Practical Discourse: Studio, Learning, and the Ethical Construction of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Design education almost invariably finds the student as ground for action; their attitudes, experiences, sense of conviction, and ego are as much part of educational content as is architecture. However, there are significant questions about how—or even if—this ego-centric perspective enables a design student to construct a useful ethics of practice.

As ethics and its value for human conduct has regained a centrality to philosophical thought, the realm of professional ethics has reemerged as a substantive issue for design education. Yet ethics in design education appears to suffer from the same pedagogical underdevelopment of all content that is seen as being outside the internalized act of designing. As long as design is imagined as an intra-subjective process, it will necessarily diminish aspects of inter-subjectivity—like ethics—which remain beyond its sphere of action.

This disjunction between design and ethics is an odd paradox when considered within the unique method of design education—the studio. The pedagogy of studio instruction is based upon the value of shared experience and its inherently socialized forms of interaction should be natural ground from which ethical issues could be engaged. That this effectively doesn't seem to be the case should give us pause. Why is the studio not an exemplar of ethics in education? What characteristics of environmental design thinking seem to limit the development of an ethics of practice? Are there other aspects of human learning that help us examine this problem?

Through established modern theories of design thinking, we will see that the internalization of design through studio education is fundamentally a construct of ego-centrism. This fact subsequently inhibits an intersubjective and discursive professional ethic. Alternatively, a pedagogy set within a construct of practical discourse could ground an ethical construction of practice which more accurately reflects the realities of intersubjectivity found in human learning, the best possibilities of studio education, and in the discursive processes fundamental to environmental design in society.

THE EGO-CENTRISM OF DESIGN THINKING AND DESIGN EDUCATION

To begin, we must accept a characteristic fact of architectural education; students are seen as the locus of design because it fits within the normative theories of design thinking.

In his seminal 1983 work *The Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schön theorizes the practical application of design thinking by centering the act in the person of the designer. From this internalized perspective, he maps the various aspects of the problem field through a process he famously called "reflection-in-action." Schön's thesis accepts the designer—and his/her "differences of language, priorities, images, style, and precedents"—as the ground upon which the entire design process rests (1983:103). Peter Rowe furthers this idea as a "concept of style"; that "[a] fluency in a particular way of designing, and the consistency that comes with it, can only be reached through experience and constant development" of a particular designer's internal process of problem solving (1987:109-110). Like the others, Bryan Lawson finds the person of the designer to be the locus of resolution to the myriad complexities inherent to design; "[w]e each of us have to acquire our own process, for it is we, not others, who must design with it" (1990:3).

We can more specifically qualify this internalization of design thinking as "ego-centric," in that it is centered within the self, the designer. Though it will be problematized further in the subsequent argument, the term is not meant to imply a pejorative self-centeredness. Here ego-centric should be defined as *a non-discursive, internalized epistemology of thinking and knowing.*

How does this understanding of design thinking affect design education? Based in the established modern theory we've seen, the fact that students are taught to internalize the design process does not, on its face, seem illogical; it is a simple correspondence between how professional practice is conceptualized and then established in professional education. Whether the process is described as autonomous self-expression, individual creativity, or artistry, the ego-centric structure of the system as a whole is quite clear. Major contemporary studies of architectural practice and education confirm this effect as a legacy of the studio- and art-based teaching methodologies of the Ecole des Beaux Arts from which modern American architectural education arises (Gutman, 1988; Anthony, 1991; Cuff, 1991; Boyer and Mitgang, 1996). From this history, the pervasiveness of ego-centrism is woven into the contemporary instructional culture of the design studio to the point of mythology. The recent report of the American Institute of Architecture Students Studio Culture Task Force catalogued many of these myths in its criticism of them: "The creation of architecture should be a solo, artistic struggle. . . . Success in architecture school is only attained by investing all of your energy in studio. . . . Collaboration with other students means giving up the best ideas. . . . It is possible to learn about complex social and cultural issues while spending the majority of time sitting at a studio desk" (AIAS, 2002:6).

