immense importance to the future of the planet and has spawned the burgeoning field of sustainable or “Green” architecture.

(vi) What we might call a building’s design fit, that is, the extent to which a building fits with its natural, social, and built contexts when considered purely in terms of its design rather than in terms of its actual physical impact or even the preferences that people might have in regard to it.
Having now outlined the Big Six categories of *architecture ethics* let us move on to consider what we might call the *architecture of ethics*. What, in brief, is the basic structure of ethical thinking and what can it offer architecture ethics?

3. THE ARCHITECTURE OF ETHICS

Ethics is generally divided into *descriptive ethics, normative ethics, metaethics, and applied ethics*. Descriptive ethics simply refers to the descriptive study of the ethical views that people happen to hold. Normative ethics, in contrast, refers to arguments for the sorts of norms, goals, or standards that people ought to hold. As such normative ethics lies at the heart of philosophical approaches to ethics and is what most people mean when they use the term "ethics." Metaethics refers to discussion about normative ethics, as opposed to arguments for a substantive normative position. Metaethics covers questions regarding such things as the meaning of ethical terms; how we come by knowledge of what is good or bad, right or wrong; and the reality status of ethical values, e.g., do ethical claims have an objective basis or only a subjective basis? Thus, metaethics picks up on the semantic, epistemological, and metaphysical issues that arise from normative ethical discussion. Finally, applied ethics refers to inquiry into the application of normative ethical approaches in all manner of specific practical contexts - these range from A to Z (abortion, animal experimentation ... business, computing ... journalism, medicine, nursing ... zoos), and from birth to death (prenatal testing, obstetrics ... euthanasia and physician assisted suicide).

A systematic exposition of the basics of normative ethics – the heart of ethics – would typically begin by outlining the three main approaches to normative ethics:

(i) Ethics that focus on the cultivation of certain *qualities of character* (formally known as *virtue ethics*).

(ii) Ethics that focus on the upholding of, or respect for, certain *principles* (formally known as *deontological ethics*, from *deon* duty, but a more user-friendly term is *principle ethics*). A principle ethics approach is concerned with the upholding of, or respect for, certain *principles* quite independently of the question of whether or not the *character* of moral agents is such that they personally wish to uphold these principles or the question of whether or not upholding these principles necessarily leads to the best *consequences* on each occasion.

(iii) Ethics that focus on obtaining certain kinds of *outcomes* (formally known as *consequentialism*, or just *consequentialism*; the best known form of consequentialism is *utilitarianism*, which enjoins us to maximize the general happiness).

David Solomon (1995) has usefully pointed out that these three main approaches to normative ethics can be thought of as mapping on to the general structure of action, which can be represented by this simple schema: agent --- action --- outcome. If the focus of an ethical approach is on the character of the moral agent, then it constitutes a virtue ethics approach; if the focus of the approach is on the rightness of wrongness of certain actions per se, then it constitutes a deontological, or principle, ethics approach; and if the focus is on the goodness or bad of certain outcomes, then it constitutes a consequentialist approach.

These three main forms of ethics are all highly developed – especially in regard to inter-human ethics – and they can all be employed to address the Big Six categories of architecture ethics that I outlined above. This does not mean that we simply crank an ethical handle and get an ethical answer; there is as much disputation in ethical discourse as in other high-level forms of discourse. (That said, this fact of intellectual life should not obscure the fact that, as in other high-level forms of discourse, from science to law, there are also substantial areas of agreement.) Rather, it means that we can address ethical questions within systematically developed frameworks of thought that enable us to offer well-developed reasons for our views and so enter into reasoned discussion with others.

The three main approaches to normative ethics that I have just outlined clearly open out on to a wide range of questions for the ethics of building. For example:

- What kinds of personal qualities of character (or virtues) should planners, designers, architects, and builders cultivate? More generally, what kinds of virtues should people in general cultivate in order to be more sensitive to the built environment (and perhaps by implication the natural environment)?

- What kinds of principles should we seek to uphold with respect to the built environment?

- What kinds of outcomes or consequences should we seek to promote with respect to the built environment?

