



NIKOS A. SALINGAROS

ANTI-ARCHITECTURE
AND DECONSTRUCTION:
THE TRIUMPH OF NIHILISM

FOURTH EDITION

WITH

CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER,
JAMES STEVENS CURL, BRIAN HANSON, JAMES KALB,
MICHAEL MEHAFFY, TERRY M. MIKITEN, RAY SAWHILL,
HILLEL SCHOCKEN, AND LUCIEN STEIL



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“More irritating than someone’s actual stupidity is their mouthing a scientific vocabulary... One of the worst intellectual catastrophes is found in the appropriation of scientific concepts and vocabulary by mediocre intelligences.”

— Nicolas Gomez-Davila, 1992

“In architectural and art schools, soulless dogma is still being taught; against reason, beauty, nature and man. Man is misused as a guinea pig for perverse, dogmatic, educational, architectural experiments... Young architects who still have dreams of a more beautiful and better world in their heads, these get their dreams taken away from them by force or else they don’t receive their architectural diploma. Thus, only architects who have been brought into line become certified and so have the right to build.”

— Friedrich Hundertwasser, 1993

“There grew around the modernists a class of critics and impresarios, who offered initiation into the modernist cult. This impresario class began to promote the incomprehensible and the outrageous as a matter of course, lest the public should regard its services as redundant. It owes much to state patronage, which is now the principal source of funding for high culture; it shares in the serene unanswerability of all bureaucracies with power to reward the “experts” appointed to oversee them... The new impresario surrounds himself with others of his kind, promoting them to all committees which are relevant to his status and expecting to be promoted in his turn.”

— Roger Scruton, 2000

“The humanities have, in adopting jargon, tried to ape the sciences without grasping the actual nature of scientific thinking. In other respects, they have consciously and dogmatically rejected the scientific model altogether.”

– Dennis Dutton, 2003

“One thing becomes ever clearer, however, and that is that schools of architecture, as presently constituted, should be closed down, and architectural education replaced by practical training, as was once the case. Certainly it is arguable that the resulting architecture was greatly superior to that produced after “architectural education” became a supposedly “academic” subject, with spurious degrees given to mark each hurdle jumped.”

— James Stevens Curl, 2004

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CONTENT

WITH ANNOTATIONS BY RAY SAWHILL

AUTHOR'S PREFACE P. 11

FOREWORD BY JAMES STEVENS CURL P. 17

“SOME THOUGHTS ON CULPABILITY” BY JAMES KALB P. 19

INTRODUCTION BY RAY SAWHILL P. 23

PART 1 THE CHESSBOARD MODEL OF ARCHITECTURAL STYLES P.29

One objection that inevitably arises to the Alexander-Salingaros approach is that it limits the artist's creativity. And aren't freedom and creativity always good, as well as signs of life? Shouldn't we always be looking to expand our sense of what's possible? Salingaros addresses these anxieties in a subtle but wide-ranging way. Why not conceive of architectural styles as a chessboard? A chessboard represents a very special kind of complexity: a variety of elements and rules that promote life. Beyond the chessboard is blankness, death — an infinity of combinations, via none of which life can come to fruition. In the name of creativity, Modernism and its descendents have steered us away from the chessboard and hurtled us out into cold wastelands where non-life is inevitably the result. Let's return then to what works. Constraints aren't deterministic; rules and patterns can enable creativity. Besides, the number of possible chess games — of life-giving moves and solutions — is infinite. Who should feel limited by this? And if we're to choose infinities, why shouldn't we opt for the one that confers life instead of death?

PART 2 THE DANGER OF DECONSTRUCTIVISM P. 39

What is the relationship between intellect and emotion in art and architecture? Here Salingaros establishes the primacy of emotional experience in architecture. In his discussion, he also demonstrates something fundamental: that the exploration of

PART 6 WARPED SPACE

P. 77

In this deceptively casual review of a book about Deconstructivism’s treatment of space, Salingaros employs one of his most enjoyable strategies, which is to simply take them directly at their word, even to draw them out. We’re left wondering: “What is this all about?” and “Who are those people talking to?” (Unstated but perfectly obvious answer: they’re talking to each other, of course.)

PART 7 TWENTIETH-CENTURY ARCHITECTURE AS A CULT

P. 81

We have encountered Decon; we have opened our thinking to it. The time has come to tackle, as straightforwardly as possible, the question of what Deconstructivism as an architectural movement is, and what it represents. Some may find Salingaros’ thesis shocking or facile; having had my own encounters with the Decon set I find it entirely convincing. A question stays with us after we’ve finished this essay: the leaders and stars of this movement — What are they getting out of it? And how is it serving them?

