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Not Out of the Woods: Preserving the Human in Environmental Architecture

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ABSTRACT

The North American environmental movement has historically sought to redress the depletion and degradation of natural resources that has been the legacy of the industrial revolution. Predominant in this approach has been the preservation of wilderness, conservation of species biodiversity and the restoration of natural ecosystems. While the results of such activity have often been commendable, several scholars have pointed out that the environmental movement has inherited an unfortunate bias against urban environments, and consequently, a blind spot to ways in which densely populated built spaces can serve to enhance rather than degrade efforts to achieve sustainability. After exploring this concern we argue that environmental architecture can serve as a counter-balance to this bias, focused, as it is, on the ways in which the construction and organisation of built spaces for humans can help or hinder the pursuit of environmental priorities. But if environmental architecture is to take this role then it must be understood in a broader context, one which does not exclude other moral, political and aesthetic values in the production of human environments. We will highlight several examples of how environmental architecture has combined success and failure at taking a broader view of environmental questions, with a specific focus on one green skyscraper that may be good for the natural environment but not necessarily for the human environment of the city.

KEYWORDS

Environmental architecture, urban density, environmental philosophy, aesthetics

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4

ANDREW LIGHT AND AURORA WALLACE

INTRODUCTION

In the revival of the hit Sondheim musical *Into the Woods*, currently playing on Broadway, fairy tales are woven together using the familiar trope of the woods as a dark, unknowable and unpredictable space of risk, confusion, rebirth and redemption. Characters are lured in on the promise of finding something they've lost, and lost is what they become. The woods stand in stark opposition to civilised life; it is a liminal zone in which people confront all manner of threat. Under cover of night, unseen predators lurk and surprise unsuspecting travellers. There is a palpable relief from tension as each character emerges back into the light. At the end of the play, theatre goers themselves emerge into the urban jungle of Times Square.

Into the Woods serves to remind us that nature isn't always without its dangers. It might also help us to rethink one of the perennial questions of North American environmentalism: Can and ought we follow nature? Unfortunately this classic question has been too often interpreted through a dichotomy between realms of human culture and realms of nonhuman nature, such as the spaces of the urban and the wild. The result in many fields of academic environmental inquiry has been an overwhelming embrace of issues like wilderness preservation and a concomitant lack of attention to human environments. What is too often forgotten in this literature however is that it is cities that have historically provided the birthplace of environmentalism. Beginning in earnest in the nineteenth century, wealthy urbanites provided the financial means and the political capital to promote the preservation of the last vestiges of wilderness (see Dowie 1996). Later, protection and expansion of these same places became the rallying cry for liberal and radical environmentalists alike, each assuming that urbanites had to protect against the eventual loss of nature lest we lose touch with a source of natural values. If those values could be regained, *à la* the wisdom of Muir, Thoreau and others, humanity could be restored to a higher state.

The enlightenment found through wilderness would allow us to return to our own human habitations having learned the lessons that nature has to teach; to rethink our own human civilisation and create not a new City of God but instead a City of Nature. The results have been that many environmentalists have come to see cities as they currently exist as antithetical or hostile to nature. The only acceptable compromise position has been to stress the potential for densely populated cities to reduce the human impact on nature wherever possible. But even here we have too often naively assumed that the 'greening' of the built environment is an obvious and desirable part of the urban agenda.

In contemporary calls for 'green' or 'ecological' architecture however the dichotomy between the urban and the wild has been thankfully less influential given the nature of the discipline – the production of spaces in which we will live and work. Environmental architecture thus can stand as a potentially important corrective to the prevailing green anti-human and anti-urban orthodoxy.

It may also represent one of our best hopes for ensuring that broader aesthetic, moral and political imperatives for the human community do not get lost in our attempts to remake the world in a more sustainable form.

