GJOKO MURATOVSKI

Auckland University of Technology

The burden of ethics: the use of design and architecture as political propaganda

ABSTRACT

In the face of an underlying theoretical structure that links the subjects of propaganda and politics with architectural and design practice, it can be argued that both designers and architects often use ideologies (self-invented or borrowed) to shape their communicative and design processes. It is their beliefs and dialogues that condition what ideals may lead to a better society and how these ideals can be put into practice—often for the benefit or to the detriment of the society at large. In most cases, these practices are juxtaposed with moral and ethical issues that are too great to be ignored.

KEYWORDS

politics

ethics

design

architecture

propaganda

INTRODUCTION

Everyone has to make moral decisions in life—from the smallest ones concerning the daily nature of everyday life to the larger issues that can sometimes be related to dire consequences. Often some of the positions people take are held with passion, conviction and great sincerity, yet many of those who have strong views on moral issues have not really stopped to think why they take a particular stance and if they were challenged might find it difficult to justify their position (Vardy and Grosch 1997: 13). Designers and architects, due to the nature of their work, are often faced with moral or ethical dilemmas on which they have to make a choice. The issues with which they have to deal with may vary greatly, ranging from environmental and commercial to ideological and political concerns. In the same way as design is used in the corporate world as a tool for creating competitive advantage or as a form of communication that empowers corporate reputation and persuades or impresses current or prospective clients, design can also be used in conventional politics, day-to-day social activities, and various aspects of governance for achieving similar yet somewhat different objectives. Then again, there is something inherently political in the practice of design and consequently architecture.

Like politicians, designers and architects often use ideologies (self-invented or borrowed) to shape their communicative and creative processes. It is their beliefs and dialogues that condition what ideals may lead to a better society and how these ideals can be put into practice—often for the benefit or to the detriment of the society at large. In most cases these practices are juxtaposed with moral and ethical issues that are too great to be ignored.

MACHIAVELLIAN RATIONALE AND A FOUCAULTIAN PLATFORM

When it comes to issues of business, social responsibility or the environment, it appears that there is more or less a global 'understanding' among the professions of design and architecture of what is morally or ethically acceptable. It can be argued that both designers and architects are quite capable of understanding the concept of 'good citizenship'—even if we cannot say that everything they do fits into this category (see Heller and Vienne 2003). However once we step into the world of politics, matters of 'wrong' and 'right' enter a grey area and morality and ethics become an illusion. Morality becomes an expression of personal preference, while ethics becomes an expression of what is customary in a particular society. Everything becomes subjective and principles and practices of design and architecture become Machiavellian in nature.

According to Niccolò Machiavelli (2005), moral principles must yield to every circumstance, especially in such cases where sordid, inhumane actions may be required. However, as the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (2009) points out, a careless reading of Machiavelli's controversial work *The Prince* could easily lead one to believe that its central argument is 'the ends justify the means'—a simplistic interpretation that any evil action can be justified if it is done for a good purpose. However, this view is wrong. Rather, Machiavelli argued that the only acceptable end was the stabilization and the health of the state; individual power for its own sake is not an acceptable end and does not justify evil actions (see Machiavelli 2005).

Furthermore, a close analysis and interpretation of the social and the theoretical mechanisms behind design and architecture, based on a Foucaultian platform, can reveal a discourse in theories of power and state (Foucault 1975). If we examine design as a method of public persuasion that is often used to sell, promote or explain various functional, visual or abstract aspects of a certain element or object by aesthetic, physical and/or structural means, we can identify design as an element of power. Architecture on the other hand, besides

providing the obvious benefits of function and structure, also serves as an ideological apparatus that, depending on the circumstances, can act as a substitute for authority. According to art and architecture critic Robert Hughes, '[a]rchitecture is the only art that moulds the world directly. Of all the arts, architecture is the supreme expression of politics and ideology' (2008). If we take into consideration that politics is often defined by its exercise of power and authority, then we can discuss what James M. Mayo calls an 'underlying theoretical structure' that links the subjects of politics and design/architecture together (1996: 76).

