

Reconceiving Professionalism in the Twenty-First Century

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In early 2016, as this essay is being finalized, news regarding the winner of this year's Pritzker Prize has just come out. In addition to the announcement of the prize itself, follow-up news articles on the winner, Alejandro Aravena, were penned as was criticism of the award jury's decision, in honoring an architect thought—by some—to be undeserving of the honor.

According to its website, the Pritzker Prize has been awarded annually since 1979 to

honor a living architect or architects whose built work demonstrates a combination of those qualities of talent, vision, and commitment, which has produced *consistent and significant contributions to humanity and the built environment* through the art of architecture.

(*Emphasis mine*)

The list of honorees reads like a Who's Who of architecture, and includes many of the most heralded architects of the age. A simple analysis of the winners reveals the following: 39 "entities" have won the award. Of those entities, 37 are individual people and 2—Herzog & deMeuron and SANAA—are partnerships, meaning that 41 individual people have been honored, 39 of whom are men and 2 of whom are women. Geographically (by continent), the distribution is as follows: Europe leads with 49 percent, North America with 22 percent, Asia with 20 percent, South America with 7 percent and Australia with 2 percent. Seventy-one percent of the winners come from Europe and North America, while the rest of the globe claims 29 percent. Further consider that seven of Asia's eight winners are Japanese; and eight of North America's nine are from the United States, and we have 85 percent of Pritzker winners from Europe, Japan and the United States. With perhaps the exception of Glenn Murcutt, whose oeuvre consists largely of relatively modest single-family houses, these architects have made their names by serving important business and cultural clients to cement their reputations and build their practices. Again, when considering all of the possible building types not to be represented in the work of Pritzker Prize laureates, we find a fairly narrow slice of the high-culture/business industry represented by the winners. To put it plainly, 95 percent of the winners are Western/Caucasian/Asian men who serve a very particular kind of wealthy client for high-culture building types (Patterson 2012; Sorkin 2005). This is not to say that there aren't exceptions within any of these architects' bodies of work—for instance the pre-Bilbao Frank Gehry (Pritzker '89), who then, post-Bilbao, "became the epitome of a generation that set out to be part of an avant-garde, and ended up as highbrow, copy-paste establishment" (Miessen 78)—but still the point remains.

As for criticism of Aravena's selection, Patrik Schumacher, the business partner of Zaha Hadid (Pritzker '04 and the first woman to win the prize), became the poster boy for dissent when he complained in a Facebook post (quoted in full):

The PC takeover of architecture is complete: Pritzker Prize mutates into a prize for humanitarian work. The role of the architect is now "to serve greater social and humanitarian needs" and the new Laureate is hailed for "tackling the global housing crisis" and for his concern for the underprivileged. *Architecture loses its specific societal task and responsibility*, architectural innovation is replaced by the demonstration of noble intentions and the *discipline's criteria of success and excellence dissolve in the vague do-good-feel-good pursuit of "social justice"*.

I respect [what] Alejandro Aravena is doing and his "half a good house" developments are an intelligent response. However, this is not the frontier where architecture and urban design participate in advancing the next stage of our global high-density urban civilization. I would not object to this year's choice half as much if this safe and comforting *validation of humanitarian concern was not part of a wider trend in contemporary architecture that in my view signals an unfortunate confusion, bad conscience, lack of confidence, vitality and courage about the discipline's own unique contribution to the world*.¹

Considering the world Schumacher lives in, it's not hard to imagine why he would have this take. He is just like 90 percent of the Pritzker Prize winners to date. He's a man, he's Western, and he serves the rich by building iconic buildings. His club is loosening the rules for membership and it's discomfiting!