POSTSCRIPT: THE AUTHORITY OF THE GOSPELS

P. 86

**PART 8 AGGRESSION IN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION:
 THE ‘COUP’ IN VISEU**

P. 91

It’s hard to believe but true: only a handful of architecture schools teach traditional architecture and urbanism — which means, in other words, that there are only a very few schools in the entire world that teach students how to create the built environments that most people find pleasing and rewarding. What a strange state of affairs, no? All the other schools are modernist enclaves, devoted to whatever’s chic and hot: deconstruction, blobitecture... Once again, I find myself shaking my head over the bizarre and noxious schemes our elites are determined to put over on the rest of us. So it was heartbreaking to learn that one of the rare traditional architecture outposts was recently toppled.

PART 9 ANTI-ARCHITECTURE AND RELIGION

P. 97

Part of the strength and daring of the people in the alternative tradition I describe in my Introduction to this book lies in their willingness not just to raise some of the questions that art has dodged for over a hundred years now, but also to tackle these questions very directly. Perhaps the deepest of these questions is the relationship between art and religion. I can’t begin to summarize Nikos’ thinking here. But let me say that

passages in this essay convey as much gravity and substance as any art criticism that I'm aware of. He writes at one point, "This indicates the transference of values from traditional symbols and rules (which could express religion) to an abstract ideal (which therefore competes with religion)" — that's saying an amazing lot.

PART 10 CONTEMPORARY CHURCH ARCHITECTURE AND SAINT AUGUSTINE'S 'THE CITY OF GOD' P. 103

Why do collaborations between the Church and up-to-date architects seem to express the global marketplace more than the sacred? Fearing irrelevancy, Church fathers choose to project an image of contemporaneity. Yet the new churches they commission are the antithesis of what satisfying religious buildings need to be. Worshippers too often don't feel exalted or deepened; instead they're left feeling bereft and alone. Faith in God is thwarted, and spiritual yearnings are displaced onto blank forms and modern materials — onto the activity of abstract (if striking) image making — instead. By setting modernist procedures head to head with the fundamentals of being human Salingaros here brings the role of belief to the fore.

PART 11 THE DERRIDA VIRUS P. 109

It has to be admitted that Decon has a unique kind of power: the ability to consume and destroy perfectly good brains. It goes that even one better, because it also fills that brain with feverish excitement, a kind of exhilaration at the spectacle of its own self-destruction. Here, Salingaros gives us an almost admiring appreciation of the distinctive power of Decon.

**PART 12 BACKGROUND MATERIAL FOR "THE DERRIDA VIRUS" P. 127
(INCLUDES SECTIONS CO-AUTHORED WITH TERRY M. MIKITEN)**

Now that the elements of Salingaros' perceptions and arguments have been established, the view broadens. Stepping back, we take in the overall structure. Here we begin to see how the deconstruction of Deconstructivism can become an act of creation.

PART 13 THE NEW ARA PACIS MUSEUM P. 137

Salingaros zeroes in on a recent real-life example — perfect in its scale and ironies — to crystallize his arguments: the Ara Pacis Museum in Rome, designed by the American uber-modernist and geometricist Richard Meier to house the remains

of a 13 BCE altar memorializing the stability of the Roman Empire. (The Museum, which opened in April 2006, is the first work of modernist architecture to be built in the Historic Center of Rome since the 1930s, and it has been and continues to be controversial). The contrast between life and death is complete. The angles, planes, voids, surfaces, and blinding light of Meier's work convey nothing more than the sterile chic of an expensive dentist's waiting room. Meanwhile, the exquisite small classical building it shelters and dwarfs is as vital as ever, and still radiates an intense life. Sadly, Meier's new Museum represents something all too emblematic of our time: an intrusion into the living soul of a great city by a jet-setting global elite peddling nothing more than their own conviction that they know best. When will the rest of us wake up to what is being done to us?

PART 14 THE NEW ACROPOLIS MUSEUM P. 143

What a test case: Decon in the person of Bernard Tschumi is invited to make his mark on the foundations of Western civilization — Athens, Greece. The generative past meets a destructive present.