In regard to the Big Six categories of architecture ethics, we can note that established, anthropocentrically focused forms of virtue ethics are especially (but not only) applicable to the issues covered by the first category, that is, the category of basic forms of professional conduct. Similarly, established, anthropocentrically focused forms of deontological and consequentialist ethics are especially (but not only) applicable to the second, third, and fourth categories I have listed above, that is, the categories of direct physical impacts upon people, direct psychological impacts upon people, and impacts upon people that are more obviously culturally/symbolically mediated. The fifth category – that of physical impact upon the environment – can be addressed either *indirectly* by established, anthropocentric approaches to ethics (i.e., by focusing on the indirect impact that the built environment has on people through its direct impacts upon the wider natural environment) or *directly* by the approaches that are being developed within environmental ethics from animal welfare ethics to life-based ethics to (especially) ecological integrity based ethics.
At this point, however, a critic might say:

OK, I can see that the practice of architecture raises a great many kinds of ethically relevant questions, but it turns out that these questions can all be dealt with in terms of either established, anthropocentric approaches to ethics or the newer approaches being developed in regard to the ethics of the natural environment, so although we need to discuss ethical questions concerning architecture, these questions do not confront the field of ethics itself with any genuinely new kinds of challenges. Questions concerning the ethics of architecture are simply reducible to other approaches to ethics such as those concerning our obligations in respect of other people, other sentient beings, other living things, or ecosystem integrity. Thus, architecture ethics cannot be thought of as a genuinely independent field of inquiry; it is just another field that is ripe for the application of ethical approaches that have been or are being developed elsewhere.

This criticism might have some force were it not for the sixth, design fit category listed above. If people see a building that “sticks out like a sore thumb,” then they will often spontaneously exclaim words to the effect that “There ought to be a law against it” (and sometimes there are). Moreover, even if it turns out that the building has a relatively low environmental impact in measurable, physical terms and is, on the whole, accepted by others (e.g., perhaps other people “don’t mind it” in part because it provides more car parking space than other buildings or perhaps they take some kind of perverse pride in the fact that it has helped to “put the place on the map”) someone might still object to this building in principle, on the grounds that its design does not fit its context. Is this “just” an aesthetic reaction? Or is it a more strongly normatively laden reaction than that – one more appropriately addressed within an ethical framework of reference as the expression “There ought to be a law against it” suggests?

I have been concerned with the importance of this design fit issue for some years (Fox 2000b, 2004, 2006a, 2006b) in part because I think that the theoretical tools that are required to address it adequately point to a new and better form of ethics in general (more on which below). Tom Spector, author of The Ethical Architect (2001), has also recently picked up on (what I am here referring to as) the design fit issue in arguing that the notion of sustainability “does not appear to have many, if any, formal implications” and that it is, therefore, quite possible to construct “an ugly building – to high sustainability standards” (Spector 2006: 268, 275). However, in contrast to the ethical implications that I see in this problem, Spector (2006: 275) sees it as an aesthetic problem for sustainability (and note here how well his comments chime with Fisher’s critically intended observation, quoted earlier, that “Architecture … has long been viewed as a branch of aesthetics rather than ethics”).

There is a certain unease over whether radical sustainability will prove to be a source of an aesthetic, or a source of aesthetic dismay – whether it will turn into something that works to block an aesthetic consciousness as much as it grounds one. This unease is reflected in the polite, but tepid, response it receives in the mainstream architectural community.

Thus, we return to the question: Is objecting to a building on the basis of its design fit “just” an aesthetic reaction or is it a more strongly normatively laden reaction than that – one more appropriately addressed within an ethical framework of reference as the expression “There ought to be a law against it” suggests? This is a key question for the ethics of architecture for this reason: if we agree that the values we should live by (which is to say, the ethics we should adopt) are such that we should object to this kind of building regardless of both the preferences of others and the (physical) environmental impact of such a building, then it means that the field of architecture ethics does indeed address questions that are not reducible to traditional, anthropocentric approaches to ethics or the newer approaches being developed in regard to the ethics of the natural environment – or, for that matter, aesthetics, since the stipulation that we are concerned with the values we should live by specifies that we are dealing with concerns that are, at base, ethical rather than aesthetic, or only aesthetic. This would mean that architecture ethics would have to be considered as a field of inquiry in its own right since it covers issues that cannot be reduced to others that are already being addressed by other fields of ethics. Indeed, it might even be that in tackling this difficult – but architecturally central – design fit issue ethicists are forced to develop new approaches to ethics in general.