It is a familiar contention in environmental circles that humans are also 'nature', and therefore whatever we produce must also be, by extension, natural. Despite the metaphysical complexities of such a contention, this position serves as an important answer to the claim that what is natural is always wholly other than what humans have made. What humans have made in the past is also, for better or worse, the canvas on which we must work. Given that few among us is ever afforded the opportunity to remake the environment in its entirety in our own or any other image, it is imperative that we arrive at some determination for what should be. Accordingly, if environmental architecture is to continue to remind us of these important lessons then it must be securely oriented in this direction. After giving a more thorough account of the risks of anti-urbanism in environmentalism in general we will argue that environmental architecture and design must emphasise that turning green does not necessarily just mean reproducing the patterns of natural systems in human developments, or – even more narrowly – just implementing new energy saving technologies in buildings in order to achieve a green goal. We will illustrate this point with an extended example – New York's first 'green skyscraper', the Condé Nast building at 4 Times Square. We hope to make a plausible case that the best environmental architecture will more broadly aim to integrate human and nonhuman elements into a larger environmental rubric.

THE ANTI-URBAN BIAS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

The anti-humanism of environmentalism has long been connected to the anti-urbanism of the movement and is no doubt also connected to the larger anti-urban bias of most North Americans. However, the counter-evidence is striking. We can see this by considering the fact that New York City may well be the most sustainable city in the United States. It is also the least likely place to be chosen as such in a survey. Studies of the conservation gains made during the late 1970s and early 1980s in the U.S. show that the lowest per capita per day energy consumption rate went to New York state (215 BTUs on average) because so many residents live in New York City apartments, sharing walls and hence sharing heat, and do not own cars nor regularly use them if they own them. The highest energy consumption rate went to Alaska, with 1,139 BTUs per capita on average, five times as much energy consumed as by a New Yorker. While climatic differences certainly account for much of this disparity, several other states with very high individual energy consumption rates per capita include those with more comparable weather patterns such as Ohio or Indiana (Myerson 1998).

While the above study reports the outcome of only one variable – i.e. the measurement of energy costs and savings – it is a critical variable. Personal electricity consumption continues to be the leading source of the production of greenhouse gases. Looking at other indicators, transportation costs for food and other goods are remarkably similar in most parts of the country. The amount of energy expended to bring food to Missoula, Montana or Manhattan is now, per capita, comparable. Each consumer dollar spent also releases some quantity of petroleum, but consumption is no greater on average in urban areas than in suburbs, small towns, or most rural areas (Light 2003). The same is true of most production. While the location of commercial factory production should also be taken into account, the products of such endeavors are rarely if ever confined to their location. As such products are shipped all over the United States (and all over the world), so attribution of the cause of their environmental impacts has to be spread more widely than only their point source. Certainly, if less densely populated areas were to undertake more substantial energy conservation measures then perhaps these comparisons would change.

Unfortunately, however, this has not been the case, and at least in the U.S., as opposed to many other developed countries, the federal government has consistently failed to pass any incentive measures to improve energy consumption rates across the board so as actually to catch up to the inherent savings of densely populated cities. What progress has been made in the past by the federal government is threatened daily. Bush's last round of major tax reforms prior to the last election proposed incentives encouraging businesses to purchase the biggest S.U.V'.s over other classes of vehicle (Hakim 2002). Assuming that population increases and consumption rates remain constant, moving away from density becomes one of the single biggest obstacles for achieving environmental sustainability. This does not mean that everyone should move to Manhattan to live more sustainably. It means that spaces across any scale, from small town to megalopolis, are better in relation to broader environmental priorities when they are more densely populated, and hence, more 'urban'. A consistent environmental perspective would have to embrace larger cities as one of the better examples of meeting such priorities because they provide an opportunity for greater numbers of people to live more sustainably without having to substantially change their lifestyle. While some states, such as Virginia and New Jersey, have taken stronger steps toward abating sprawl than in the past, such proposals unfortunately do very little to address the damage that has already been done by unsustainable suburban development. We can worry too that such reforms will not survive in anything other than an economic recession.

Many people and most environmentalists however would find the claim to the environmental advantages of densely populated cities absurd. In part this is because the environmental advantages of some cities are lumped in too quickly with the clear disadvantages of sprawled cities like Los Angles and Las Vegas. Densely populated places like New York are seen as the antithesis of 'the envi-

ronment'. Sure, there's that big park there, but anyone who has seen the place knows that whatever nature is found in Central Park is entirely manufactured, and compromised by the traverses which enable the constant intrusion of cross-town traffic. On such a view, suburbs may come closer, and exurbs closest, to getting us back to nature. At least there we have access to green space. If we are environmentally enlightened then we can learn the virtues of digging up our Kentucky bluegrass and replacing it with native plants – returning our small patch of the world to its original natural state.

