Architectus

2011
Nr 2 (30)

Grzegorz Wojtkun*

Between order and decency– Between the code and abstract criteria

It seems that the difficulty in the interpretation of the professional reality as an ethical message is today one of the biggest challenges faced by the designers of architecture. In the classical presentation of ethics, it is practice that provides the basis for formulation of a coherent set of axioms. At present, we live in the times when the methods of achieving success are more and more often based on encouragement instead of instruction, on flexibility and promotion instead of disciplinary sanctions.

The architect's code of professional ethics is not casuistic by nature and that is why it was based on universally accepted and established ethical norms and not on torts. However, this creates huge problems as an act which is ethical for some is not ethical for others. Regardless of that, it is an obligation of all architects to observe the general human and professional ethical norms, and especially guarding the dignity of the profession.

Codified ethics. The individual and the community

Contemporary research on codification of ethics leads to the conclusion that it deprives man of moral sensitivity rather than prepares to life and work according to those kinds of norms because categorization assigns the responsibility for defining what is good and what is bad to the institution formulating the code: *The wish to have a moral code is an element of that pursuit of security, that escape from making decisions; it is the wish to live in the world where all decisions have already been made once and for all* [3]. Paradoxically, the constant codifying of ethics, including professional ethics, seems natural or even desirable. That is exactly why the harmful aspect of that process should be considered. This was noticed by Z. Bauman who even distinguished between ethics and morality: *morality phenomena* […] *precede all considerations over the aims of deeds and all profits and loss accounts; they cannot be crammed into the category of "aims and means"* […]. *Ethics tries to rule, similarly to law, which deed in a specific situation is "proper" and which is "improper"* […], *leaving no space unattended where diversity of opinions and ambivalence of judgments could breed* [1].

The distinction which was made above corresponds to the diversity of daily life and professional reality which is difficult to grasp. The code should inspire reflection. Each unambiguous and definitive interpretation within the realm of moral considerations is always confusing as it confines the meaning, preventing further consideration. It is impossible to translate the code into clearly defined rules of conduct without violating the structure of its text. However, naturally, this does not mean it is useless. It indicates that the same code has different implications for different entities. That fact determines – or not – the development of an ethical community.

In this context, there emerges an issue of abstract and unclear terms which is a serious drawback of the statutory law. Unclear provisions and their possible different interpretations are the main sources of injustice and they expose the ineffectuality of public institutions. On the other hand, ethics is not a set of principles regulating social life. It exclusively regards the individual. Consequently, the claim that the wish to develop a code as a set of obligations and restrictions would ultimately render it ineffective sounds trivial.

* Faculty of Building and Architecture, Szczecin University of Technology

What the code of ethics does not serve

One of the biggest misunderstandings regarding codified ethics is the issue of free interpretation of the rules included in it which could result in unacceptable freedom of their interpretation. However, the law necessary to maintain social order frequently is erroneously identified with morality. This is characteristic of theocratic systems based on arousing strong fear and one-way communication. This is not very far from the claim that every moral dilemma results from the relaxation of morals and insubordination. This also questions the possibility of moral growth of man as a natural process. That is why the efforts to question codified ethics are often perceived as moral relativism. Undoubtedly, this is connected with possible undermining of the mission of the creators of codes who tried to put the world in order, believing that people do not know how to behave. However, when led by the hand, they become less sensitive. The result is opposite to the intended one – moral depravation is growing greater and greater.

Only individuals can be ethical and not groups or communities. Another issue regards the moral conduct of the individual as a protest against the surrounding environment.

The development of codified ethics can result in the creation of convictions contradictory to the actual state, however, internally coherent. The moral principles imposed "from above" create a system, whereas the ones "from the bottom" provide autonomy of the individual.

It seems that the excessive algorithmization of ethics inevitably leads to its dehumanization.

Ethics of the architect in postmodernism

The times of communism required special conduct, often informal, as well as extraordinary mobilization. The diversity of opinions and attitudes, transparency of decisions and procedures, freedom of speech – all this provides counterbalance for ostracism, selfless envy and lack of trust. The functioning of man in a society that respects civil rights means autonomy in experiencing the world and the ability to self-determine one's own will.