As it happens, thinking about this design fit issue has been of the first importance to my own development in recent years of a new approach to ethics in general. This approach, which I refer to as the theory of responsive cohesion, has profound implications for how we think about architecture, design in general, and a great many other significant aspects of our lives. Here, however, I will restrict myself to outlining those aspects of the theory that are most relevant to architecture.

4. THE THEORY OF RESPONSIVE COHESION

The central thesis of the theory of responsive cohesion is that there is a form of organization that underpins our most informed judgments as to what is most valuable. I refer to this form of organization as responsive cohesion. Responsive cohesion can be contrasted with the two forms of organization that lie on either side of it, as it were. I refer to these as fixed cohesion and discohesion (lack of cohesion). Let me briefly outline what I mean by these three forms of organization.

Things can be ordered, organized, hold together, or exhibit cohesion (or not) in any of three main ways. (Cohesion is my preferred term here and it simply means to hold or cling together, from Latin cohaerere, from co- together + haerere to cling, adhere.) These three main forms of cohesion can be thought of as lying along a spectrum of possibilities with all manner of gradations in between.

At one extreme, things can, literally or metaphorically, hold or be stuck together in a fixed, rigid, and hence static, or at least repetitive, way. By definition, then, the elements or salient features that constitute them are not responsive to each other in any meaningful way; rather, they just hold or are stuck together in a certain way and that’s that. Another way of saying this is that their salient features don’t answer to each other in any meaningful way. (Talking about whether things can be said, literally or metaphorically, to “answer” to each other is often an illuminating way of
talking about whether they can be said, literally or metaphorically, to be responsive to each other. The word response, from which the adjectival term responsive is derived, itself derives from the Latin responsum, meaning answer.)

At the other extreme, things can, literally or metaphorically, simply fail to hold together at all, in which case they do not exhibit any cohesion to speak of, they are “all over the place,” there’s “no logic to them,” they’re “completely chaotic” (in the conventional rather than more recent, technical, mathematical sense of the term chaos).

Between these extremes lies the region in which things can be said, literally or metaphorically, to hold together (i.e., to possess an overall cohesive form of organization), but to hold together in virtue of the ways in which the elements or salient features that constitute them are responsive to each other. In these cases, the elements or salient features that constitute things can be said to feed into and play off each other, or answer to each other in various ways, such that they generate and maintain a form of organization that is cohesive overall. Rather than being locked into a fixed, rigid, frozen, forced, mechanical or formulaic pattern on the one hand (as with examples of fixed cohesion) or being “all over the place” on the other hand (as with examples of discohesion), examples of responsive cohesion have a fluid, adaptive, creative, organic, “alive” quality about them.

The theory of responsive cohesion advances the thesis that, in any genuinely open consideration of the matter, it is always the example that exemplifies the most responsively cohesive form of organization that is typically judged to be the best example of its kind by informed judges – or that (for reasons that I simply can not pursue here for reasons of space) ought to be judged to be the best example of its kind (see Fox 2006b: 86-87 for more on this caveat). Therefore argue that responsive cohesion represents the foundational value – the most fundamental general value there is – and that we ought, accordingly, to live by, or be guided by, this foundational value to the extent that we reasonably can (e.g., by preserving examples of responsive cohesion where we find them, regenerating or creating examples of responsive cohesion in and through our chosen undertakings, reflecting and reinforcing this relational quality in our judgments and ways of proceeding, and so on).