The resiliency of these ego-centric design constructs is clear when considered within the trajectory of artistic originality and authorship birthed by twentieth-century modernism. Like the rest of the society in which they inhabit, design students are steeped in the notion that the built environment around them is produced by acts of individual creative thinking, and in turn are instructed in theories and methodologies that perpetuate this ideology. So we might propose that in professional design education, the conceptual congruence between the application of ego-centric design thinking in practice and the abstraction of it in the academy appear today largely—if not fully—realized.

DESIGN THINKING AND THE ETHICAL CONSTRUCTION OF DESIGN PRACTICE

As a "non-discursive, internalized epistemology of thinking and knowing," ego-centric thinking suffers an immediate limitation in the ethical construction of design practice; its logic is intra-subjective, not inter-subjective. While there are positions from which an ethic could be derived which do not draw from an understanding of intersubjectivity, we will assume here that design "practice" implies this necessity by its definition. Wholly considered, practice is intrinsically bound to inter-subjective engagement, to the performance of actual persons, their active dialogue, and the "cognitivism which, instead of stressing (factual or intuited) data, relies on insights garnered through participation in communicative or discursive exchanges" (Dallmayr, 1990:2).

While it is clear that this last quote sums up the essential nature of the socialization of practice, Dallmayr in fact uses it to define the general terms of *communicative ethics.* As he describes the process, it is here—in social interaction and its practical discourse—that we might find a particularly valuable position to ascribe ethics within the realm of environmental design practice. That is to say, the intersubjectivity of practice both defines its methodology as a human activity as well as acts as its native ground for questions of human ethics.

The idea of—"communicative" or "discourse" ethics has developed from a contemporary critique of historic and modern universalist/contractarian views of moral interaction, especially the seminal positions developed by Immanuel Kant. His idea of the universalizability of moral conduct was founded in a resolute belief in the transcendence of rationality, a position perhaps best represented by the deductive thought experiments he posited would produce an ethic applicable to all persons. From the perspective of communicative ethics, a non-discursive formulation of ethics—like that proposed by Kant—is inherently unjustifiable since:

> . . . [o]nly those norms and normative institutional arrangements are valid, it is claimed, which individuals can or would freely consent to as a result of engaging in

certain argumentative practices. [Karl-Otto] Apel maintains that such argumentative practices can be described as "an ideal community of communication," while [Jürgen] Habermas calls them "practical discourses." Both agree, however, that such practices are the only plausible procedure in the light of which we can think of the Kantian principle of "universalizability" in ethics today. Instead of asking what an individual moral agent could or would will, without self contradiction, to be a universal maxim for all, one asks: what norms or institutions would the members of an ideal or real communication community agree to as representing their common interests after engaging in a special kind of argumentation or conversation? The procedural model of an argumentative praxis replaces the silent thought-experiment enjoined by the Kantian universalizability test" (Benhabib, 1990:330).

Here communicative ethics is defined by a

"special kind of argumentation"—namely, "practical discourses." If this idea appears congruent with the socialized nature of design practice, can we theorize the effect that the ego-centric formulation of design thinking and education has had on professional ethics?

First, we would presume that an ego-centric construction of ethics must define itself through either 1) subjective egoism—making self both the progenitor and arbiter of the ethical system, or by 2) substitutionalist universalism—appealing to a larger transcendent structure which is applicable more widely but is realized by personal experience. Both of these might be characterized as—"psycho-genetic," or "self-constructed" models.

In the first case—subjective egoism—the problem of ego-centric ethical construction is that self is realized as an interiority, beyond the realm of intersubjectivity and its needs and effects. It may ignore otherness through a process of relativistic dissonance, whereby actions taken within inter-personal experience are either mandates by an exterior moral authority or become specific issues judged by their relative effects on self. This kind of thinking is frequently identified with those whose

moral concepts are immature, as in the case of young children (Piaget, 1965:110). Egoism may also abstract ethics as a completely exterior system to one's self, but one that necessitates self-interpretation. Theorizing ethical conduct as arising from "law" or "justice" operationalizes the process in such a way that egoism can expound positions that have little foundation in moral behavior but work instead to advance the cause of self under the guise of the "right." In this case, ego acts parasitically on the authority of the right as a structure or justification, as in the worst excesses of religious and political fundamentalism.