While perhaps not quite so damning, this aversion to urban density has roots in the literature held dear by many environmentalists. In the famous 'Land Ethic' chapter of Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, shortly after Leopold describes the idea of a 'biotic pyramid', explaining how all life fits together and should be valued as a whole, he puts the worry this way:

> The combined evidence of history and ecology seems to support one general deduction: the less violent the man-made changes, the greater the probability of successful readjustment in the pyramid. Violence, in turn, varies with human population density; a dense population requires a more violent conversion. In this respect, North America has a better chance for permanence than Europe, if she can contrive to limit her density. This deduction runs counter to our current philosophy, which assumes that because a small increase in density enriched human life, that an indefinite increase will enrich it indefinitely. Ecology knows of no density relationship that holds for indefinitely wide limits. All gains from density are subject to a law of diminishing returns (Leopold 1997: 220).

Here Leopold offers a familiar contrast between the non-environmental advantages of density – the stimulation of great centres of culture such as in the arts and commerce – and the environmental disadvantages. But thankfully remarks like this by Leopold are balanced by other sentiments he expressed to the effect that the vestiges of nature in urban environments can be as inspiring for the environmentally enlightened as the most majestic redwoods. One can hope then that, if confronted by more recent data on the benefits of density for sustainability, which certainly would not argue that the advantages of density are limitless, Leopold might have softened such comments. Unfortunately the same may not be true for more contemporary authors who have done much to ensconce anti-urbanism in the environmental academy. This is certainly true in environmental philosophy, even if it is arguably less so in other fields like environmental sociology and environmental history.

Take for example the work of Holmes Rolston III, the 'dean' of environmental ethics in North America. Rolston argues that the future of environmental responsibility lies in the creation of what he and others term an 'Earth-centred' ethic. In one typical essay he argues that the four most critical issues that humans currently face are peace, population, development, and environment. While we worried through most of the past century that we would destroy ourselves

through war, the overriding cause for distress for the next century is that we will destroy the planet itself. 'The challenge of the next millennium is to contain those [human] cultures within the carrying capacity of the larger community of life in our biosphere […] If we humans are true to our species epithet, "the wise species" needs an Earth ethics, one that discovers a global sense of obligation to this whole inhabited planet' (Rolston 1999: 293). For Rolston, this ethic should not focus on the way that the Earth is valuable from a human perspective, which he assumes entails seeing it predominantly as a resource, as a means to human ends. Rather, he thinks the Earth should be seen as valuable from an ecological perspective, as a place valuable in its own right. Rolston goes on to focus his comments on the need for humans to live in a place, to be part of a place, as a necessary condition, or even living foundation, for such an ethic.

But for all of his emphasis on the importance of human attachment to place, it seems that only certain kinds of places count as acceptable spaces for environmental thinking. The built world, for example, is not a natural part of the Earth in this view and so presumably not to be part of our new ethic of environmental responsibility. Says Rolston, 'In finding our place in the built environment, we have tended to get displaced from our natural environment' (Ibid.) When it comes to the sort of relationship we should have to the Earth as a place, it is one that focuses on our connection to biotic communities, 'tracks of nature', and 'natural kinds'. Elsewhere he has put the point even more bluntly, implicating the potential moral development of urbanites: 'Big-city life in a high rise apartment – to say nothing of the slums – or a day's work in a windowless, air-conditioned factory represents synthetic life filled with plastic everything from teeth to trees. Such life is foreign to our native, earthen element. We have lost touch with natural reality; life is, alas, artificial' (Rolston 1988: 36).