Even our most informed judgments about what constitutes an informed judgment support the idea of the foundational value of responsive cohesion. Let me illustrate this. Even if a view holds together internally (i.e., is internally cohesive), we do not think that it represents an informed judgment if it is a fixed and dogmatic view (i.e., if it is unresponsive to reasons and evidence). Rather, such a view represents an example of fixed cohesion at the level of ideas or judgments. On the other hand, we do not think that a view that is internally inconsistent or that “doesn’t hold together” or “doesn’t add up” represents an informed judgment either. Rather, such a view represents an example of discohesion at the level of ideas or judgments. Instead, our most informed judgments suggest that an informed judgment is precisely a view that both holds together internally and is based on and remains open to reasons and evidence (i.e., a view that answers to or is responsive to reasons and evidence). And a view of this kind is clearly an example of responsive cohesion at the level of ideas or judgments.

But the theory of responsive cohesion does not just advance the view that responsive cohesion is the most valuable form of organization at the level of our most informed judgments about what constitutes an informed judgment. Rather, to repeat, the theory of responsive cohesion advances the thesis that our most informed judgments suggest that responsive cohesion is the most valuable form of organization in any area we care to consider. Let’s quickly consider some other examples across realms as broad as science, ethics, psychology, and politics.

In the realms of both science and ethics, informed judges typically consider both rigid adherence to a theory in the face of significantly differing reasons and evidence and the complete lack of a theory (such that one lives in a “wilderness of single instances”) to represent bad examples of science and ethics. These two ways of proceeding represent examples of fixed cohesion and discohesion, respectively, at the level of theory. In contrast, good procedure in both science and ethics consists in there being a responsive cohesion between theory and observations in the case of science and theory and personal moral judgments (or “moral intuitions”) in the case of ethics.

In the realm of psychology, informed judges typically consider a person to be in “good (psychological) shape” when there is a responsive cohesion between their thoughts, emotions and desires (i.e., when the various elements of their psyche “answer” to each other). In contrast, we consider a person to be in “bad (psychological) shape” when they feel compelled to do the same things in the same ways (we say that they are “stuck in a rut” or “acting like a zombie”) or when they seem to be (psychologically) “all over the place,” “a mess,” “crazy,” and so on. The latter two ways of being represent examples of fixed cohesion and discohesion, respectively, at the level of psychological organization.

In the realm of politics, informed judges typically consider that the best forms of politics are those in which there is a responsive cohesion between a government and the population it governs, that is, where there are mechanisms in place to ensure that the government answers to the people (e.g., through democratic elections, an independent judiciary, and a free press) and that people answer to the government (e.g., through the rule of law). In contrast, informed judges typically consider that the worst forms of politics consist in circumstances where ruler(s) dictate to the people but are not answerable to them (as in dictatorships) or where there is no government and everyone is a “law unto themselves” (anarchy). Again, the latter two ways of proceeding represent examples of fixed cohesion and discohesion, respectively, at the level of political organization.

We can extend this analysis on and on. What I’m driving at very briefly here is the idea that whatever domain of interest we wish to consider – whether it be scientific theories, ethics, psychology, politics, or others such as the arts, sports, economics, organizational management, conversations, and so on (even making love) – we will find that it is
always the example that most exemplifies the relational quality of responsive cohesion (i.e., the example that most holds together by virtue of the mutual responsiveness between its central features) that is typically judged to be the best example of its kind by informed judges. The overall point of this argument is this: if this claim applies in the case of every domain of interest we wish to consider, then it points to the conclusion that the relational quality of responsive cohesion is (what I refer to as) the foundational value, that is, it is the most basic value we can find. Moreover, this claim applies to everything because everything is organized in one way or another, whether we are considering a chair or a system of government.

If you follow the drift of what I’m arguing here and are prepared to entertain the idea that perhaps responsive cohesion is the most fundamental value there is, the deepest value we can find, then it follows that we should live by this value, because the best answer to the question “What value or values should we live by?” is not the 42nd most fundamental value we can find or the 57th most fundamental value we can find but rather the most fundamental value we can find. (Indeed, it is worth noting here that the relational quality of responsive cohesion is, in my view, not only the most fundamental value we can find but that it even underpins the process of valuing. This is because the brain itself is organized in a responsively cohesive way – there’s no central organizing factor or feature in the brain; rather, it is constituted by an astonishingly rich network of neurons and neuronal connections – so even the brain and, thus, consciousness and, thus, the very possibility of valuing is underpinned by this feature of responsive cohesion.)