Schumacher clearly doesn't consider "social justice" nor "humanitarian concerns" to be included in the "discipline's criteria of success and excellence," nor congruent with Pritzker's aims to honor "consistent and significant contributions to humanity and the built environment." Judging from the commenters on various online publishing platforms, many people agree with him.² This isn't the first time that Schumacher took exception to the Pritzker selection. In 2014, he spoke out on Facebook to criticize Shigeru Ban's selection: "I am afraid that if criteria shift towards political correctness great iconoclast-innovators like Wolf Prix or Peter Eisenman won't ever stand a chance to be recognized here."³

About a month before the latest Pritzker announcement, the Turner Prize, "widely recognized [since it was established in 1984] as one of the most important and prestigious awards for the visual arts in Europe," selected Assemble, a collective of architects and designers working in derelict Liverpool neighborhoods on projects that are decidedly not of the Art World. Like Schumacher, the *Telegraph's* Mark Hudson was not impressed by the jury's decision: "Assemble's structures are not revolutionary. Many of them are rather ordinary, and if such cross-discipline projects are to be nominated in the future, I hope the line-up will include projects that are more creative" (Hudson, 2015). Like the Pritzker, the Turner is typically awarded to an individual person—someone who has earned the respect of the Art World.⁴ For the latest Turner to be awarded to a collective called "Assemble," which doesn't even list individual member names on its website, is truly radical—and to some, inherently troubling.

In contrast to these two awards, I will briefly note the Curry Stone Design Prize, which was established in 2008 to honor exactly the kind of work that Pritzker and Turner are being criticized for honoring.⁵ Its latest honoree, Rural Urban Framework, is a research and design firm whose work is a "critique against the overwhelming trends that saturate architecture and building in China today" (Homecoming: Rufwork 2013). It is a critique of the kind of work that Schumacher holds up as "the discipline's own unique contribution to the world."

Each of these awards reflects the intentions and values of the award creators, juries, and the times in which they operate. Times change, and these anecdotal instances of recent controversy point to a fundamental split—a kind of cognitive dissonance—in architectural and professional culture

that just now, since the Great Recession, seems to be playing out in a more public way. But the theoretical background behind the emerging trend toward the “social” has been brewing much longer—for decades—fueled by events (i.e., Hurricane Katrina, Haitian earthquake, financial crisis, climate change), exhibitions (i.e., *Small Scale, Big Change, Design for the Other 90%*, 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale), movements (i.e., Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter), education programs (i.e., Auburn Rural Studio, Tulane City Center), and emerging practices (i.e., MASS Design, BC Workshop), and reported on in both scholarly and mass-market texts (i.e., Kaminer’s *Architecture, Crisis and Resuscitation*, Miessen’s *Nightmare of Participation*, Sennett’s *Uses of Disorder*, Hyde’s *Future Practice*, Awan, Schneider and Till’s *Spatial Agency*, Sinclair’s *Design Like You Give a Damn*). This suggests that the Pritzker and Turner fusses are merely a more public indicator of the larger trend toward the social “effects” of architecture (Stickells 2011). Schumacher’s rants belie a typical reactionary, conservative backlash by the establishment at seeing the world change around it, despite its self-acclaimed avant-garde pretensions⁶ (Mitchell 2004).

The remainder of this essay will look at the background of this trend and speculate on what it might mean for the future of the discipline and profession.

Effects, Affects, and Facts

The danger of naming names—like Schumacher’s—and citing anecdotes in an essay like this is that it personalizes and localizes the issue in a way that one could dismiss as an aberration. And it also could lead to a naively binary understanding of architectural culture in an X vs. Y sort of way: good vs. bad, formalists vs. functionalists, capitalists vs. Marxists. That would be a mistake, for these projects, awards, and practices evolve over decades, in response to changes in culture, clients, ideas, economies, technologies, laws, and natural disasters. Then they are revealed and get interpreted by journalists, critics, historians, and the larger public in ways that might be unfair, misleading, or wrong. Then these interpretations become a story in their own right—as in the case of Schumacher’s pronouncements, perhaps obscuring the real issues underlying them.