Such arguments can and have been criticised (see Light 2001). Important here though is that, unfortunately, such a view is not unique to Rolston. Such sentiments are backed by even more sophisticated scientific arguments from the academy. E. O. Wilson's popular 'biophilia hypothesis' is a good case in point. 'Biophilia', as is well known to readers of this journal, is Wilson's neologism describing the innate affection that humans have toward other living things. For Wilson, the identifiable emotional, aesthetic and even spiritual cravings to be close to nature are a result of our origins as a naturally evolved species. Having spent much of our history in the wild, we are shaped by the forces and complexity of that original natural state. The more closely we identify ourselves with nature, the more quickly we will be able to discover the sources of human sensibility and acquire the knowledge on which an enduring ethic, a sense of preferred direction, can be built (Wilson 1992: 348).

In this schema however, cities are a hurdle to be overcome. Wilson claims that the evolutionary 'imprint' on us in the form of our genetic nucleotide sequences – resulting from our long struggle in and with nature – 'cannot have been erased in a few generations of urban existence'. Evidence is found in the tendency of

humans to acquire phobias to objects and circumstances which threatened us in our natural environments such as snakes, spiders, and open spaces. As we find with Rolston, we should not then be surprised to learn that, at its core, embracing biophilia means embracing wilderness. People are attracted to wilderness because it 'settles peace on the soul', and is 'beyond human contrivance' (Ibid.: 349–350). This residual attachment to wild nature is sufficient for Wilson to claim that the most important task at hand is to focus on 'the central questions of human origins in the wild environment' (Ibid.: 351).[1]

Architecture and planning have also produced versions of such anti-urbanism. One example can be found in Bruce Sterling and Michael McDonough's vision (2000) of a future for New York City completely redesigned using bamboo construction techniques and a fully wired infrastructure to remake the living spaces of the city on a natural model. While cities as such are not abandoned, they are uniformly decried in their present formations. This thought experiment however is unfortunately premised on a hypothetical future in which the city has been completely laid waste by fire. While there are some notable differences between the background assumptions of proposals like this one and the philosophical commitments at work in Rolston or Wilson, the most important may be that in environmental architecture, planning and design such schemes may be taken as just so much fantasy. In other environmental circles however they may be embraced as accepted wisdom given the lack of attention to urban environments at all.[2]

Aside from this consideration we can also object of course that we shouldn't need to completely destroy our cities in order to wholly remake them in accord with ecological principles, or any other principles for that matter. In this respect, such fantasies are not so distant from the urban renewal plans of figures like Le Corbussier, Mies Van Der Rohe, and Robert Moses. In the name of a more progressive idea of how we should live we wipe the slate clean of what we have made regardless of its inherent benefits. The larger problem with all such proposals is that they start with the assumption of a clear vision of what humans should be, which then drives a teleological rationale for the complete redesign of how we live. Fortunately, we understand too well now the hazards of remaking cities to follow the presumed freedoms created by the automobile. Many have argued that these results have been profoundly anti-democratic rather than liberating (see for example Jacobs 1992).

So too, sustainable design ought not to be premised on the abandonment of forms of life which appear on the surface to be alien to our natural origins but which we know are inherently more sustainable. We do not need to abandon altogether the beneficial ways in which we have lived in the past in order to build more sustainably for the future. Accordingly, what counts as green or environmental architecture and design today is not limited to large-scale planning fantasies but more rigorously developed techniques of building and design which garner energy savings. In this way, green architecture can provide an answer to

the broader anti-humanism and anti-urbanism of environmentalism, taking as its raw material the habitats in which we must necessarily find a home – which by definition will not be in the wild. We should also keep in mind that concerns over sprawl are not based solely on environmental considerations but also for what it does to destroy the fabric of the human community, something that is too easily forgotten in other fields of environmental study. The trick however is to ensure that those more reasonable proposals to make us more architecturally 'natural' do not abandon what makes us human.

EXPANDING THE 'ENVIRONMENT' IN ENVIRONMENTAL ARCHITECTURE

If environmental architecture is to live up to its potential for overcoming the culture-nature divide in environmental thought it should broaden what counts as an 'environment' worthy of respect, preservation, or restoration.[3] Too often we find in even the more sober literature on this topic a sentiment that we are succeeding when we 'follow nature', -- when we try to mimic nonhuman natural processes in construction and planning techniques by incorporating 'principles inherent in the natural world' (Todd and Todd 1994: 1).[4] Such calls have produced several important developments such as the idea of 'industrial ecology', the incorporation of 'living machines' in building plans, various forms of bioremediation in design, such as the use of green roofs, and endeavours aimed at abandoning ideal human geometries in favour of those that would more closely mimic 'chaotic' natural patterns.

