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Building Agnotology

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The topic of building is central to the agnotology of architectural education. Agnotology is the field of study that examines the cultural production of ignorance.[1] That is, agnotology is a form of knowledge production that focuses on what we do not know and why. It considers how ignorance develops, gains momentum and, in the case of pedagogy, what topics remain unlearned. Familiar agnotological examples include the production of ignorance in the twentieth century about smoking and climate change, and more recently the dynamics of "fake" news.

Architectural education promotes a range of unquestioned traditions, biases, and received assumptions that invite agnotological inquiry. For instance, non-Western histories of building have meaningfully challenged the North American bias of twentieth-century pedagogy in very welcome ways and have enriched and broadened our conception of architecture and building on this planet. Another recurrent bias is how the ossifying tendencies of the term "built environment" structure path-dependencies that preclude the active dynamics of maintenance, repair, and un-building from architectural purview. Work on "building environments," on the other hand, opens the discipline to a broader range of topics and concerns that reflect what the process of building does on this planet.

When it comes to building in the received understanding—even for the minority of faculty who would accept building as a legitimate category of knowledge production—building, as a topic, is typically focused on the composition and assembly of architectural objects. As a result, building as a topic of inquiry in architectural education is construed in quite narrow terms by a quite narrow minority. This particular form of agnotology results in inadequate descriptions of building as a terrestrial phenomenon. This restricts our understanding of building as a process that reshapes and re-organizes the thin surface of this planet leaving many of the most important questions unasked and thus their design implications unknown. As such, at this point in the history of late modern architectural education, and as we consider building as a form of knowledge production in this issue of *JAE,* I invite you to equally consider how building, as taught, constitutes a form of ignorance production in architecture.

Consider some pedagogical tendencies regarding building in modernism. Think about the modernist obsession with structure. The very aspect of architecture–structure–that literally couples building, through its foundations, to the planet. Structure was long abstracted and taught such that its bulk materials and systems were literally *not* connected to the planet in other ways at the scales of construction ecology. That is, only gravity and lateral structural loads were taught in modernity, never the environmental loads of structure. This engineered externalization, and its displacement of environmental loads and emissions, inevitably and adversely impacted the people and places in the extractive zones that supply the bulk materials for structural systems. The extractive rural zones were structurally underdeveloped while the urban cores were arguably overdeveloped in this approach to structures.[2] Stable building structures appeared in one part of the world that engendered unstable social and environmental structures in other parts of the planet: a core dynamic of modern architecture's metabolic rifts.[3] All this occurred literally through the process of building, and how structure was taught, studied, and then practiced.

Likewise, a building enclosure has as many bio-geophysical and world-systems properties as it does, say, insulative properties. That is, building enclosures also enclose—in sociological terms of resource appropriation, labor sublimation, unequal economic and ecological exchanges, and displaced emissions. Once again, this puts real people and places on a building's periphery into inequitable servitude to the concentrated centers of building capital. The excessively complicated assembly of contemporary building enclosures, as now taught in schools of architecture, only exacerbates these forms of sociological and economic enclosure through a pernicious neoliberal political economy of building. In the current political economy of building, buildings are no longer built from materials for clients and labor for users but rather assembled from proprietary products for developers, by corporate-trained installers, as guaranteed by insurance underwriting and proprietary warranties.

Building products now have as many proprietary properties as structural or thermal properties. The terrestrial basis of building in this modality is vastly more planetary in scope, more opaque, *and* more deleterious toward the environmental and social conditions that support life on this planet than it has ever been in the history of building. Teaching complicated, putatively "high-performance" or "sustainable" types of building enclosure—its many specialized layers and products, each often a derivative petroleum product—without a robust picture of the muddled social and ecological webs that presuppose such building enclosures is a prime exemplar of contemporary agnotology. In no way does this agnotology of building envelopes insulate architectural education from the social, ecological, and political consequences it begets. Collective life on this planet grants architecture no such autonomy.

As yet another example, consider the role of modern details in architecture. The pedagogy and discourse on details in architecture typically conceals more than it reveals about building as a terrestrial phenomenon. Architects and architectural education tend to fetishize details, if they are considered much at all. In doing so, they tend to abstract and externalize key aspects of building precisely when they intend to be at their most detailed. Architects thus are often at their most vague, in terrestrial terms, in their acts of detailed specification.[4] Today, in a context of downloaded specs and Revit product libraries, seemingly less than ever is known in architecture about the terrestrial specificity and details of building: that is, *the details of the details* of contemporary architecture. Gaia is in the details of the details of building, and the terrestrial details of building are more overtly relevant for our students than ever as social and environmental concerns finally begin to occupy concern in architecture.