In *Architecture’s Desire*, Michael Hays (2010, 1) declaratively asserts, “I am not primarily concerned with architecture as the art of building per se, nor do I consider it as a profession. Rather, I examine architecture as a way of negotiating the real, by which I mean intervening in the realm of symbols and signifying processes . . . rather than the making of things,” identifying the cognitive structure in which he operates and seeming to align (as we will examine) with the ethos of the pre-2014 Pritzker juries. But then he goes on to acknowledge that things are more complex than he suggested at the outset: “Nevertheless, I hope to suggest too that the architectural impulse is part of daily social life and its wide-ranging practices. . . . I am concerned here with the effects and affects as well as the facts of architecture” (1).

Professionalism and Ethics

One of the “facts” of architecture today is that in most industrialized societies, the practice of architecture is legally constrained to a licensed set of professionals, and thus burdened with the assumptions underlying the notion of professionalism.

Professions in Anglo-American society are defined as the class of knowledge-based occupations requiring a period of specialized vocational training and experience, often requiring licensure as a mechanism of occupational control and market closure (Evetts 2003). At their root the idea of professions is based on the premise that an exclusive set of people is trained to dispense expertise in certain jurisdictions of knowledge (i.e., medicine, law, accounting, architecture). With specialized training, professionals help the society cope with the risky propositions embedded in that jurisdiction (health, legality, finance, safety). In exchange for assuming the responsibility—and liability—for

the work, society grants the licensed professional a kind of monopoly on the work. For instance, the state requires that doctors hold a license to dispense medicine; lawyers a license to stand at the bar; and architects a license to prepare construction documents. Non-licensed individuals attempting to encroach on that monopoly power will be prosecuted by the state. Guarding the gate is a fundamental responsibility of the professional associations. At their best the professions are the stewards of desirable social goals, such as good health, justice, or environmental quality; at their worst they are regarded as self-interested economic cartels.

The crisis felt by many in the professions lies in the temporary and evolving nature of such arrangements: the state laws requiring licensure are essentially an early twentieth-century invention, and carry with them early twentieth-century assumptions that may or may not be relevant a century later (Simon 1997). With licensing, the state is attempting to insure that architects' work will be of a quality that preserves and respects the public's health, safety, and welfare. These concerns range from "buildings shouldn't kill people" to less consequential, and harder-to-standardize concerns, such as "aesthetic inappropriateness" (Tappendorf 2002). Society's interest in safe buildings, defined by the complex rules and arcane language in building and zoning codes, is thus relegated to people who have been formally educated, and subsequently licensed, to practice architecture, as individual professionals—not as corporate entities. These assumptions have evolved over time. One base assumption is that the professional is a singular, licensed individual of high repute, whose personal license and reputation are at stake; another is that the client is an individual seeking professional assistance for his or her personal needs. Today, with the increase of the corporate architecture practice working for corporate clients, the conditions of employment permit a degree of detachment—on both sides of the relationship—that diminishes its fiduciary potency. It seems—and is—more like a commercial exchange between entities whose existence is based on the notion of limited legal liability (McKinlay and Marceau 2002).

The more "commercial"—and less "professional"—these business arrangements get, the more they are subject to competition from other commercial entities. At one time professional canons of ethics in architecture, as defined by the AIA, prohibited licensed architects from seeking employment in any business entity other than those whose ownership was by other licensed architects. It was possible to maintain a sense of solidarity with one's fellow professionals and resist commercial encroachment. In the United States, until the 1970 Supreme Court ruling outlawing the practice, it was even permissible for architects to collude in the setting of fees, to avoid the race to the bottom as some architects "low-balled" their fees to compete.

Yet another assumption that has eroded in the past century is the notion that professionals have a responsibility to the public trust larger than their own self-interests. The 2012 AIA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, for instance, states, "Members should . . . promote and serve the public interest in their personal and professional activities" (2012, 2). Yet there is little, aside from a sense of personal obligation as a voluntary member of that professional organization, that would enforce such a canon. It is a vestige of a prior age, when society at large (perhaps) adhered to a shared notion of civic responsibility and the greater good.