An instructive example in this vein is William McDonough's Environmental Studies building at Oberlin (with John Lyle, John Todd and others), which brings a functioning wetland into a classroom and office building to recycle and reuse waste water (Figure 1). This project evokes calls for a 'baubiologie', or building-biology that 'regards the building as an organism with its surface being the third skin of the occupants', allowed to 'function naturally: breathing, absorbing, protecting, insulating, regulating, communicating, and allowing evaporation' (Fowles 2000: 108). But to insist that we aim to follow nature in design in this way as often as possible is to insist, as William Cronon has observed, that any use of nature is '*ab*-use' (Cronon 1996: 85). We are denied a middle ground that would admit that humans, like all animals, change their surroundings to suit their needs and thus create new environments through the destruction of others. Just as important in creating the environments in which we live is to successfully preserve the best social and aesthetics standards that have evolved over time rather than only narrowly focusing on saving energy in ways that are found in the natural world.

Though there are differences, the underlying philosophy of a call that we should always try to follow nature in order to achieve green design is similar

FIGURE 1. Oberlins' Environmental Studies Building and Living Machine, William McDonough, 2000.

to that which underlies the claim that our music, poetry, and literature are also best when they mimic the sounds, symbols and stories of the nonhuman world. Such a claim is found in the work of David Abrams (1996) who maintains that aboriginal stories are better because they are more attuned to the pace and rhythms of nature. To insist that nature is the measure of all such endeavours is folly at best and evidence of an authoritarian impulse at worst, denying the value of those forms of expression that reflect something unique about us. Like all species, we evolved with others 'in the wild', but we also acquired talents and gifts that are specific to humans alone.

A thoroughly responsible environmental architecture, one better able to resist the anti-human elements of the broader environmental community, would not only be evaluated for its energy savings, but for its ability to embrace the history and potential of humanly created environments on their own terms, regardless of their similarity to some a priori conception of nature. The best environmental architecture should be recognised as those projects which minimally meet two criteria: (1) putting a priority on the preservation of the scale, context and materials available at an existing site – either the original building in the case of a restoration and renovation, or surrounding buildings in the case of a new

project – while at the same time (2) diminishing the negative environmental impact of a building both on the health and safety of its occupants and the welfare of other ecosystems. While more elaborate parameters could be stipulated at this point to fulfil either of these criteria – such as making the case that buildings should minimise the use of new resources and recycle building products whenever possible – for now we will claim that some means for fulfilling both of these criteria ought to be in place for a building to count as a good example of environmental architecture according to the conception of 'environment' that we have identified as most important for this area of concern..

Take, for example, the Croxton Collaborative restoration of the Schermerhorn Building by the Audubon Society at 700 Broadway in New York City.

FIGURE 2. Audubon Headquarters, New York City, Croxton Collaborative, 1992.

This project succeeds admirably in both of these aims. Preserving the original street line and exterior of George B. Post's 1891 design, the interior has been renovated to provide one of the most environmentally responsible workspaces in the city. While only a small example it is nonetheless a telling one. If what counted as the best environmental architecture not only measured their success by whether they had followed nature, either in concept or application, but also took into account the larger context of the human environment in which these

buildings were placed, then we would have a platform from which we could resist the easy assumption that the real core of 'environmentalism' is something which either turns a blind eye to or actively excludes the urban. If what counted as the 'environment' of concern also included human environments – as an extension of our unique biological and cultural capacities – then we would draw less of a line between environmental issues and other important social concerns. To do otherwise is to risk separating off a realm of 'environmental' responsibility from other forms of social responsibility; it is to imply that care for nature is somehow distinct from attention to the welfare of the human community.