Figure 1. Like any building, only the details of the details of building the Seagram Building reveal knowledge about the environmental load displacements, unequal ecological and economic exchanges, and modes of underdevelopment in its world systems. The architecture of building transcends the composition of buildings as nouns. Myriad terrestrial processes better reflect the terrestrial constitution of architecture. (Image by author.)

As a final example, the paucity of pedagogy regarding building maintenance and repair in architectural pedagogy has contributed directly to the dynamic that Thorstein Veblen described as "planned obsolescence" and "conspicuous consumption" in his early twentieth-century study, and indictment, of an emerging leisure class in modernity.[5] In a century in which future architects will increasingly operate in the aftermath of current and recent building practices, proactive pedagogy on extant building stocks is scant and an ethos of care and repair is too often absent from building.

The terrestrial project and relevance of architecture—architecture's relevance to a world beyond the Whites talking to the Whites about themselves to themselves, to paraphrase Manfredo Tafuri—remains quite unknown, under-articulated, and under-taught. The building environments of architecture that constitute its terrestrial basis are where architecture's political economy and frontlines are arguably most palpably situated. The environmental and social loads inherent to building are literally part of architecture and its terrestrial activities—as much as any plan or facade. They are inseparable from the design of building. They are inextricably part of the terrestrial basis of architecture, but remain largely abstracted and unknown even to those ostensibly engaged in questions of building. To leave such loads and appropriations out of our descriptions of building leaves us and our students out of the salient ecological and social dynamics in the world today. Insight and instruction regarding the actual terrestrial processes of building offer a different future for

knowledge production—however, one that makes the future much less a colony of present pedagogy.

Given the externalizations and blind spots regarding building in architecture as a discipline, there is indeed much knowledge to be produced about building and its inordinate consequences for life in this century. In this regard, we could benefit from the virtues of ignorance[6] and develop new descriptions of building. Building fundamentals have as much to do with teaching how to frame a house as they do with how to frame the complex web of social and ecological relations that yield a 2×4, much less the complicated modalities of extraction, production, transportation, obsolescence, maintenance, and demolition of the products and assemblies that constitute building as a terrestrial variable today.

Life in this century will not sustain the willful agnotologies of building that characterize architecture and architectural education today. Architecture has inherited many rifts, externalizations, blind spots, and emissions from modernity. Whether it is the related—but still disparately taught—topics of structure, enclosure, and details, or the absurdly hubristic nomenclature and pedagogy of "environmental control systems," it is difficult to claim that the topic of building has been driven by avid knowledge production in modern architectural education, given the persistence of its inherited externalities, imposed mandates, and resulting pathologies. It is equally easy to discern the overt connections between these agnotologies of building in architectural education and the salient environmental and social storms of this century.

As the neurologist Kurt Goldstein stated, "There is greater revelation in pathological phenomena."[7] In this regard, in this historical moment, our blind spots regarding building today could reveal much about what architecture is and does as a terrestrial activity, and much about its terrestrial potential. Rather than continue to posit simplistic progress ideologies of "innovation" or "high-performance buildings" as a shill for neoliberal development, ecological and social progress in architecture could itself be re-described in this moment through fresh pedagogical reasoning and imagination regarding the totality of building as a terrestrial phenomenon. The inheritances and momentum of modernity need not prescribe or overdetermine our descriptions of building today. A fresh interpretation of building as a genre of terrestrial activities and dynamics more completely, and thus accurately, describes the social, ecological, and political basis of building. It results in equally fresh, and urgent, conceptions of building for our students and engenders novel interpretations of building activities and flows that can better achieve ecologically sane and socially just practices of architecture.

The lives and careers of present and future students will increasingly look unlike that which shaped our own lives, education, and careers. This moment is not about climate change: it is about everything change. In this moment this means questioning, and fundamentally redescribing, our most basic operating assumptions, procedures, and agnotologies about building and building environments in architectural education.

Author Biography

Kiel Moe is a practicing architect and the Gerald Sheff Professor of Architecture at McGill University.

Notes

1 Robert Proctor and Londa L. Schiebinger, *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008).

2 Stephen G. Bunker, *Underdeveloping the Amazon: Extraction, Unequal Exchange, and the Failure of the Modern State* (University of Illinois Press, 1985).

3 John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology," *The American Journal of Sociology* 105 (2) (1999): 366–405.

4 Kiel Moe, *Empire, State & Building* (Barcelona/New York: Actar, 2017).

5 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

6 A. L. Peterson, "Ignorance and Ethics," in T*he Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge,* ed. W. Vitek and W. Jackson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

7 Goldstein, Kurt, *The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man* (New York: Zone Books, 1995): 29.