Late twentieth-century neoliberal economic attitudes and policies can be recognized as eroding the power of the professions to perform the desirable social functions described by the root meaning of the term "pro bono": for the (public) good. And at the same time, those same neoliberal policies have eroded the actual quality of life for those without the economic capacity to hire professionals to help them maintain their health, seek justice, or improve their environment. Consequently, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the providers of professional services follow the money.

"Magnificence Is a Virtue"

In early fifteenth-century Italy, it was regarded as unseemly for the wealthy to use their money in shows of ostentation—for instance in the construction of personal monuments (Jenkins 1970). This

reflected prevailing negative attitudes toward usury. But attitudes started to shift in the middle of the century, when Cosimo de' Medici transgressed those norms; in reference to Cosimo it was declared that "[m]agnificence is a virtue. . . . [Cosimo's buildings] are not to be condemned for their excessive size, but praised for the excess of virtue in the patron's mind, shewn by his having spent more than he need" (Jenkins 1970, 165).

By the end of the century, ostentation in personal buildings was no longer considered unseemly, but rather virtuous; and architects—meant as the singular designers that create buildings as an act of intellectual force—were regarded as great men who could bring a patron's personal monument into fruition (Carneiro 1981). Much of architectural historiography has aligned to reinforce such thinking.

Great Man Theory: Individual Genius or Cultural Circumstance?

Patrik Schumacher's public critique of the Pritzker represents an underlying, and largely unquestioned, ethos about the "proper" societal role of architects that has persisted since the Renaissance. His discomfort in Aravena's award reflects the fact that the predominant history of architecture has been written as if it were rightly a subcategory of art history—a discipline "whose primary concern is properly with aesthetics . . . [thus encouraging] the architectural historian to ignore the wider context by focusing solely on authorial authenticity, the link between the individual maker and the individual work, and the aesthetics of style" (Arnold, Ergut and Ozkaya 2006, xvii). The Pritzker jury, with its selection of the last three awardees, Aravena, Frei Otto, and Shigeru Ban, has acknowledged in its citations an expanded set of concerns which matter in architecture just as much as aesthetics.⁷

Time moves slowly in architectural culture and, thus, slowly does its culture evolve too. These recent Pritzker awards (and Turner Prize, and Curry Stone awards) are but a reflection of wider trends in the discipline, in historiography, in education, and ultimately in society that started decades ago. In 1968 Whitney Young "called out the entire profession of architecture for its lack of social engagement. In an oft-quoted passage, he challenged them to become a more positive force for social change, saying, 'You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance'" (Corser 2009, 3). A generation later the Carnegie Foundation's "Boyer Report" challenged a generation of architectural educators and students to consider the social impact of the work of architecture. In the UK, around the same time, the "Burton Report" addressed similar issues. Perhaps the larger culture is just now seeing the actual results of those challenges.

Earlier in this essay I drew a distinction between what society, through licensing, expects from architects (safe buildings serving the public good) and the values that the profession espouses through its highest honor awards (iconic buildings serving the magnificent). It is encouraging to sense an expanded field of architecture as reflected in these latest awards. But I don't take it as a sea change, for

there continues to be a conflict between the potential future of architects as leaders in a society facing complex socio-economic and environmental issues and the image of the architect as a privileged sophisticate using aesthetic skill to serve the upper echelons of society.

(Anderson 2012, 268)

If I judge from much of the work published in the media, winning design awards, and emulated in the work of students in schools, the attitudes espoused by Schumacher et al. are largely still the norm.

But new times demand new attitudes. In the larger sociopolitical context in the United States, beyond architecture, recently we find movements like Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street and political discussions regarding income inequality in the forefront, and raising general consciousness. In Europe, the refugee diaspora raises questions about how to house and provide services to

desperate, impoverished families fleeing war zones. Everywhere we have an increasing recognition that the built environment has an impact on public health and well-being. Many of these problems have physical, spatial, and infrastructural components that architects can help understand and address.