The call for a broader environmental architecture also cannot be based only on the foils of small green projects or fictional examples. Such initiatives as the Oberlin building, though commendable, appear more useful as demonstrations than as reproducible alternatives to reshape existing urban spaces; excellent for encouraging a green pedagogy on a college campus but most likely limited for wholesale adaptation. The larger architecture and design world seems to agree. What counts as green architecture today is not limited to small projects but includes larger ones which embrace broader techniques of building and planning which are by and large aimed at attaining energy savings.

FOUR TIMES SQUARE

The Condé Nast Building at 4 Times Square has been an important element in the larger fabric of urban renewal in the area. As mentioned at the start, this building has been heralded as New York City's first 'green' skyscraper and has been singled out by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) as an environmental achievement. Despite these accolades, the Condé Nast Building arguably exemplifies what we take to be too limited an understanding of environmental architecture. While it is certainly green, though more modest on that criterion than a project like the Oberlin building, it is not environmentally responsible in the broader terms we wish to apply. To claim that the building is an environmental success is to count success too narrowly along one axis, namely novel energy savings. A close look at the building shows that it ought not be held up as a model of good environmental architecture within our definition (Figure 3).

Four Times Square is a 48-story office tower, located on Broadway between 42nd Street and 43rd Street in Manhattan and houses the operations for 17 Condé Nast magazines including the *New Yorker*, *Vogue*, *Architectural Digest*, *Vanity Fair*, *Glamour*, and *House and Garden*, as well as the law firm Skadden Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom on its top 30 floors. What qualifies this building as green is mostly attributed to the energy efficiency achieved through the use of a photovoltaic system which exploits the sun's energy in combination with a curtain wall construction with high shading and insulation performance. The air intake and ventilation systems ensure above average fresh air circulation,

FIGURE 3. Conde Nast Building, Fox and Fowle, 1999.

and a sophisticated recycling network limits the building's waste output. Fuel cells are used to provide light and heat pollution-free, and a strict set of tenant guidelines ensures that only clean construction and destruction methods and materials are employed. These accomplishments notwithstanding, in our admittedly academic view there is little about this building that would qualify as environmental architecture.

In terms of the broader human environment let us imagine that a building should serve both the population inside, the workers at two large firms, and the population outside, the citizens of New York and tourists of the world. From what we have heard, the inhabitants of the building appear to vary in their opinions of whether the improved air quality has any tangible effect on their health or happiness. There is more emphasis on complaints that a complicated

network of elevators that make travel from one section of the building to another confusing and difficult.

To counter the increased congestion of the area, amenities such as cafeterias have been included in the plan, in this case a well designed Frank Gehry cafeteria that is both beautiful and at the same time serves as a stage for the hierarchy of workers in the building. Because of the enormous volume of foot traffic in the surrounding area, it is virtually impossible to get in and out of the building for lunch in a reasonable amount of time. And yet to contain people on the inside, the building must create a 'city within a city' which provides services on the premises. As a consequence, one could claim that the building does not serve its neighbourhood such that the flow of people in and around it can support local shops, newspaper stands or restaurants. Once inside, it is more efficient to have people stay there until they leave at the end of the day.

While no building can ever aspire to be so green as to truly replace the out of doors, it would make more sense to provide outdoor access on intermittent floors. Building setbacks, which were so common following the 1916 New York City building ordinance, would have succeeded here in providing the benefit of allowing for air and light circulation around the tops of the highest buildings, and creating the possibility of outdoor terraces at each setback. Outdoor seating areas, meeting spaces or cafes would do much to alleviate the all day internment in artificially lit work spaces, especially given that the girth of each floor prevents most workers from having access to a window. Access to views and outdoor air aids in creating a more fluid boundary between interior and exterior, and prevents structures from standing as isolated island fortresses on the landscape.

For the population on the outside of the building, many of whom may never have occasion to go inside but who will no doubt be affected by its presence, we must demand a different set of environmental requirements. There are at least three important concerns to be addressed: communication, wayfinding and contextualisation. Each of these factors is interrelated and contributes to the broader legibility of urban space which in our opinion ought to be reflected in good environmental design.

