

OPINION

AWESOME ARCHITECTURE VERSUS BIOPHILIA IN AN AGE OF DISTRACTION

Paul Downton*

Architect, Writer, Urban Evolutionary, Australia

1. Biophilia in the curriculum

Biophilia is an integral part of creating architectures that not only perform well environmentally and socially but are also beautiful places in which that beauty reflects and reinforces their environmental and social performance. This needs to be reflected in architectural curricula from day one.

So what should architecture schools be teaching in regards to biophilia and biophilic design? What can be done to ensure that this powerful tool is used to further the pursuit of beauty rather than abused as a new kind of greenwash?

- Establish a *Biophilia Imperative* as a core component of an architectural curriculum and recognise it as an essential part of architectural design;
- Recognize that biophilia is an integral part of creating architecture that not only performs well environmentally and socially, but is itself beautiful;
- Explain how this beauty must be seen as such in the wider public domain — and not only by design professionals with specific training and learned cultural prejudices (see below);
- Demonstrate ways in which this beauty could reflect and reinforce the environmental and social performance of the architecture;
- Encourage an understanding of biophilia from the first year of architectural programs and teach biophilic design as an essential part of an architect's toolkit from the outset;
- Acknowledge biophilia as having intrinsic merit alongside a sound understanding of structure, response to the climate and environment, and knowledge of social factors;
- Celebrate biophilia as a key driver for effective and worthwhile design.

2. Misleading distractions

The internet is awash with slick, seductive images of uber-cool buildings and cities that claim to be carbon-neutral and sustainable and even solve the problems of post-disaster rebuilding in corrupt, dysfunctional, impoverished third world environments, but this is often no more than modernism on steroids; it's designer porn. Here's a checklist:

* Dr. Paul Downton, Carrum (Melbourne), Australia, paul@ecopolis.com.au

- façades of spray-on greenery (greenwash)
- movie set imagery (no substance)
- loud & grave pronouncements about how sustainable it all is (shock & awe)

It's a variant of consumerism and at its best is a kind of theatre, but it reminds me of nothing so much as the Wizard of Oz — lots of effects designed to simultaneously impress and distract, wielded by a wizard who turns out to be someone rather ordinary, but full of bluff and blunder.

But it's also distracting and confusing and like all pornography it reduces human beings to a very limited set of functions and obsesses with titillating appearances. It airbrushes away the imperfections of real life in favor of a fantasy world. Like all pornography, it may (sometimes, arguably) be okay when it's confined to the world of fantasy, but the problems begin when those fantasies are enacted in the real world of flesh and blood and collide with the complications of real human relationships.

Nominally biophilic green credentials are used to position such constructions as having contemporary relevance and to support claims of climate-friendly design. Their claims to be biophilic are often based on employing aspects of genuine biophilic design, but they play fast and loose with the reality of its application. In reality, these are little more than flavor-of-the-month panaceas for sustaining architectural myths which, in turn, are used to reinforce patterns of thought in educational practices that have remained essentially the same for decades and are now as hopelessly, and dangerously out-of-date as championing the construction of new coal mines.

3. Codes and compromise

To make things worse, whilst architects often resent having to 'compromise' their designs to satisfy building codes, internationally, few building codes deal with genuine environmental performance in a convincing or effective manner.

Architects recognize that appearances are important even as they use that recognition as way of over-riding the relevance of any relationship between appearance and function. Particularly, I would argue, in the catechisms of the 20th century *International Style* in which internal contradictions abound. It is difficult for those who haven't been inculcated with the doctrine in the controlled and controlling conditions of architectural schools to understand how the insistence that 'form follows function' can continue as one of their tenets; and this occurs despite such sometimes obvious observations of an iconic building failing to do something as basic as keep the rain out.

The machine aesthetic promoted by Modernists like Le Corbusier was reliant on fossil fuels to be in any way viable as the basis for creating human shelter. The fossil-fueled factory-made glazing, thin walls, and dense materials of steel and concrete are key ingredients in a recipe for construction that practically guarantees that buildings will lose heat in cold months and gain too much during the hotter times of the year — or day. To counter a fundamentally dismal thermal performance the solution was "more machinery". That was acceptable because fossil energy was so cheap and, it was believed, plentiful. Fossil energy released the built form from having to behave sensibly whatever the weather. New technology made things possible that previously were not. Showing off the new tricks that this enabled became the main game in town for any

architect anxious to show-off their ambition and gain attention for being ‘progressive’. Distortion has been piled on distortion and it hasn’t stopped for over a century.

