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The Failure of Contemporary Architecture to Support Human Endeavor and Unity

Reimagining the Vitruvian Mandate

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Kenneth Morrison launched his career in Architecture after completing his degree at UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design. with an early focus on technology, IT security, and data optimization to optimize all systems of the built environment. He cites the inspiration of outstanding thought leaders on the faculty in his formative time at UC Berkeley as crucial foundations for his ability to see broadest opportunities in design. He has worked for some of the world's leading companies, including IBM, Sun Microsystems, and Oracle where his focus has been a combination of space optimization and IT Security. He is the Principal and Founder of Morrison Consulting, which helps clients identify ways to optimize data and technology to yield the greatest value in what they build, whether it be systems or buildings. Ken has spoken before international audiences on topics including data security, smart city design, the human-architecture equation. His recent research has been on the eviscerating impact that technology can have if not designed and integrated with the primary focus on people who will occupy the spaces, providing the intrinsic and ongoing benefit and source of pride that comes from thoughtful spaces.

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this White Paper solely reflect the views of the author and no current or previous affiliated organization or institution has contributed to this work.

Executive Summary

In this paper, I present the case that much contemporary Architecture of today has fallen into detrimental patterns that impact the ultimate occupant experience in reverberating, damaging respects.

Cost is often blamed for the lack of designs that creatively addresses the needs of humans in spaces. Costs are allowed to escalate without much evaluation of the reason for their increase, and despite this, the quality of buildings is often criticized as decreasing.

Technology has exploded to a point that cost and complexity in selection poses a significant challenge to design professionals. Technology provides a wealth of unprecedented opportunities, but those in the design profession must focus functionality and methods on the value delivered to occupants for those benefits to be fully realized.

Regulatory hurdles have grown to become one of the most frustrating aspects of new space creation. Hurdles, include zoning, permitting, environmental assessments, and public hearings, sometimes resulting in litigation, may result in cost-cutting of the most human-centered features of a project. Without stalwart commitment, these vital features may be deemed the most dispensable by developers.

Environmental decisions often evaluate impact from a limited, traditionalist framework without a comprehensive lifecycle assessment which includes their cultural and social impact over time on the community.

Generational poverty, physical and mental health issues, drug use, and domestic violence—all factors in life quality and outcome—have been

shown in studies to have a causal relationship with living environment, including physical space.

The overarching goal of Architecture to provide for basic human needs—i.e., shelter, safety, security, too often undervalues the foundation of these needs, the social experience that is at the absolute core of human development.

I present the following suggestions for how to mitigate the destructive and invidious toll that the built environment all too often exerts on its occupants.

1. Establish a new branch of Architecture called “Aspirational Design”, which considers and creates all essential components of the built environment, and their interaction, from a integrated framework of how these can elevate the human condition and support the capacity for intellectual growth and social delight throughout the structure’s lifecycle.
2. Incorporate a multidisciplinary aspirational design vocabulary and methodology into the design of every type of built environment and urban plan.
3. Call upon the profession to develop a network of experts whose contribution to a aspiration-centered environment will make such a goal achievable and lasting.
4. Propose incorporation of a multidiscipline Aspirational Architecture curriculum in educational institutions globally.

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“There is a quality even meaner than outright ugliness or disorder, and this meaner quality is the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be served.”

Jane Jacobs
The Death and Life of Great American Cities

Contemporary architecture, despite its technological advancements and ambitious designs, increasingly fails at supporting humans in achieving life quality outcomes. This is true, despite the staggering cost of bringing even a modest residential structure to fruition. The bureaucratic quagmire in many state, city, and local permitting processes often adds enormously to the cost and time, engendering massive frustration while yielding little if any meaningful community improvement or benefit. While claiming to emphasize aesthetics, efficiency, and innovation, contemporary architecture frequently ignores essential human factors such as basic comfort, psychological well-being, community connection, and resource optimization.

Urban landscapes are filled with sterile, impersonal spaces that rather than enriching the communities and the lives of their inhabitants, play a significant role in diminishing them. A visual survey of empty, damaged green spaces interspersed in neighborhoods demonstrate this point. Graffiti and defacement of buildings, contributes to a sense of neglect and urban decay. Illegal dumping, littering, and destruction of public spaces diminish the usability and appeal of shared environments and degrade pride of ownership and community solidarity. The theft of public property, broken windows, and defaced street signs not only pose safety risks but also undermine the integrity of architectural designs. Taxpayer dollars are routinely and unproductively expended on repairing such damage, only to have the damage quickly repeated in a vicious cycle that demonstrates deeper social issues – that are much harder to address. Prosecution of perpetrators is likewise costly and generally futile in getting at the root problem.

One of the most glaring issues in contemporary architecture is its prioritization of form over function. Many modern buildings, designed to be visually striking or to push the boundaries of engineering, often compromise on livability and social cohesion. Glass and steel skyscrapers, while impressive, create environments that consume massive energy, are consistently either too hot or too cold, and thus defeat the principles of sustainability. Open-concept living or working spaces, ostensibly designed to foster collaboration, in truth are about cost-saving as well, and create noise pollution, shrink productivity, and increase stress with their lack of personal space.

Additionally, contemporary architecture has largely neglected the importance of community spaces. In many urban centers, high-rise residential complexes are designed with efficiency in mind, but they lack communal areas that encourage interaction and social cohesion. Many great cities of the world, particularly those in Europe, were designed centuries ago with a defining central public square to encourage gathering and multigenerational connection and many such spaces have been maintained, even expanded, into the present because of their success in facilitating this purpose.