The ethical dilemma for the designer or the architect might be whether the political behaviour that will result from the design will be beneficial to the broader society or not. From this position, the designer's willingness to engage in a political project could only be understood as stemming from one of two perspectives: (1) the designer is accepting the legitimacy of the ideology and feels that the design is contributing towards the fulfilment of that ideology, or (2) the designer decides to proceed with the work as a professional, but abdicates him- or herself from social responsibility. However, when a designer does not fully understand the purpose and the eventual outcomes of the ideology (for example, one ideology might attempt to limit the freedom of the society, while another might attempt to preserve it), the designer works superficially within a pluralistic context.

Then again, design for political propaganda purposes may or may not initiate freedom through change. However, having no assurance that such action will occur, the designer is placed in an equivocal position. As propaganda, branding and design are an integral part of the promotion of political ideology: it is precisely because of situations such as this that a designer's base of knowledge must go beyond the absolute qualities of design (such as good structure, functionality and aesthetics). This knowledge needs to include a profound understanding of ethical and moral actions within society. Since design knowledge might be used for the benefit or to the detriment of society at large, the designer who is involved with the design manipulation of political symbols carries a great burden—as Mayo (1978, 27) argues.

There are numerous historical examples where design and architecture have been used as a political demonstration of power, dominance, superiority and authority. One of the most interesting examples of the use of design and architecture for political purposes can be found in the rise of the Nazi Party and the establishment of the Third Reich.

DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE IN THE THIRD REICH

With its glittering, powerful and hypnotic appearance, the Third Reich cannot be imagined today without thinking of the design elements that helped define it. Although all fascist movements used design elements to augment their appearance, Germany's Nazi Party took this to extremes. They utilized design and architecture heavily in order to rebuild the self-confidence of the Germans after the desperate situation that followed their defeat in the First World War (Heller 2008, 14-75). Every aspect of life was designed and branded to represent the unification of the German people under the Third Reich.

Manifestations of Nazi corporate identity ranged from the design of their symbolic logo, the swastika, to the uniformed organizations such as the Hitler Youth and the Storm Troopers. This extended to the styling of the Mercedes Benz racing cars and the design of the Volkswagen Beetle, and even to the fashionably tailored uniforms of the SS troops produced by Hugo Boss (Tungate 2006, 174). Even the use of body movements and gestures—such as mechanical marching, the outstretched arm and the greeting 'Heil Hitler'—were designed as an integral part of the Nazi corporate identity. A primary reason for the success of the Nazi movement was the manner in which they presented themselves through their manipulation of design, mixed with a prevailing symbolism. Alongside graphic design, industrial design, fashion design and architecture, the Nazi Party also utilized stage design for political rallies as a demonstration of power.

The most prominent person involved in the creation of the Third Reich's corporate identity design was Albert Speer, also known as Hitler's architect. Hitler wanted to create a concrete manifestation of his political authority, so he commissioned Speer—a young and unknown architect at the time—to translate his vision of the Third Reich into marble, steel and space. In addition to this, Speer was also instrumental in early Nazi efforts to mobilize massive popular support through his creative concepts for the now infamous Nazi Party rallies. Overall, his contribution to the establishment of the Third Reich was so great that Hughes (2008) describes Speer as 'the most powerful architect in the world'.

During his imprisonment in Spandau serving a twenty year sentence for participation in the Nazi regime, Speer wrote his memoirs where he elaborated on his involvement with the Nazi Party and his contribution to Hitler's vision. He also made statements about his regrets of being involved with the regime, distancing himself from the actions of the rest of the Nazi functionaries. In the early days of the Nazi Party, when the party was gaining political momentum, and later when it was at the height of its power, Speer had no remorse nor did he

question the ethical implications of his work or the work of his patron. As Hughes argues, Speer did what any other architect would have done in his place—and that place was unique. The opportunity to create an immense new city, Germania, that would rise on the site of old Berlin, dwarfing cities like New York and Paris, outweighed any moral dilemmas that Speer could possibly have to confront over Hitler's politics. In planning the city, Speer was personally responsible to Hitler and no one else. He would have become the dictator of architecture as Hitler was dictator of the state—a temptation so great that hardly any architect in his place could have resisted (see Hughes 2008).