With such rich potential for integral logical disconnects between theory and practice it behooves us to beware of expecting too much from the profession and its pundits when putting forward the proposition that biophilia has an essential relationship between architecture and beauty. ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’, but we also *learn* how we see, and that seeing is subject to an overlay of cultural learning — in the case of some architectural education one might say indoctrination. Different cultures have different aesthetic preferences and the architectural sub-culture has a particularly skewed set.

4. Self-delusion

Sadly, one result of this is that the discourse of architectural theory often seems to verge towards meaninglessness self-delusion. This can do little to engender students’ confidence in discussing issues of beauty and its relationship to how a building works for its users. No-one who has spent time in an architecture school, especially students, can doubt the importance of learning what is supposed to constitute ‘good’ design — it is, after all, supposed to be the central mission of these establishments. But neither can they doubt that this is often accompanied by a kind of institutional brainwashing that is especially evident during the process of desensitizing newcomers to more conventional notions of attractiveness and, as Salinger might put it, inculcate them with the memes of *International Style* dogma.

But the schools also reflect something that is quite deep in the global design and planning culture, which is evidenced at the legislative level with planning dictates and guidelines being almost entirely focused on supporting the tenets of the *International Style*. Many of those are drawn from a particular set of prejudices displayed by egotistic intellectuals who exploited their nascent intuitive understanding of the burgeoning culture of early twentieth century industrialists to pursue commissions.

5. The danger of biophilic syllogism

Biophilia is a well-documented phenomenon with an increasingly substantial scientific and mathematical underpinning and enormous experiential understanding. Its key characteristics are codified or expressed in readily available literature. Yet the evidence would seem to suggest that once in the realm of professional architectural education, it has the potential to be misunderstood and, at worst, distorted or employed as a kind of pseudo-intellectual fig-leaf for hiding ‘business-as-usual’ International Stylism.

The misunderstandings may be attributable to simplistic and syllogistic thinking. For instance, it is readily understood that natural light is a positive biophilic element and windows let in natural light. It does not follow, however, that bigger windows are more biophilic. An almost identical argument in favor of ‘light and airy’ steel and glass buildings was coupled with the rhetoric of progressive industrialism and used to advance the ideas of the early *International Style*, with the result that excessive glazing was normalized. In addition, industrial production techniques were becoming cheaper and were poised to push out the role of artisan and craft production in making all manner of goods, not least buildings. Put all that together and it’s not difficult to see how, when dressed up as a desirable ‘style’, industrial Modernism became ubiquitous.

(At this point it is worth noting that this particular kind of modernism was not the only flavor in the shop).

Now we are being confronted with new glass and steel office towers that are being hailed (within much of the architectural community and by fashionable style-mongers) as icons and flagships of a new kind of sustainable architecture. In reality, many of these edifices measure up poorly in terms of environmental performance, particularly in terms of overall energy use. The same buildings often display cloaks of verdant greenery, perfectly rendered by powerful programs that can create credible images of plants, shrubs, and trees that most architects have no idea how to draw by hand. Neither do those architects know what physical conditions are required to make such green visions biologically tenable without pesticides, fertilizer, and massive continual inputs of water and energy.

6. The historical baggage of architectural language

The language of consumerism (NEW! AMAZING! AWESOME!) is helping to dumb down experience and eliminate nuance from public discourse. Add to that the corrosive effect of social media and the 24 hour ‘news’ cycle and you begin to understand why ephemeral is the new normal. Sadly, the language used to describe architecture has long included superlatives, irrelevancies, and things that maybe were not quite true or were, at least, ingenuous distortions of the truth.

The opportunistic Nazi apologist Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris maintained that “The house is a machine for living in” whilst designing things that took on the superficial *appearance* of machine-like forms, but which didn’t function with the effectiveness of machinery; leaking flat roofs being a moderately notorious example. Yet the influence of such architectural soothsayers has continued to be disproportionately powerful despite the evidence of historical failure — the owners of the Ville Savoye complained bitterly about how badly their house let in the rain and the damp. Yet it remains an architectural design icon simply because of how it *looked*.

The problem of image-obsessed disconnections, rather than informed understanding of the art and science of aesthetics, runs deep and long in the world of architecture and design. It is hard to avoid it completely but all too often, debates about architecture, design and urbanism take place in two realms: Designer World, and the world everybody else lives in.

It is time to challenge this false dichotomy with clear-headed understanding of the issues that create this unnatural divide. We need to reclaim the ability for the wider community to speak to architects in a way that they can hear, and for the architectural community to speak plainly again about widely shared notions of beauty and delight. This may not be an easy task for many architectural educators, but of all the available topics, biophilia offers pathways that have perhaps the greatest potential and shaking up the curriculum. It would be a good way to start.

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