In the second case—substitutionalist universalism—a construction of universalistic ethics by means of an *a priori*, larger good depends upon a projection of human experience which is paradigmatic, or in its greatest potential, utopian. This is a common characteristic of the universalistic moral theories in the Western tradition. Feminist critiques of this kind of moral theory have found that they are more often built from realities shared by a specific group and then abstracted as paradigmatic of humans as a whole. This manner of projecting from one set of human experiences toward the universal is best described as *substitutionalist* universalism. Such projection is a common assumption of the professions and their innate construct of duty, and has a very long trajectory in Western philosophical thought, perhaps finding its apogee in Kant's "categorical imperative." That the development of modern professionalism paralleled the major philosophical investigations following Kant assured that universalistic, contractarian theories of ethics would become essential ground for the definition of the professions. Contemporary critiques of these theories also explain why ethics has become so problematic for them.

Both "pyscho-genetic" ethical models—subjective egoism and substitutionalist universalism—fail to achieve an incorporation of the socialized nature of professional design practice since their validity claims are established outside of inter-subjective communication. Even the substitutionalist position—which could make the argument of being realized from a larger set of human experiences—still manages to deny intersubjectivity because it proposes that universalizability act as an ethical means; the—"individual being with specific needs, talents and capacities" is denied in the effort to rationalize a formal human equality. Benhabib fa-

mously criticized this process as errantly constructing a "generalized other" in contradistinction to the""concrete other" of discursive ethics (Benhabib, 1987:86-87). Inasmuch as this communicative ethic sustains the concrete existence of each human being as part of a larger inter-subjective dialogue, it fundamentally corresponds with the complexities of social interaction that define professional practice. But however we understand the socialized nature of practice, it appears that design thinking and its ego-centric construct—as it is normatively understood—retains an essential definition outside of the possibility of an inter-subjective ethics.

However, there is another perspective from which to interrogate ego-centrism in design thinking. While the lack of discursivity in design thinking may at first seem a consequence of a larger philosophical worldview, ego-centrism has been theorized to play a prominent role in the act of human learning. So there may be additional forces at work. Perhaps what is less known is how this system of ego-centric design thinking is complemented by the developmental processes of human learning itself.

EGO-CENTRISM AND LEARNING

In Jean Piaget's seminal research into the function of language in child development, he characterized human thought processes through their intrinsic qualities of communicability. His theories are vitally important to the present discussion because he was among the first twentieth-century thinkers to offer that communication—discourse—was a fundamental tool toward understanding human behavior and development. This "constructivist" position assumed that the active agency of socialization through the semiotics of human language and symbolist systems was the formative force in learning. He proposed the following matrix to explain his conceptual invention of ego-centric thought (Piaget 1932/1955:64):

disappeared in school-aged children. He saw ego-centric thought as""more intuitive, more"'syncretistic' than deductive, i.e. its reasoning is not made explicit. The mind leaps from premise to conclusion in a single bound, without stopping on the way" (Piaget 1932/1955:66). Though there are substantive differences between the previously explored theories of design thinking and Piaget's ego-centric thinking of the child, the qualities of intuition, spontaneity, inference, and dependence upon previous experience are all shared. In this comparison we get the first suggestion that there are aspects of design thinking that are more generalizable to human intellectual development as a whole.

Piaget's notion of ego-centric thinking would hold little importance for our investigation of the architecture student except for its critique by L.S. Vygotsky. Instead of seeing the ego-centric speech of the child displaced by more mature forms of mental abstraction, Vygotsky's interpretation proposed that ego-centric speech was a transitional phase toward the "inner speech" of the adult. This was type of internal, reflective thinking that distinguished itself from the phenomenon of inter-subjective communicative speech, but was "equally social" (Vygotsky, 1934/1987:74). In his empirical studies Vygotsky first noticed that ego-centric speech "nearly doubled when some difficulty or impediment was included in the task. . . . Our children showed an increase in average levels of ego-centric speech in any situation where some difficulty was encountered . . . The child conducted this entire discourse with himself" (Vygotsky, 1934/1987:70). In older children, Vygotsky saw the same self-dialogue except that it happened internally. "They looked over the situation, thought (as evidenced by long pauses), and then found the solution. When asked what they had thought about, these older children gave answers that indicated a similarity between their covert behavior and the

	Non-communicable thought	Communicable thought
Undirected thought	*Autistic thought*	*(Mythological thought)*
Directed thought	*Ego-centric thought*	*Communicated intelligence*

Piaget hypothesized "ego-centric" thinking as a stage to the more mature, adult form of discursive logic he called "communicated intelligence," and considered it a passing developmental phase that

overt verbal thinking of the preschooler" (Vygotsky, 1934/1987:70). Again, these observations have significant parallels within the functions of design thinking.