Twenty-First-Century Professionalism

In 2011 I heard Thomas Fisher, then dean of the University of Minnesota College of Design, give a talk where he briefly recounted the establishment of the public health profession, as distinct from that of medicine, and in that talk, suggested that something similar ought to happen for what he called “public architecture” (and what we now may have settled on calling “public interest design”), meaning the design of the built world that needs to happen outside the bounds of the bespoke project on the individual piece of land which typifies the vast majority of architects’ work.⁸ He used the example of a pandemic which might start in a squatter settlement in the developing world, incubating and flourishing because of the lack of adequate infrastructure, and that rapidly spreads around the world, as a result of the mobility of all people everywhere. (Since then the Ebola virus in West Africa and now the Zika virus in the Americas have given us a glimpse of what that might look like.) The costs of dealing with a pandemic would be enormous, and might be prevented with a much less costly and better-designed housing settlement with adequate infrastructure. Fisher argued that the costs of providing public design services would be a better value proposition than waiting for the outbreak to occur and then dealing with the catastrophic outcomes. This is but one example of a public interest project. We can include community design issues such as alternate transit systems, energy systems, the food system, design for equity, racial and social justice, affordable housing, and design for public awareness as other projects needing attention.

A century ago, the medical profession served its patients similarly to how architects largely serve their clients today: individual doctors served individual patients on a case-by-case basis (Fee 1992). At the same time, in the United States, an influx of immigrant families became situated in substandard tenement housing along the eastern seaboard,

supplied with communal privies and polluted water sources. City streets were heaped with garbage, including dead and decaying animals, and the waste products of small manufactories; factories produced their own noise smells, smoke, and industrial wastes to add to the dirt and confusion of the new industrial order. Children died young of diarrheal and respiratory diseases, diphtheria, whooping cough, smallpox and typhoid fever. Tuberculosis and other infectious diseases killed young adults and further impoverished families already struggling for survival. [. . .] Though public health departments existed in some cities and states, much of the work in addressing these problems were carried on by an ad hoc collection of voluntary social reform organizations—not the medical profession.

(Fee 1992, 3)

Over time, the work of city health departments expanded to include street cleaning, sanitation, statistics, engineering, bacteriological laboratories for disease testing, and inspectors. The challenge was to find adequately trained personnel to carry on these duties. In the American south hookworm was a particular public health problem, and in 1909 the Rockefeller Foundation—a private, philanthropic entity—funded a project to eradicate the disease, and leading to the establishment of the first school of public health at Johns Hopkins.

(Fee 1992, 4)

Elizabeth Fee notes that these practitioners of public health are defined by their goals—a healthy public—rather than as a specific disciplinary body of knowledge, as in the case of, say, clinical

medicine. The public health “discipline” consists, in fact, of many different disciplines: doctors, engineers, nurses, statisticians, epidemiologists, lawyers, and inspectors, all contributing to the mission of keeping the public healthy (1992, 4). As is typical in the professional realm, as the profession of public health came into being, jurisdictional disputes emerged between the subdisciplines involved, in an attempt to claim public health: competition between physicians (who saw public health as a medical problem) and sanitary engineers (who saw public health as an infrastructural problem) became intense in the early years of the twentieth century (*ibid.*, 5). Ultimately it was agreed by all that scientific education should be a unifying principle, whether one took a social, clinical, or infrastructural approach to the work, and that both research and practice considerations should be part of the educational curriculum (*ibid.*, 7). It was further determined that public health should be a new, separate profession from medicine, with its primary focus on clinical diagnosis and treatment; public health would focus on prevention of disease at the population level (*ibid.*, 8). It is worth noting—and not coincidentally—that medical education was reorganizing itself at the same time through the efforts of Abraham Flexner, strengthening the profession of medicine to what we know it as today (Duffy 2011).

To conclude, let’s draw some parallels between the birth of the professionalization of public health a century ago and the birth of public interest design today: at that time physicians served individual patients with individual problems but realized that there was a class of problems that weren’t getting solved by the medical profession, and it invented public health to address them. As a result, communicable disease, poor hygiene and sanitation, and questionable food and water systems were tackled. Today, we are realizing that many public spatial and infrastructural problems need addressing by the design professions, along with the expertise of social scientists, public health experts, civil engineers, transportation engineers, urban policy planners and other disciplines. This confluence of expertise, working to improve the public realm, is formed on an ad hoc basis, without a rigorous educational curriculum feeding it, or a business model to make the economics pencil out.