As he wrote in his memoirs, when Speer first met Hitler, it was a time in his architectural career when he would have gladly sold his soul to the devil in exchange for a patron of such calibre. In a period of twelve years, Speer placed all his abilities and energy at Hitler's disposal in something that resembled a Faustian pact:

> After years of frustrated efforts I was wild to accomplish things—and twenty-eight years old. For the commission to do a great building, I would have sold my soul like Faust. Now, I had found my Mephistopheles. He seemed no less engaging than Goethe's. (1970, 31).

In time, Speer's early admiration for Hitler slowly diminished, and when Hitler became increasingly unpredictable and unapproachable, Speer refused his orders and was even prepared to assassinate him in order to prevent the orders from being carried out.

Ethics is a complex field of inquiry and can be observed on multiple levels. As a professional, Speer acted ethically within the frames of his profession by representing his client's best interest through his practice. As a citizen, when the moral burden prevailed, he was prepared to assassinate his client for the sake of the greater good. Yet he never considered compromising the quality of his work, even when he had doubts about the righteousness of his client's actions.

Ideology is a common element that brings politics, design and architecture together. According to Mayo (1996, 76-82), these three areas all share a need for ideology. The subject of ideology itself is a controversial one. According to the fifteenth edition of *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974: 768), an ideology is a '[…] form of social or political philosophy in which [the] practical elements are as prominent as the theoretical ones; it is a system of ideas that aspire both to explain the world and to change it'. However, there is a difference between the way politicians and designers/architects deal with ideology. Based on

Jacque Ellul's theories, Mayo came to the conclusion that architects and designers who tend to use spatial design as a method of implementation of political propaganda seem to be more interested in the presentation of the ideology than in the ideology itself (Ellul 1973, cited in Mayo 1978: 24). If one assumes this to be correct (and the same can be sensed from Speer's memoirs, and I can concur from personal experience working in this area), then it can be argued that ideology, whatever it may be, simply serves as a storyline or a platform upon which such propaganda is built. While politicians are interested in the implementation of the ideology, designers and architects are primarily interested in its presentation, simply seeing this as a problem that needs to be solved. Yet the ideology cannot be implemented if it is not first presented, nor it can be maintained if it is not constantly reinforced. This makes politicians dependent on the propaganda created by designers and architects.

DISCUSSION

The question that arises here is how can a designer or architect make a decision on whether to accept or refuse a particular political project? If we take into consideration the Code of Ethics promoted by the Australian Graphic Design Association (AGDA), which is based on the Model Code of Professional Conduct for Designers published in 1987 by the International Council of Communication Design (ICOGRADA), then we can see that ethical obligations are mostly framed around the client-service provider relationship, where one of the main responsibilities of the designer is always to act in the best interest of the client, as long as this is within the limitations of professional obligation (AGDA 2011).

Nevertheless, being accountable to some moral standard is as important as being ethical, as '[a]ll individual acts, including the creation and manufacture of design for a client, exert impact on others,' argues Steven Heller (2003, x). A designer must be professionally, culturally and socially responsible for the impact of his or her work on the citizenry. From the perspective that 'good designers' are 'good citizens', it can be argued that every designer must understand that his or her respective actions will have reactions. But should designers and architects be held accountable for the actions of their clients? If they explicitly knew what actions will follow, then probably yes. Otherwise, how could they foresee what the future will bring? Certain benchmarks must apply, argues Heller, such as knowing what in fact the client does and how they do it. According to Heller, every designer is capable of making an informed decision about whether to work with a particular client or not. But then again, Heller stresses that each designer must address issues of 'right' or 'wrong' as he or she

sees fit, which only adds to the problem that issues of ethics and morality are highly subjective (2003, x).

We can establish facts through science and true or false statements through logic, but the world of value and the realm of morality are beyond fact and truth or falsehood. Instead, according to Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch (1997: 114), morality is simply the expression of personal preference in a culture which has abandoned virtue and rejected a sense of community. Ultimately, it can be argued that ethics is not an ideal system as it is noble in theory but no good in practice. Actually, it seems that the reverse of this is closer to the truth. According to Peter Singer, 'an ethical judgement that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgement is to guide practice' (1995: 2).