POSTSCRIPT: ARCHITECTURAL CANNIBALISM IN ATHENS P. 147

PART 15 ARCHITECTURAL THEORY & THE WORK OF BERNARD TSCHUMI P. 155

What is meant by Theory anyway? While addressing this question in a sober, substantial way — one based in history and science — Salingaros displays his sly side as well. Numerous unasked (but perfectly apparent) questions float up as we read this essay; numerous unstated (but perfectly apparent) answers arise too. What are these people really up to? If they aren't trying to accomplish something worthwhile, what are they doing? Their version of architectural theory couldn't be; well, a cosmetic smokescreen for an anti-civilizational enterprise, could it? Are we to sacrifice our own well-being so their stars might burn brighter?

PART 16 CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER & THE NEW ARCHITECTURE P. 179
(INCLUDES AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER)

In arriving at the end, having made our way through thorny thickets, having dug them up by the roots, we arrive at the field's true starting gate. With this review of Christopher Alexander's magnum opus "The Nature of Order", and with a discussion with Alexander himself, we're given a substantial taste of the positive thing

that architecture (as well as architectural theory) can be. Our wrestle with Decon leads us back to the thought that Decon is devoted to obscuring: that building and urbanism can be activities that contribute to human wellbeing.

1. REVIEW OF CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER'S 'THE NATURE OF ORDER'	P. 179
2. INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER	P. 181
PART 17 RAY SAWHILL INTERVIEWS NIKOS SALINGAROS	P. 185
ENDNOTE TO THE FIRST EDITION BY LUCIEN STEIL	P. 211
ENDNOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION BY MICHAEL MEHAFFY	P. 212
ENDNOTE TO THE THIRD EDITION BY JAMES KALB: "WHY DO WE HAVE HORRIBLE INHUMAN ARCHITECTURE?"	P. 215
ENDNOTE TO THE FOURTH EDITION	P. 219
APPENDIX BY NIKOS SALINGAROS AND JAMES KALB: "WHY CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE IS AGAINST GOD AND MAN"	P. 226
REFERENCES	P. 231
INDEX	P. 236
EXTRACTS FROM REVIEWS	P. 241

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

*“By an odd quirk of social circumstance, in the 20th century there were violent taboos in the architectural community, social pressures created by architectural in-groups, which made it seem, in the late 20th century, justifiable to build almost anything EXCEPT the buildings in [the class of living structures]. You were justified as a professional architect as long as you demonstrated your membership in the club of proper modern architects (a quaint term used in the 20th century), by avoiding [the class of living structures] at all costs, and by, instead, selecting or creating something unexpected from the class [of dead structures]. Of course, no architect would ever have admitted this. Instead, the questionable dogmas of 20th-century architecture were supported and propagated by incomprehensible verbal mumbo-jumbo that passed as ‘art criticism’.” — Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order, Volume 3: A Vision of a Living World*, Center for Environmental Structure, Berkeley, California, 2005, p. 690.*

This book began modestly as a collection of essays severely critical of the most fashionable and esteemed contemporary architects, published in English by a small architectural press in Germany. The book was unknown to general readers, since the major American and British bookstores (including the online ones) initially did not sell it. One prominent architectural bookstore in the US did carry it, but astonishingly, condemned it on its website! It seemed to have struck a nerve. When my publisher complained that this did not make good sense for promoting sales, the bookstore in question promptly dropped the book. Despite such obstacles, the book has been translated into Chinese, French, Italian, and Persian, and is now into its fourth edition.

Consistent with its original purpose, the book seems to have been quietly embraced by a number of influential people. I am gratified to have heard from architects, architectural historians, philosophers, scientists, and journalists who have adopted some of my ideas. A few of them have thanked me for providing what they consider a useful framework for discussing architectural and social topics. Others, whom I don't know personally, picked up key concepts from this book (or from the individual articles as they originally appeared before being collected into the book). All in all, many people have found here a convenient rubric for analysis.

At least the vocabulary I introduced has caught on. On the Internet, in books, in newspapers, and in journals, the most offensive contemporary “star” architects are increasingly described as “anti-architects”, the paradoxical proliferation of inhuman buildings is explained in terms of viral methods of infection, and monstrous new forms are analyzed with reference to their willful non-adaptivity. People started

noticing that some built forms and spaces create anxiety and symptoms of physiological distress in the user, but this connection is denied by the architect (and by architectural critics who promote that architect). I expect that the first litigations over architecture-induced sickness will settle the matter quite soon, and this book may even be used in evidence.