It is common to see 5 percent (or 2 percent, or 1 percent) called out as the portion of buildings that actually get designed by architects. Whatever the actual value, it is a minute portion of the total building economy. That money is generally supplied by the “haves.” The next half-century will see an explosion of growth in urban areas by the have-nots. And though they might not have the economic power of the haves, they still, together, have considerable economic power. The design challenges to housing them will be significant, and the architects who can invent business models to provide services to the noncorporate mass of have-nots will profit from it. For that to happen, those architects will have to shake off the self-imposed chains that they carry with them from the early twentieth century and their self-conception of what architects are and do, and how and who they serve. The invention of that business model is an immediate design challenge in itself.

We are starting to see, particularly in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, calls for a new profession of urban design based on theories of what Alexander Cuthbert calls spatial political economy, and relying heavily on the theoretical base of urban social theory, human geography, and cultural studies (Cuthbert 2005). Markus Miessen has also observed the “recent invention of particular titles and names . . . such as ‘spatial consultant,’ ‘urban researcher,’ ‘architectural curator,’ ‘spatial tactician,’ or ‘framework designer’” (2011, 81). Cuthbert’s vision of a new profession would include the expertise of architects and urban planners, but would generate and use a body of knowledge that doesn’t fit comfortably inside either of those existing professions. As an example, in the UK, the Urban Design Group (UDG) began as a loose affiliation of practitioners in 1979 who acknowledged that

the institutes of architecture and of planning no longer recognised each other’s legitimate role in the creation of the urban scene. The public realm had become, by default, largely the consequences of mechanistic decisions by highways, traffic and municipal engineers.⁹

Today, some 30 years later, UDG publishes a journal to share knowledge, has an emerging certification process underway, and is active in promoting educational curricula through universities. It has a manifesto that serves as a kind of code of ethics. All of these—body of knowledge, certification, educational system, ethical code—are the indicators for when a profession actually becomes a profession with its own jurisdictional claims (Abbott 1988). Others, elsewhere, are undoubtedly pursuing burgeoning professionalization in their own fledgling efforts to solve these problems. Time will tell how these play out, but it's pretty clear that the time is now for such a profession to emerge.

Notes

- 1 Schumacher, Patrik, January 13, 2016, Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/patrik.schumacher.10/posts/10207222111024032>. Emphasis mine.
- 2 Keskeys, Paul, n.d., "Patrik vs. Pritzker: Schumacher Reignites the Debate Over Political Correctness in Architecture", *Architizer*. <http://architizer.com/blog/patrik-vs-pritzker>.
- 3 Schumacher, Patrik, March 25, 2014, Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/patrik.schumacher.10/posts/10202674357973048>.
- 4 See Danto, Arthur C., 1981, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), to understand why Art World is capitalized.
- 5 *What Is the Curry Stone Design Prize? Curry Stone Design Prize*. <http://currystonedesignprize.com/about>.
- 6 Schumacher made the news again in late fall 2016, "when he called for social housing to be scrapped and public space to be privatised" and earned the condemnations of "Zaha Hadid's closest confidantes . . . Rana Hadid, Peter Palumbo and Brian Clarke—the three other trustees of the Zaha Hadid Foundation, and executors of Hadid's estate." www.dezeen.com/2016/11/29/zaha-hadid-foundation-family-friends-disown-patrik-schumacher-housing-statement.
- 7 The Pritzker jury members "are recognized professionals in their own fields of architecture, business, education, publishing, and culture" (Pritzker website, www.pritzkerprize.com/about/jury), thus making selections from within their cultural milieu even more likely.
- 8 Conference session, "Bridging the Gap: Architectural Internships in Public Service" at Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture 99th Annual Meeting, March 5, 2011.
- 9 Urban Design Group. www.udg.org.uk/about/history.

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