In a broad sense, politics is a particular set of beliefs or principles driven by ideology. The existence of rival ideologies, different wants, competing needs and opposing interests guarantees disagreement about the rules under which people live and this in return creates political conflicts (Heywood 2007: 4). The differences between some ideologies are so great that the conflict between them is often portrayed as a conflict of ethics—one between 'good' and 'bad' or 'right' and 'wrong'—with a common feature being that every side perceives itself as the righteous one.

CONCLUSION

According to the fifteenth edition of *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974: 627-648), as a philosophical subject, ethics consists of fundamental issues of practical decision-making and its major concerns include the nature of ultimate value and the standards by which human actions can be judged right or wrong. In other words, ethics deals with the justification of moral principles. Contrastingly, morality is simply a matter of what is customary and is always relative to a particular society. From an anthropological perspective, no ethical principles can be considered as valid, except in terms of the society in which they are held. Accordingly, words such as 'good' or 'bad' can simply be taken as 'approved in my society' or 'disapproved in my society', and therefore, the search for objective or rationally justifiable ethical behaviour is in fact an illusion.

REFERENCES

AGDA, 'Code of Ethics', *AGDA*, available from http://www.agda.com.au/about/code. Accessed on March 4, 2011.

Ellul, Jacques (1973), *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes,* New York: Vintage Books, cited in J. M. Mayo (1978) 'Propaganda with Design: Environmental Dramaturgy in the Political Rally', *Journal of Architectural Education,* 32: 2, pp. 24-27.

Foucault, Michel (1975), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* New York: Random House.

Heller, Steven (2008), *Iron Fists: Branding the 20th Century Totalitarian State*, New York: Phaidon Press.

Heller, Steven and Vienne, Veronique (eds.) (2003), *Citizen Designer,* New York: Allworth Press.

Heller, Steven (2003), 'Introduction', in *Citizen Designer*, S. Heller and V. Vienne (eds.), New York: Allworth Press, 2003, pp. ix-xii.

Heywood, Andrew (2007), *Politics*, New York, Palgrave.

Hughes, Robert (2008), *Visions of Space* – 'Albert Speer: Size Matters' [TV Documentary], London: BBC Four.

Machiavelli, Niccolò (2005), *The Prince*, trans. P. Bondanella, New York: Oxford University Press. First published 1515.

Mayo, James M. (1978), 'Propaganda with Design: Environmental Dramaturgy in the Political Rally', *Journal of Architectural Education,* 32: 2, pp. 24-27.

--. (1996), 'The Manifestation of Politics in Architectural Practice', *Journal of Architectural Education,* 50: 2, pp. 76-88.

Pastoureau, Michel (2004), *Heraldry: Its Origins and Meaning*, London: Thames and Hudson.

Singer, Peter (1995), *Practical Ethics*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (2009), s.v.' Niccolò Machiavelli'

Speer, Albert (1970) *Inside the Third Reich,* trans. R. and C. Winston, London: Macmillan Company.

The New Encyclopaedia Britannica (1974), s.v. 'Ethics'.

The New Encyclopaedia Britannica (1974), s.v. 'Ideology'.

Tungate, Mark (2006), *Fashion Brands: Branding Style from Armani to Zara*, London: Kogan Page Limited.

Vardy, Peter and Grosch, Paul (1997), *The Puzzle of Ethics,* New York: Sharpe.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Gjoko Muratovski is the Head of the Communication Design Department at Auckland University of Technology. He is also the Chairman of the International Research Conference: Design for Business (agIdeas / Melbourne International Design Week), Area Chair for Design and for Business at the Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand, Founding Editor-in-Chief of the international *Journal of Design, Business & Society* (Intellect Journals) and Founding Associate Editor of the international *Journal of Design, Economics & Innovation* (Elsevier).

Contact: gjoko.muratovski@aut.ac.nz

SUGGESTED CITATION

Muratovski, G. (2014), 'The burden of ethics: the use of design and architecture as political propaganda', *Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the 5th Annual Conference Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand* (PopCAANZ), Hobart, Australia, 18-20 June, 2014, P. Mountfort (ed.), Sydney: PopCAANZ, pp. 44-53. Available from http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2014/.