The architectural debate is starting to take place outside architecture altogether, in an open forum where these fundamental questions can be freely discussed. In the twentieth century, architecture assumed a wholly unjustified role of authority (characterized by some as a substitute religion, complete with proselytizing and grandiose self-delusions), yet this key aspect is hardly discussed within architecture itself. Many people projected and continue to project their aspirations onto architecture, which thus acquired lofty ideals. Those excited by new and strange shapes seek a thrill in man-made forms. Nevertheless, this sort of visceral pleasure gets mixed up with defunct religious yearnings, and subsequently assumes aspects of a religious cult open only to the initiated. At the same time, its adherents celebrate a geometry that denies the generative experience of life in the world.

Ordinary citizens have suddenly discovered that their own intuitive feelings about architectural form are not aberrations, but have a basis in scientifically-comprehensible conditions. What looks and feels ugly, monstrous, and evil is in fact bad architecture from a user's point of view. Confused and disoriented by the peculiar discourse of our prominent architectural critics, illustrious schools, and the international media, they finally found a group of people (i.e., my circle of friends and co-authors) who validate their own deeply-felt frustrations. Theirs are normal responses to the perceived decline of the built environment, and the irresponsibility of our architectural leadership. I am incredibly gratified to have been able to help people stand on their convictions against the onslaught of media propaganda and specialist conditioning, supported and promoted by powerful institutions.

As far as the practice and teaching of architecture are concerned, the situation is more complicated. Everyday architects go on as usual, oblivious to the polarization of their discipline. Most of them continue to believe the delusional assumption that ordinary citizens "just don't get" architecture. The profession is not self-governing, and as a result, the public is not protected from professionals who abuse or damage nature's delicate geometry. Accusations about the inability or unwillingness of the architectural profession to adapt to human sensibilities and the ecosphere are answered by superficial gloss and a lot of hype. The debate on contemporary architecture's failure to adapt to biological forms and processes has only just begun, and will soon get more intense.

Architectural education remains isolated from the rest of the world, its very future in question (although those in control either don't know it, or don't wish

to consider the possibility). I lecture at various architecture schools around the world, where I am confronted by the fundamental disconnect between living forms, on the one hand, and what is promoted as the nihilist standard of avant-garde art by professors, required course books, magazines, and the global media on the other. Students don't see the extent of the deception going on in architectural academia; otherwise they might get locked into a destructive struggle with their teachers, and thus never get to finish their degree. It's better that they discover this when they can stand on their own two feet (either upon entering graduate architecture school, or after they begin to practice).

I have found more sympathetic recognition from colleagues within Classical and Traditional Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Sustainable and Biophilic Architecture — all respected communities that are currently somewhat peripheral to the world of iconic architecture. Those disciplines are gaining in influence, however, and may eventually supply our future architects. As the agenda of sustainability and human wellbeing becomes paramount, iconic architects are beginning to find themselves isolated, and on the defensive. Quite aside from analyses like this one, it becomes more and more difficult for iconic architects to pretend to embrace sustainable urban concepts, without anyone noticing an incompatibility with their fundamentally destructive approach to the built environment.

As a welcome and positive development, a small number of architectural educators increasingly embrace my writings as offering opportunities for innovation. Those individuals are not aligned with any particular ideology or power structure. They genuinely want their students to become better architects — and make this their priority over and above political games. It is a challenge for me to help them try and work out future directions for architectural education from within the system. Even if only a handful of academics and practicing architects (and they are so far in the minority) are willing to make a change for the better, that can surely be accomplished, although it goes against established tradition. My writings help stir up a healthy debate in schools of architecture, a process encouraged in some places. Although most architecture schools advertise an open approach to the topic, they will not go so far as to include my views!

I have actually been careful not to foment any more controversy than is strictly necessary. For instance, I recently had to sit through a lecture by the Dean of one of the world's premier architecture schools, in which he presented the three greatest architectural thinkers of all time as Vitruvius, Palladio, and Libeskind. I kept quiet, not wishing to upset the conference's organizers who had also invited me. At the same conference, I befriended the Dean of another prominent architecture school, who had given a reasonably good talk on urbanism. I later sent him this book as a gift. He sent it right back! Now that's odd — Deans receive all sorts of books they don't particularly want, and they donate them to the school library.

Clearly, he didn't want this book available in his school's library. He could have tossed it in the trash instead of paying return postage, but he must have found it remarkably provocative — so much so that he felt it necessary to distance himself from it in no uncertain terms.

The deepening crisis in which iconic architecture finds itself is of its own making — aided and abetted by a commodity culture that is only too happy to package up nihilistic kitsch. The present period of nihilistic expression continues for the time being, creating an alternative reality of seductive, translucent images offered for public consumption. Its corrupt support by vested interests might yet be superseded by a wonderful flowering of emotionally-nourishing, enduring buildings. It is with this goal in mind — a naïve wish that people will eventually rediscover simple, living architecture — that I hope this book will continue to provide inspiration to readers.