What would it mean to live by the foundational value of responsive cohesion? Well, one important implication is that it would lead us to think about things much more in terms of how they fit with their contexts. Let me explain this extremely important point. When we think about the idea of responsive cohesion further, we can see that we have to distinguish between what I refer to as internal responsive cohesion and contextual responsive cohesion. Let me give an example to illustrate what I mean. Suppose you’ve just put a tremendous amount of work into composing a beautiful symphony. This symphony has a very responsively cohesive structure; the various elements of the symphony play into and play off of each other beautifully. But suppose you then introduce some new bars of music. And suppose that although these new bars of music exhibit an internal form of responsive cohesion, because they fit together very well, they don’t fit with the contextual responsive cohesion that is represented by the overall symphony. What are you going to do? Well, if you live by the foundational value of responsive cohesion, then the obvious thing to do is to reject or modify the smaller ill-fitting new part because if you tried to turn the whole symphony into something that would fit with this smaller ill-fitting new part, then you’d be undoing lots of responsive cohesion (namely, the rest of the symphony) to fit in with just a small “bit” of responsive cohesion (namely, the smaller ill-fitting part). Moreover, if you modified the whole to fit with the part every time you introduced some new part that didn’t fit (imagine some builders doing this in your house!), then you’d be remaking the whole on an ongoing basis. This would amount to an ongoing state of anarchy and so would represent the functional equivalent of dis cohesion rather than responsive cohesion.

The basic message here is that although any individual example of responsive cohesion is a good thing, the widest context in which we can locate this form of organization is the best thing. This means that, on the whole, internal versions of responsive cohesion need to be made to fit with contextual forms of responsive cohesion rather than the other way around. This conclusion brings us to a crucial question, namely: What is the widest context of responsive cohesion that we can think of for all earthly purposes? Well, it’s the earth itself, sometimes referred to these days as Gaia. The largest example of responsive cohesion we can think of for all earthly purposes is the way in which the ecosphere maintains its integrity over time through the mutual responsiveness of its component parts. Thus, if we accept the point that internal versions of responsive cohesion need to be made to fit with contextual forms of responsive cohesion rather than the other way around (which itself follows naturally from the conclusion that responsive cohesion is the foundational value), then it follows that the internal aspects of our Gaian context, including our social, political, and economic arrangements and our manufactured products (including our architectural products), should be made responsive to that context, rather than the other way around.

5. IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY OF RESPONSIVE COHESION FOR ARCHITECTURE

The theory of responsive cohesion is considerably more fine-grained than the above statement alone suggests. This is especially obvious when it comes to consideration of the human-constructed realm, which is to say all the material artifacts that we design and make, including buildings. We can see this when we consider the following. An analysis of “what constitutes the context of what” reveals that the biophysical realm of nature constitutes the basic context for the development and continuance of the linguistically mediated human social realm, and that the human social realm in turn constitutes the basic context for the development and continuance of the human-constructed realm. (For considerably more on the theory of responsive cohesion’s theory of contexts, which I am briefly encapsulating here, see Fox 2006b, especially chapter 6.) When we put this tripartite division of contexts together with the principle that examples of responsive cohesion in subsidiary contexts should defer more to examples of responsive cohesion in their overarching contexts than vice versa (since this is clearly the best way to preserve and further enhance the foundational value of responsive cohesion overall), then it follows that the contextual responsive cohesion of the biophysical realm is ultimately more important than the contextual responsive cohesion of the human social realm, which, in turn, is ultimately more important than the contextual responsive cohesion of the human-constructed realm. Thus, when there are tensions between these different forms of contextual responsive cohesion, as indeed there often are, considerations regarding the contextual responsive cohesion of the human-constructed realm should defer more to considerations regarding the contextual responsive cohesion of the human social realm than vice versa, and considerations regarding the contextual responsive cohesion of the human social realm should defer more to considerations regarding the contextual responsive cohesion of the biophysical realm than vice versa.
In the context of building this allows us to say to the architect, designer, builder, planner, and so on:

When you make material things, make them so that they exemplify both contextual and internal responsive cohesion. If tough choices have to be made between these two forms of responsive cohesion, then give priority to contextual responsive cohesion over internal responsive cohesion. And if tough choices have to be made between contextual forms of responsive cohesion themselves then give priority to contextual responsive cohesion with the natural realm over the human social realm, and the human social realm over the humanly constructed realm. But on no account engage in prioritizing things in any of these ways unless you are confronted with a genuinely forced choice. The thing to aim for is responsive cohesion at all levels. To settle for less is actually to settle for a failure of design.