First, we should be able to glean the function of a building by its exterior design. Architecture ought not to be an arbitrary sign system of communication. Even as typologies evolve, we know, for example, how to tell the difference between a hospital, a school, a fire hall and a church by the interplay of elements that compose each of these structural categories. Such a system allows residents and newcomers alike to easily navigate their way around a city. To imagine otherwise, is to imagine walking through the city without recourse to sense perception; trying to guess which building contains which services. Though such situations are not altogether uncommon in some areas a good case can be made for living otherwise. New York has never operated on this premise, and has at every opportunity made the city easily readable to the first time visitor

by way of a grid system, locally defined neighbourhoods, and iconographic skyscrapers.

As residents of this city, we see little hope that as a skyscraper the Condé Nast Building will become iconic, like the Empire State Building or Chrysler Building, nor do we feel that its design is in any way related to its current tenants. As a symbol of corporate architecture, it does not communicate with any specificity what corporation, or even what kind of corporation might be found within. Not only does the exterior not communicate what goes on inside, it communicates something other than what does.

Wrapped around its corner facade is an electronic screen billboard used to signal the operations of companies which are not located inside, including the current screen which advertises Microsoft. This sign cannot but thwart the efforts of passersby looking for fixed points of reference in the area.

FIGURE 4. Conde Nast Building Night, Fox and Fowle, 1999.

Wayfinding refers to both size and scale of structures as well as to their orientation and surrounding sightlines. Most developments in wayfinding have relied on literal signs, which help travellers find their way to the correct ward of a hospital, or the intended gate at an airport, by colour coded markers and distinct yet uniform graphic symbol systems which are easily apprehended. But wayfinding must concern the exterior of buildings as well. Does a building

promote good sightlines not only toward itself but around it as well? Can the overwhelmed tourist in Times Square find their way to a particular building at ground level, and are they able to identify it when they see it? Such considerations help us to negotiate the environments that we have created, perhaps as influenced by our evolved cognitive capacities, but also reflecting the social and cultural cues that we have developed as well (see Arthur and Passini 1992).

There are certainly other opinions when it comes to this particular space. *New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp has approvingly termed the style of Times Square an 'architecture of distraction', finding virtue in the vice of awkward and unruly design (Muschamp 2000: E1). But making visitors lost and disoriented, further contributing to the stagnated foot and automotive traffic, seems a pale substitute for a functioning, readable space.

Finally, a well contextualised building both engages with its immediate environment, and is distinctive enough to be noticeable at the same time. The Condé Nast building endeavours to do this with two distinct facades, each intended to serve a different public. The 42nd street facade is a staid office building of granite and glass, speaking to neighbouring financial buildings, while the Times Square side must, by municipal mandate, be sheathed in neon signage to speak to its entertainment industry neighbours. This dual focus contained in one building does little to integrate the building on its site. Though the city ordinance may be the real culprit here, the result is an artificial separation that does not produce a coherent whole and does little to lessen the building's impact on its block.

Environmental context in this sense ought also to imply history, and here is where this building is most problematic. While few would argue for a return to the perilous and derelict Times Square of the 1970s and 1980s, the redevelopment of the site was perhaps too far-reaching in its efforts to efface the past. Acknowledging that neon signage replaced traditional frontages in Times Square much earlier than in other areas, continuity with the past has resulted in only the most superficial acquiescence to the entertainment industry. The exterior glow has, for the most part, substituted for architecture, such that the profile of the building has become the victim of economic pressures from advertisers. Architects now, it seems, have to worry more about who will pay for the space on their building's skin than what it should look like on the drafting table. Does the income from a 24-hour electrical billboard compensate for the cost of producing this effect? Does this in any way conflict with the building's larger 'greener' goals?

And what of the skyline profile? Does the industrial silhouette which houses the inner workings of the advanced green efficiency machines at the building's apex contribute to the profile of the city in an aesthetically pleasing way? Again, there seems to be an ex post facto appreciation of its form on the grounds that it unabashedly serves the ecological needs of its interior. How are we to interpret the medley of shapes that crown this structure? As a statement of post-industrialism, a transparency of infrastructure, a collage? To architect Bruce Fowle,

there is a larger concept mounted here: 'The idea is the building decomposes as it reaches the sky, so the guts show' (quoted in Jacobs 1999: 38). Should we imagine the compost heap as our highest achievement in architecture?