Two new parts are included in the third edition: a second essay on the New Acropolis Museum; and a description of the takeover of the Architecture School in Viseu, Portugal, written just after that architectural coup d'état took place. My original comments against the museum in Athens were published in several languages, and became known all around the world — except in Greece. That was not for lack of me trying, however. The outcome I predicted for the New Acropolis Museum turned out to be far worse than I could ever have anticipated. A successful propaganda campaign for starchitecture was carried out with consummate skill and efficiency. It destroyed, and is still threatening, part of Athens's historical urban fabric. The public was brainwashed using methods I had outlined in this book (but not learned from me!). Those who thought my warnings were exaggerated should look to Athens, where the methods were actually put into practice.

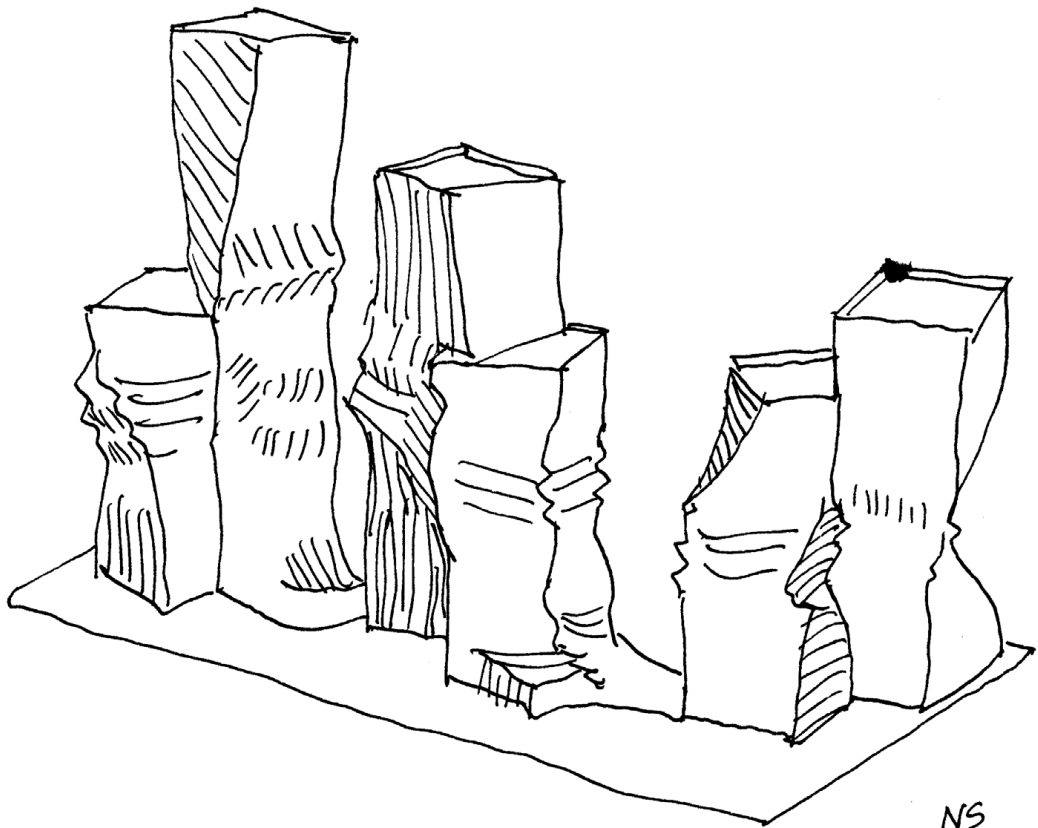
The second focus is on architectural education. We cannot hope to train humanistic architects in our existing architecture schools without a radically new type of educational program. The architectural establishment correctly perceives this as a major threat to its continued ideological domination. The ruthless takeover of one architecture school that introduced a humanistic design curriculum was a terrible setback for world architecture. Nevertheless, I believe that a lesson can be learned here. A single historic defeat can eventually become a rallying cry leading to eventual victory.

James Kalb rejoined the battle with three recent postings on his website. He was kind enough to let me use them here as a new endnote, entitled 'Why do we have Horrible Inhuman Architecture'. James raises profound questions about the religious implications of contemporary architectural styles, a discussion that Christopher Alexander is currently engaged in as well.