This approach clearly addresses the design fit question. Among other things, it gives us a basis for objecting to a building not only in terms of its failure to be responsive to the physical ecological integrity of its surroundings but also in terms of its failure to be responsive to its biophysical, social, and built contexts (in that order of priority) at the more intangible level of its design. Moreover, the basis of this objection is fundamentally an ethical one rather than “merely” an aesthetic one because ethics is concerned with the values we should live by and this response proceeds from us living by the deepest value we can find, namely, the foundational value of responsive cohesion.

Williamson, Radford, and Bennetts (2003: 128, 130) argue that the implications of the theory of responsive cohesion mark a distinct change in terms of the dominant conventions of architectural design and philosophy, and so ought to make a considerable difference to the ways in which architects, designers, planners, and builders proceed:

Fox argues that upholding the principle of responsive cohesion in sustainable architecture entails responding to ecological, social and built contexts, in that order of priority (Fox 2000b: 225). Similarly, architect Paul Pholeros characterizes architecture as concerned with place, people and stuff, in that order, which shows agreement about priorities between architect and philosopher … The emphasis on order is important … The orthodox anthropocentric position in both architecture and philosophy would have put the social context ahead of the ecological context. [The authors indicate in a chapter note at this point that “Paul Pholeros says ‘he used to put people first,’ but now considers the environmental issues of place to be paramount (personal communication).”]

Although no reference is provided to any published work by Pholeros, it can be seen that the priority ordering that the theory of responsive cohesion gives to contextual responsive cohesion over internal (or sub-contextual forms of) responsive cohesion explains why Pholeros was right to change his ordering.] Putting ecological [concerns] first illustrates the degree to which environmental concerns have moved to the forefront. Architecture is most obviously manifested in the third concern, the stuff or built context, including the aesthetical tectonics of space and form as well as building and landscape materials. Indeed, conventionally architecture would put concern about stuff first, and placing this last in the order corresponds to a view of the issue [that asks] what can architecture mean for sustainability rather than vice versa; in other words how can the stuff of architecture be mobilized to advance our sustainability objectives for the environment and society (my emphasis). It is worth adding here that the contextual priority ordering that emerges from the theory of responsive cohesion’s theory of contexts has equally significant implications for many other aspects of our lives as well – think of the design (or lack of it) and manufacture not only of the built environment (so much of which is thoroughly dispiriting), but of almost everything we use.

My own view is that we will not as a society be sufficiently motivated to design and build in contextually sensitive ways (including, but not only, ecologically sensitive ways) until we come to see that the relational quality of responsive cohesion actually represents the deepest value there is. If we collectively come to see this, then we will find ourselves far more motivated to engage in the kind of context saturated thinking that the adoption of this foundational value brings in its wake and that is clearly crucial to the future of life on earth – both human and non-human.

If there is a credo, a “take-home message,” of the theory of responsive cohesion, it is this:

In being responsive to your own goals and desires – that is, in living your life – do what you reasonably can to preserve examples of the relational quality of responsive cohesion where you find them, regenerate or create examples of it in and through your chosen undertakings, reflect and reinforce it in your judgments and ways of proceeding, and so on.

I hope that architects, designers, planners, builders, and others in the design professions will be persuaded to take this message home to their professions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Parts of this paper draw, with permission, on copyright material of mine (modified as I have seen fit for the purposes of this paper) that is forthcoming in my article “Architecture Ethics” in Jan-Kyrre Berg Olsen, Stig Andur Pedersen, and Vincent F. Hendricks, eds., A Companion to Philosophy of Technology (Oxford: Blackwell). Some other paragraphs are taken or adapted as I have seen fit from material of mine in Fox 2000c, 2004, 2006a, and 2006b.

REFERENCES