The disappearance or non-inclusion of public gathering spaces in other cities—with precious central land usurped instead by more lucrative commercialized environments such as shopping malls—has contributed to their growing sense of urban isolation. People are relegated to existing in environments where they are physically close but socially isolated, with the resulting diminution in life quality, physical and psychological well-being, and ultimately, happiness and satisfaction. The lack of positive life outcome resulting from inhabitants of these environments is predictable, with many segments of the population feeling marginalized.

Even as articulating the principles of sustainability has become a staunch commitment in every building design, the substantive benefit of sustainable practices is debatable, just as the true meaning of the term itself is. Many buildings remain highly dependent on artificial lighting, heating, and cooling, contributing to environmental degradation. The emphasis on glass facades, while in some cases visually appealing, often leads to excessive energy consumption, coupled with the intrusive impact of solar reflectivity to adjacent structures and occupants. In contrast, traditional architectural principles that prioritize natural ventilation and lighting, shading, and locally sourced materials are frequently rejected in favor of faster, industrial-scale construction techniques and lower costs. Sustainable practices, materials, and processes often start off well but

deteriorate with use and lack of maintenance—all debunking any true, lasting commitment.

Some architects emphasize that cutting-edge materials and digital modeling allow for greater efficiency and innovation in construction. Proponents of contemporary architecture also highlight efforts to integrate biophilic elements, smart technologies and IoT devices, and modular designs to improve livability. Furthermore, they assert that modern structures, despite criticisms, offer new opportunities for reimagining space utilization in ways that traditional designs could not. The question is whether these methods and the ideologies that underlie them are responsive to the most essential obligation of the built environment, which is to serve the needs of the humans that inhabit it. This inquiry requires a more substantive examination of what the most fundamental need, underlying the more obvious ones, is.

In her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, urbanist Jane Jacobs criticized modernist urban planning that was proliferating across the US, stating: "This is not the rebuilding of cities. This is the sacking of cities." She argued that such planning often disregarded the complexities of human social interactions, leading to environments that fail to support vibrant community life. As the new planning models took hold, the increase in property crime, violent crime, mental health issues, civil unrest, and discriminatory practices against various targeted groups—often from marginalized demographics, Jacobs concerns were shared by an ever widening audience.

Scholars such as Rem Koolhaas ("Delirious New York") and Patrik Schumacher ("Parametricism") suggest that modern architecture reflects changing societal and technological demands. Koolhaas highlights the necessity of urban density and adaptability, while Schumacher advocates for computational design to enhance functionality. Additionally, research by the World Green Building Council emphasizes that sustainability measures are improving, with innovative materials and smart technology gradually reducing environmental footprints. Architectural critic Elizabeth Gordon, in her book "The Threat to the Next America" described "modernist designs, particularly 'glass houses', are often impractical, being too hot in summer and too cold in winter, lacking privacy, beauty, and overall livability."

Design theorist Horst Rittel encouraged the incorporation of activities like planning, engineering, and policy making as essential to inspire good design practice. Biologist E.O. Wilson, who used the term "Biophilia" in the 1980s to describe the predisposition of humans to want to be in touch with nature as essential to their well-being. Yet architectural design often ignores this affinity by failing to incorporate

natural elements into building, such as natural lighting and ventilation, visible outdoor greenscapes, plants, etc. Or equally disturbing is when such elements are incorporated, but allowed to decay over time due to lack of financial commitment to maintain them. Again, evidence of true commitment to these principles beyond initial application.

Given the advances made in technology, materials, the explosion of AI across every sector, and the immigrant population increase in countries across the world that demand accommodation, a more in-depth examination of the fundamental need of humans must at last be undertaken to then reveal the fundamental charge of architecture.

The responsibility of architecture, as a discipline, is proposed here to be to provide a foundation for humans to be simply and clearly to realize their aspirations at the various stages in their life cycle within their structure.

This mandate requires that architects first and foremost acquiesce to the requirement to imagine the space they create from a multi-disciplinary perspective, without which rich input buildings cannot truly respond to the richness of their human clients. For the true client is not a corporation, an affordable housing office, or a government funding program board. It is the person who will inhabit the space.

How exactly this mandate may be executed thus adds to the design process a collaborative approach to each project that brings together a multitude of disciplines in a dynamic conversation including experts in psychology, sociology, biology, anatomy, physiology, human development, ergonomics, botany, cognitive science, geology, anthropology, public policy and all facets of urban and civic planning. When the architect operates in isolation of these other fields and focuses, the end result will represent a devastating failure to recognize the connections that inform the human experience and to respect the importance of these in making decisions that must support it.

Well designed buildings can influence behavior, and facilitate personal and collective growth, and elevate quotidian experience, and inspire productivity and achievement. The establishment of a branch of architecture called "Aspirational Architecture" that is informed by the aforementioned disciplines, and others, is timely, and necessary in order to cease and desist with creating buildings that create more issues – short and long term – than they solve. In essence, architecture should be a tool for empowerment, allowing individuals and societies to reach their full potential by providing spaces that inspire, support, and adapt to their evolving needs.

To truly support human well-being, architecture must return to its roots—designing spaces that prioritize human experience over abstract artistic statements. This means integrating natural elements, creating accessible and inclusive spaces, and fostering a sense of belonging and connection. Yet the use of new materials, technologies, and incorporation of AI and machine learning, if used considerately, can be tremendous assets singularly and collaboratively. AI will provide a great enhancement in terms of bringing together the requisite multidisciplinary intelligence to create better buildings and communities, and educating design professionals in that regard.

Aspirational Architecture offers a new way of looking at the venerated practices of our predecessors, and an invitation to explore all facets of the human who will be the beneficiary of better practices that will result from this new specialty. But in fact, the benefit of this new way of thinking will accrue to the wider world audience, at a time when it could not be more critical.

Without this shift in perspective, contemporary architecture will continue to produce environments that alienate rather than accommodate the people who inhabit them.