Co-opting the recent movement towards humanistic architecture by those who have suppressed it for the past several decades is a very worrying development. In the Postscript to Part 7 of this book, entitled ‘The Authority of the Gospels’, I mention how proponents of an inhuman architecture have now adopted a scientific vocabulary, and make up plausible-sounding but false arguments to promote their bizarre forms. This is simply an attempt to maintain their hegemony on the discipline — one more pretense in a long line of deceptive practices used to hold onto power. Students are easily fooled, however, since they are faced with new books containing attractive organic illustrations, in which deceptively sincere architectural theorists talk about exactly the same things I talk about: but twisting them to promote the worst sort of absurd anti-architecture. The arguments rely on the most superficial analogies with biological forms, betraying a fundamental lack of scientific understanding (which is unfortunately not evident to architects and students).

I must admit that this recent propaganda campaign is very cleverly done! Titles of the new books promoting a new direction in design all include the catchy words “Biological”, “Green”, “Landscape”, or “Nature”. Their authors (and publishers) have abandoned their usual sadistic architectural style of using a too small sans-serif font in a light gray ink, with blurry, grainy photographs; and have instead adopted a nice large serif font in solid black, with sharp, detailed photos of biological forms. There are also paragraph breaks for the first time in decades! Those books could be mistaken for the writings of my friends, not only for their superficial content, but also for their “look and feel”. That, I’m afraid, is the intention: to marginalize us yet one more time by stealing our own vocabulary. Remember when the old totalitarian political regimes finally fell? Those who had worked for the secret police presented themselves as resistance fighters and moved quickly to take over the new democratic governments. It’s the old trick all over again.





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FOREWORD

BY JAMES STEVENS CURL

This book should be required reading in every institution concerned with the teaching of architecture, planning, and all other aspects of the built environment. It should also be read by every person claiming to be an architect.

That, however, is a forlorn hope, as most architects seldom read at all: they only look at seductive pictures and absorb slogans. There are a very few honorable exceptions; these are those rare individuals who conserve and restore old buildings, add to them or adapt them with sensitivity and scholarship. It includes those who can still design buildings that delight and enhance life rather than threaten it, and who understand the nature of the materials used in their buildings without having to call in engineers and contortionists to enable their designs to be realized.

The rise of Deconstructivism and its adherents can partly be explained by the spread of the contagion Salingeros, in this essential and timely book, calls “The Derrida Virus”, and partly by the Imprimatur given to the style (for that is what it is) by Philip Johnson. Before the 1939-1945 War, Johnson had also encouraged the pandemic of the International Style with the exhibition he and H. R. Hitchcock organized in New York City. Now, Deconstructivism has been hailed as a “New Paradigm” by those who ought to know better, and the cult is being forced on students in those breeding grounds of the ugly and the unworkable, namely the Schools of Architecture. (In my opinion, they ought to be properly renamed “Schools for the Destruction of the Environment”, and, in any reasonable society, closed down because of the menace they pose for the future).

This excellent and thoughtful book dismantles the flimsy codification known as Deconstructivism, showing how the ill-educated have been fooled by obfuscation, which they have mistaken for profundity. It also warns of the wholly negative nature of Deconstructivism. How many more of these so-called “iconic” buildings, with their jagged forms and uncomfortable spaces, their grotesquely impractical corners, their expense, and their disregard for context, can be sustained? Already, *LAUS DEO*, there are rumblings of discontent, and certain projects are being called into question as support falls away. Despite the pseudo-intellectual apologies for this cult/style, buildings resembling crumpled boxes, or with fronts looking as though they are sliding off in shards, cannot be justified, even using obfuscatory non-language. Nor can all the glossy pages of the journals that purport to be “architectural” (but are nothing of the sort) justify them, raising questions about trades descriptions.

“The Emperor Has No Clothes” is an old adage, but, in the sad case of Deconstructivism, it is absolutely appropriate, as the style is really nothing more

than Modernism in a new guise. Modernists, notably the Bauhäusler, aimed for the clean slate — the *tabula rasa* — jettisoning everything that went before. Yet, at times, they claimed links with antecedents such as the Parthenon (Jeanneret-Gris alias Le Corbusier, and company), the English Arts-and-Crafts Movement (Pevsner *et. al.*), and Prussian Neo-Classicism (Mies van der Rohe) to give a spurious historical ancestry to their aims and creations. Now all sorts of barmy links and precedents are being claimed for the works of Deconstructivists by Deconstructivist architects and their supporters.