Architects should demonstrate understanding for pluralism within their profession and return to the discussion which is ongoing but without exaltation. Human freedom and truth do not pose danger. An open debate is not a destructive attack but a testimony to maturity. The need of individualization has become an inseparable element of the architectural profession. We have entered the age when its identity develops in the internal dispute or even dilemma: *I always accept criticism. Sometimes I even share it* […]. *The only thing I want is to be able to continue to doubt* (J. Herzog) [4].

At the same time urgent questions emerge: shouldn't the architect's code of professional ethics, unlike the restrictions of the penal code, provide only a set of principles, identification with which would be a reason to be proud of? Isn't the educational role of the architect's code of professional ethics in fact acting *post factum*? Many factors indicate that a different interpretation of it should be searched for; for instance in the form of belonging to an elite association such as a Victorian gentlemen's club, distinguishing its members and at the same time creating the highest possible level of their ethical and cultural refinement.

At present, it seems only necessary to respect the identity of each artist. Their way of thinking and conduct should be recognized with interest and without immediate imposition of any patronizing persuasion. Actually that assumption could be satisfied by elite associations co-providing the principles of professional ethics.

Caring for the moral standards of the graduates of architectural universities is a task for generations. The low degree of openness of educational systems to the contemporary knowledge of the internal human growth is more and more disturbing. Universities should restore their reputation of the places of dialog and centers of culture which could be further cultivated in professional associations. If, however, university teachers remain silent, then what can be expected of future architects? This requires both time and place.

Instead of an epilogue

The crisis of identity of the architects that we face today does not need to bring destruction and ultimate void. The temporary disintegration and defeat paradoxically can become a source of hope or an impulse for new, more mature, and dynamic activities. The future, which is unknown and can be disturbing, can also provide new prospects. The architect's code of professional ethics requires that constant reformatory efforts be made – editorial ones but primarily on the mental plane. Its provisions should not be limited to one, even if it is the most united, economic and cultural sphere. It should become a universal human value. Furthermore, the provisions of the architect's code of professional ethics should be verified on the regular basis in practice, however, not with the use of a system of disciplinary and professional sanctions, but disapproval or appreciation both social and within the profession. Then the fighting spirit that accompanies, for instance, the presentation of the Pritzker Architecture Award would be replaced with noble competition. Consequently, the works of architects might become less heroic and spectacular, but more conscience-oriented and closer to the people whom they are supposed to serve. Undoubtedly, this would be the first step toward the breakthrough in the new concept of the architect's code of professional ethics.

References

[1] Bauman Z., *Etyka ponowoczesna*, PWN, Warsaw 1996, pp. 18-19.
[2] Bauman Z., *Płynne życie*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2007.
[3] Kołakowski L., *Kultura i fetysze*, PWN, Warsaw 2000, p. 156.
[4] Zabalbeascoa A., Entrevista: Planeta Urban – Entrevista Jacques Herzog. No nos interesan las burbujas. Queremos seguir dudando, El País, www.elpais.com (02/02/2010).

Między nakazem a przyzwoitością – między kodeksem a kryteriami abstrakcyjnymi

Wydaje się, że trudność interpretacji rzeczywistości zawodowej jako przesłania etycznego stanowi obecnie jedno z największych wyzwań, przed którym stoi środowisko projektantów architektury. W klasycznym ujęciu etyki praktyka dostarcza podstaw do sformułowania spójnego zbioru aksjomatów. Obecnie żyjemy w czasach, gdy coraz częściej dąży się do oparcia metod skutecznego działania na zachęcie zamiast na nakazie, na elastyczności i promocji zamiast na sankcjach dyscyplinarnych. Jednocześnie pojawiają się naglące pytania: czy przeciwnie do obostrzeń na wzór kodeksu karnego, kodeks etyki zawodowej architekta nie powinien stanowić jedynie zbioru zasad, z którym identyfikowanie się byłoby chlubą? Czy rola wychowawcza kodeksu etyki zawodowej architekta nie jest w rzeczywistości działaniem *post factum*? Zdaniem autora niniejszego artykułu, należałoby szukać innej jego wykładni, na przykład w formie przynależności do elitarnego zrzeszenia na wzór wiktoriańskich klubów dżentelmenów, nobilitujących swoich członków, a jednocześnie tworzących najwyższy poziom ich etycznego i kulturalnego wyrobienia.

Key words: architectural ethics, ethical axiom, educational role of the code of ethics, ethical elitism

Słowa kluczowe: etyka architekta, aksjomat etyczny, wychowawcza rola kodeksu etyki, elitaryzm etyczny