To Vygotsky, the similarity between younger and older children appeared to suggest that the relationship between ego-centric thinking and the more mature inner reflective thinking of adults was not phasic as much as topographic; ego-centric thinking became relocated instead of abandoned. Vygotsky saw that ego-centric thinking moved itself to internal, reflective thinking as a function of the increasing complexity of external socialization, and he argued that this position upended Piaget's assertions:

> In contrast to Piaget, we hypothesize that development does not proceed toward socialization, but toward the conversion of social relations into mental functions. . . . In particular, it was formerly thought that each child was able to reflect on, give reasons for, construct proofs for, and search for the foundations of any position. An argument was spawned out of the clash of such reflections. But, in fact, matters stand otherwise. Research shows that reflection is spawned from argument. The study of all the other mental functions leads us to the same conclusion (Vygotsky, 1981: 165).

Within the empirical evidence of child learning he observed, Vygotsky's conclusion was clear: along the path toward higher mental functioning, he sees that inner speech (reflection) is ego-centric speech moved by external processes of social discourse (argument). Vygotsky found that human thinking and learning could be understood only as a result of the mediation of socialized human dialogue, a model which we would properly call "socio-genetic," or "socially constructed."

AN INTERIM PROPOSITION

Here we arrive at a significant point in our discussion of design thinking and an ethical construction of design practice. First, we have seen that modern theories of design thinking propose the design process as an ego-centric model. Second, we have seen that "psycho-genetic" construct of ego-centrism fails to account for the ethical necessities of inter-subjective discourse in professional practice. In the attempt to understand ego-centrism in design thinking beyond its possibilities as a worldview, we have found it to be a function of

human learning and foundational to human intellectual development. Lastly, we see that Vygotsky's reading of ego-centric thinking posits its mature internalization as a process founded in socialized discourse; that "reflection is spawned from argument."

Accepting these observations, it follows that 1) *the ego-centrism of design thinking has an important foundation in the nature of human learning itself*, and that 2) *such thinking matures to be reflective, inner thinking through the ongoing mediation of external discourse.* With these two points, we have a position from which to make a third proposition: *3) advancing the learning needs of reflective thinking through inter-subjective discourse acts as reciprocal ground for the ethical construction of design practice.* To the extent to which the previous arguments are valid, we have a startling possibility; we can connect the *learning* of design thinking to the *ethics* of design practice. As we have seen previously, the ground for this possibility lay in *practical discourse.*

LEARNING, ETHICS, AND PRACTICAL DISCOURSE IN DESIGN THINKING

Vygotsky's research concluded that learning was a function of socialized discourse. The data was compelling enough for him to propose this idea as a general law of human development: that "learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (Vygotsky, 1978: 90).[1] Environmental design education fully engages this concept in that it relies on the shared experiences of active learning in the studio.

The active learning of the architecture student is founded in a pedagogy of problem solving and reflection. The studio's essential nature is its discursive intersubjectivity. Among his major contributions in the development of communicative ethics, Jürgen Habermas puts forward the idea that the dialogue inherent to intersubjectivity is not just a vehicle for ethical discussion, it is the process of discursive agreement itself which *constructs and justifies* moral norms:

> The social world is inextricably interwoven with the intentions and beliefs, the practices and languages of its members. This

holds in a similar way for *descriptions* of the objective world but not for this world itself. Hence the discursive redemption of truth claims has a different meaning from that of moral validity claims: in the former case, discursive agreement *signifies* that the truth conditions of an assertoric proposition . . . are fulfilled; in the latter case, discursive agreement *justifies* the claim that a norm is worthy of recognition and thereby itself contributes to the fulfillment of its conditions of validity. Whereas rational acceptability merely *points to* the truth of assertoric propositions, it makes a *constructive* contribution to the validity of moral norms (Habermas, 1998:38, author's emphasis).