As this book points out, “architects and architectural critics have become expertly adept at fancy wordplay, sounding impressive while promoting the deconstructivist style’s unnatural qualities. This linguistic dance is used to justify a meaningless architecture of fashion.” Quite so, except that to some of us, blessed with a Classical education, it does not even sound impressive. We know it is simply empty jargon, meaningless pseudo-language, and ranting drivel of the worst sort. Cults invent their own liturgies and fraudulent language. Deconstructivism is a perfect example of this.

Deconstructivism is just another phase in the creation of the inhuman world dreamed of by Modernists. That world of uninhabitable cities, incessant noise, violent and pornographic “entertainment”, destruction of natural resources, an uncivilized, dangerous, selfish population, and all other attendant horrors, is rapidly becoming a nightmare of the most ghastly kind, in which even the buildings are distorted, misshapen, and menacing.

Architects are trained nowadays to destroy: they are brainwashed into killing off living organisms such as cities, and have no feeling for old buildings other than to wreck them too. They are also trained to worship, starry-eyed, the few “star” architects who have gained favor with the arbiters of taste — the journals — so that when the stars go out or fall from the firmament, they have nothing left to worship. What is to become of them? They cannot do anything expect ape the once-fashionable and that which is *passé*, so (empty-headed and unskilled as they are) they really ought to be retrained to do something useful in a completely different field. Probably a mindless job — which seems to be the most common these days, and one for which the products of most architectural schools are eminently suited — is appropriate.

This book is the beginning of a long-overdue counterattack.



PROFESSOR JAMES STEVENS CURL IS ONE OF THE WORLD’S LEADING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS, AND THE AUTHOR OF “THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF ARCHITECTURE” (1999).

“SOME THOUGHTS ON CULPABILITY”

BY JAMES KALB

The obvious method of dealing with the virus of deconstruction in architecture, as Professor Salinger describes it, is no doubt intellectual hygiene: sunshine, fresh air, and a change in theoretical and aesthetic scenery. Get rid of the cultishness, accept the possibility of rational discussion with whoever has relevant knowledge, and open the doors to what people need and what actually works. A further necessity, as the author points out, is “stop[ping] its modes of informational transmission.” Presumably, that would mostly be a matter of the normal practices of education and serious discussion. Intellectual influence depends on reputation, so recognizing the problem is the greater part of exorcizing it. Every field has standard examples of disasters to analyze and avoid, and in architecture deconstruction should be one such example.

Still, something further is needed to contain and cure the infection. Anything as complex as architecture requires mutual trust, cooperation, and a degree of subordination, so it is difficult for those working in the field, and for the general public, to deal with highly-placed authorities who promote irrationality on principle. Leading deconstructivists are skilled at manipulation, and their theories and actions are designed to disable rational criticism. When a major figure in deconstruction is able to respond to criticism with the assertion that all third-person indicative statements about his work are inadmissible something very odd is going on, and when thereafter his prestige only grows the situation is evidently one that requires clarity and vigor.

Clarity and vigor means that the issue of culpability must be addressed. As described in this book, deconstruction seems less a style or theory of architecture or anything else than an attempt to disorder fundamental aspects of human life. It is viral warfare carried on against any possible intellectual order, and thus a crime against humanity. Since deconstruction is a wrong as well as a disaster in the making, one cannot understand and respond to it adequately without considering the question of responsibility. Formal legal penalties are not at issue. While there is evidently wrongful intent, and the damage is potentially immense, the crime is too general, and involves the participation of too many respected people, to treat like an ordinary confidence game or sale of adulterated goods. As Edmund Burke suggests, it is difficult to draw up an indictment against a whole people — or even the dominant group in a profession or intellectual class. Extent, numbers and social position obscure blame and confer impunity.

Justice is never perfect. An 18th century Englishman comments:

“The law doth punish man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common,
But lets the greater felon loose,
Who steals the common from the goose.”

Human culture — which includes the implicit connections and implications that make coherent thought and action possible — is the greatest of all commons. It is the field in which all life, thought, and social cooperation play themselves out. An attempt to disrupt and destroy something so basic to what we are should be viewed as a crime. Nonetheless, a crime perpetrated by designing and propagating toxic memes to be embodied (*inter alia*) in the built environment and thus forced on the whole society seems too abstract to define and prosecute. Perpetrators infected by the virus they spread may not be fully responsible for their actions. Those not infected are likely to be adroit enough to adjust their conduct and avoid any system of legal liability. And if disordering of thought is the problem, prosecutors and judges may themselves be unreliable. With all that in mind, how does one sort out the blame, and what does one do about it?