We should be clear however on our critical point here: We are not claiming that the achievement of particular green goals for this building caused the other problems that we find in it. It is that whatever environmental benefits may be found in the building are offset by a neglect of the more expansive environmental considerations that a sound environmental architecture in our opinion ought to take into consideration. Especially given the already inherent sustainability of New York City, such expanded considerations of environmental responsibility may be comparatively more important than narrow energy saving objectives. While certainly it is better, all other things being equal, for a building to be more energy efficient than less, that is not the end of the story in this case because all other things are not equal. Therefore, at the very least, such a building should not be heralded as the best that environmental architecture has to offer since it only succeeds on one of our criteria for a complete environmental architecture.

We must not sacrifice the vitality of city life for goals which ultimately do more for the corporate developer than for those who must endure the finished product. By concentrating on values that are explicitly green, the design of the building overlooks elements which might serve its human population. Some may already object that such an environmentalism will lose its unique focus among other competing social priorities. If so, so be it. We have no doubt that the development of green alternatives will continue apace.

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

Environmental design and architecture requires a focus on making for humans what we would want for other parts of nature: preservation of the best of our environment as a habitat that is good for us, and beneficial to others, without trying to become something we are not. However, we wish to end with the point that even what we take to be a sound environmental architecture ought not always to determine what we build or how we live. Our species has developed other complex moral, social, and aesthetic priorities as well, one of which is to mark our spaces as distinctive. Such a tendency is an extension of wayfinding: we not only want visual cues to find particular kinds of places in cities but also markers that we are in one place rather than another. Signature buildings, such as the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building in New York do this for us. They become sign-posts to visitors and residents alike that they are in a particular place.

But are such projects consistent with our suggested understanding of environmental architecture and design? Against perhaps too many green designers we think they should be, for the simple reason that a broader understanding of

the environments that ought to be respected and preserved beyond those that are merely green also entails a kind of modesty about other competing criteria. A more contextually appropriate environmental architecture emerges out of a respect for the complexity of the history of design and thus ought to represent only one set of reasons for how we make human habitats. It is absurd to demand of any particular building that it embody every criterion we can come up with which would make it better. Encouragement of more responsible design criteria is not a zero sum game. Built space always negotiates between competing demands and succeeds at some criteria better than others. This is in fact what makes particular city spaces, and the people that occupy them, interesting: it is their inherent complexity, their combination of success and failure in meeting competing expectations and demands.[5]

NOTES

[1] It should be noted however that Wilson's colleague in work on biophilia, Stephen Kellert, at the Yale School of Forestry, is much more balanced in his portrayal of environmental priorities. Kellert is forthright about the existence of natural experiences in cites (something Wilson may or may not object to): 'Even the most impoverished city offers extraordinary opportunities for experiencing natural wonder […] Society's challenge is to make the positive experience of nature accessible to all rather than to dismiss its presumed relevance to an entire group'. See Kellert 1996: 28. Kellert also does an admirable job of advocating the design of cities with nature in mind. Peter H. Kahn Jr. (1999) claims that empirical studies on biophilia confirm the importance of these urban themes in Kellert's work.

[2] Tellingly, in an extremely rare article on the subject, Alastair Gunn (1998: 355) reports that in three recent and top selling textbooks on environmental ethics, out of nearly 200 readings between them not one single selection deals explicitly with cities.

[3] We are certainly not the first to press for a more expanded notion of what should count as the environment of concern in design and architecture. For another version of this claim in assessing the 'following nature' school of environmental design see Yuriko Saito 2002.

[4] Also see Bob Fowles (2000). Fowles offers three principles for a paradigm shift for a sustainable future. Number one is 'Man is not separate from Nature, and man's activities, including the making of the built environment, must recognize and respect the processes of ecosystems: we must practice ecological design' (104). A summary of similar trends in environmental philosophy can be found in Light (2002).

[5] Our thanks to Michael Benedikt, Steven Moore, and Fritz Steiner for helpful comments and suggestions on this paper.

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