This construction of moral norms through argumentation is what Habermas more particularly calls "practical discourse" (Habermas, 1984:19). While practical discourse exists as a method toward the agreement by which ethical claims are made valid, Habermas notes that its operative function is *argument*; the process that "contains reasons or grounds that are connected in a systematic way with the *validity claim* of a problematic expression" (Habermas, 1984:18, author's emphasis). In this way, argument is the inter-subjective construct of discourse by which moral norms are realized. Habermas finds that this cognitive fact of argumentation corresponds directly to *learning*:

The concept of *grounding* is interwoven with that of *learning*. Argumentation plays an important role in learning processes as well. Thus we call a person rational who, in the cognitive-instrumental sphere, expresses reasonable opinions and acts efficiently; but this rationality remains accidental if it is not coupled with the ability to learn from mistakes, from the refutation of hypotheses and from the failure of interventions (Habermas, 1984:18, author's emphasis).

As we have seen previously, this qualitative description of learning reflects Vygotsky's conclusions that learning is "reflection is spawned from argument" (Vygotsky, 1981: 165). We might recognize that Habermas' definition of ethical argumentation is wholly within the sphere of learning described by Vygotsky. Said more generally, the conceptual resolution between the ideas of Habermas and Vygotsky is that human learning and communica-

tive ethics are founded in congruent processes of socialized discourse, and thus processurally evident in its larger manifestations of ' "society" and ' "culture." It is for this reason that Jerome Bruner could say in his Prologue to *Thinking and Speech* that, "[i]n fact, [Vygotsky's] educational theory is a theory of cultural transmission as well as a theory of development" (Bruner, 1987:1).

Further, as Vygotsky proposed that inner speech (reflection) is ego-centric speech moved by external processes of social discourse (argument), we might see that there is a special relationship between the formation of design thinking—"reflection-in-action"—and the possibilities of an ethical construction of design practice. Accepting communicative ethics as the theory best suited to the socialized nature of practice, the obligation of reflection inherent to practical discourse becomes a reciprocal foundation for both design thinking and the construction of professional moral norms. What is especially potent about this concept is that it is a functioning set of activities that could be successfully located in environmental design education. To the extent to which Vygotsky's theories are correct, this cycle of discourse to reflection to ethics is one entirely within the normative process of human learning. As the pedagogy of studio education is conceptually grounded in the discursive atmosphere of problem-based learning, a shared work environment, and the very real and public potentials of projects conceived of as "in the world," the development of professional design ethics has every reason to be successfully set within the efforts of professional education.

A CRITIQUE OFFERED BY A CONCLUSION

What emerges from this argument is a sort of "unified field theory" of design thinking and the ethical construction of environmental design practice, and the discovery that its development can be enabled through innate human processes of learning. In turn, this potential reestablishes the design studio as a substantive site for the formation of professional ethics.

In fact, it is exactly the unrealized potential of the studio and its problem-based methodology which should offer hope. First, we've seen that learning and the development of ethical norms can be integrated through human inter-subjectivity. Second, we recognize that the essential nature of studio

learning is its foundation of shared experience. As in every discursive theory examined here, these constructs of socialization are the very foundation of discourse and hold the most significant path to the ethical construction of environmental design practice. Ultimately, this argument recognizes the *reciprocal ground* established by practical discourse, and how learning, design thinking, and professional ethics can all be realized through studio education.

The problem of practical discourse in studio—its establishment, its quality and its efficacy—is not a question of—*whether* as much as it is a question of *how*. The challenge for the design disciplines lies in a renewed understanding of the ethical importance of discourse and an evolution of studio pedagogy back toward its true methodological strengths. This means a reorientation of design thinking from the negative ego-centric aspects of self aggrandizement to the positive ones of self reflection. This means a reestablishment of design education within a learning environment of collaborative action, public engagement, and social justice. This means a better understanding of how issues of professional ethics must be accessed; not through passive means like interpreting canonical texts or reading case studies, but through the active means of practical discourse within human societal conditions. Considered as a whole, these all work to establish communicative ethics as the center of environmental design education; by reiterating the power of the studio, the potential of its project-based pedagogy, and the fact of human learning itself.

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NOTES

[1] The more common definition of this idea is what Vygotsky called the "zone of proximal development." Vygotsky (1978), p. 90.