The author touches on the issue, but does not develop it at any length. The most culpable, in his view, are the few theoreticians of deconstruction who act with a clear understanding of what they are doing and what is at stake. If the author’s description is correct, such people cannot be accepted as participants in intellectual life. The organized thought of an intellectual community is vulnerable to fraud, abuse and vandalism, and it will be degraded unless such actions and those who engage in them are identified, confronted, resisted, and condemned. Such policing must be primarily the responsibility of the malefactor’s fellow professionals. If they do not act, and the case seems egregious, the rest of us must form our own conclusions, both as to the specific acts and the degree of respect owed an intellectual community that tolerates them.

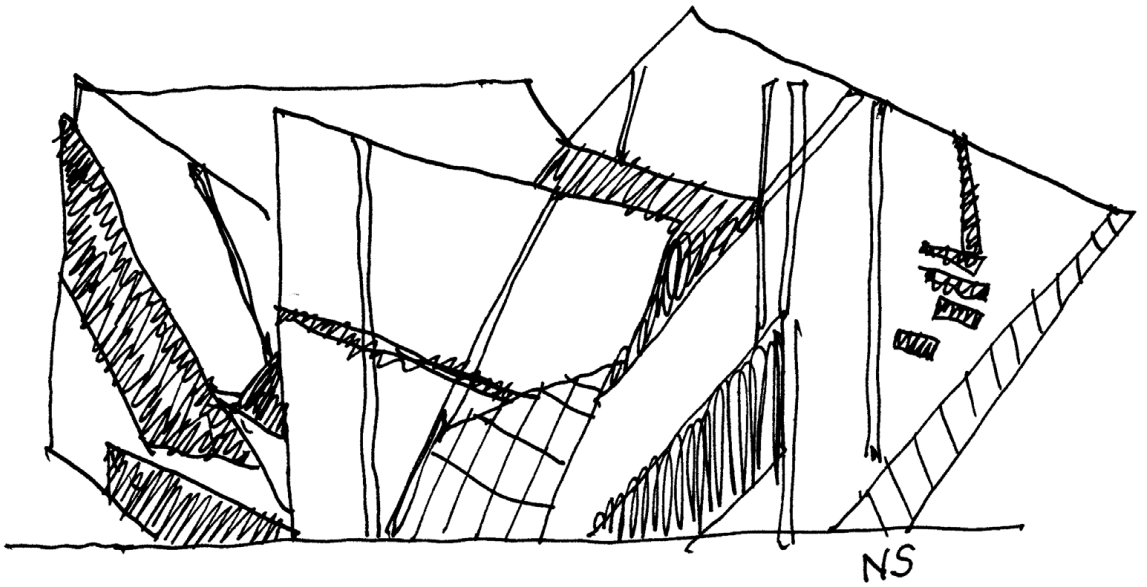
The culpability of others whose subjective purposes and degree of consciousness are more obscure is less clear. Perhaps they should be protected from blame by the principle that “theoretical investigations should be free and each should say what he thinks,” or perhaps there are grounds to condemn individual architects who leave their meaning obscure but interweave their work with sadistic images of violation in what looks like a game of psychosocial manipulation. It is difficult to pursue such issues closely in the case of most individual theoreticians, who may only be presenting their thoughts for public consideration, or at worst attempting to provoke.

The officials, educators and institutions that promote bogus or harmful theories and back them with their authority are, as the author observes, a different matter. Those bearing practical responsibility for the built environment should be

expected to exercise good or at least conscientious judgment. When they fail to do so they should be held responsible and suffer professional consequences. Those who push forward thinkers and projects that are at best modish and at worst toxic have the same culpability as anyone in a responsible position who adopts plainly destructive policies on account of stupidity, laziness, cowardice, frivolity, opportunism, or implicit sympathy with evil. The culpability of such people should be publicly recognized, and they should suffer the consequences accruing to any official whose willfulness or gross negligence brings on disaster. The same can be said of intellectual gatekeepers like architectural critics and those who sit on prize juries.

But what about everybody else — working architects, who must do the best they can in a professional world they did not create, and members of the intellectual and lay public in general? Here each must look to himself and herself. We get the leaders and the public arts we deserve. The inhumanity of contemporary architecture could not have been perpetrated without the support, cooperation or acquiescence of a great many people at many levels of society. How has it been possible for outrageous or incomprehensible claims to be accepted and inhuman buildings built, acclaimed and imitated for so many years? Modern life pushes us all toward subordinating our duty of independent judgment to the pretensions of certified or self-defined experts who claim the exclusive right to determine what can be thought and said. That tendency opens the way for endless abuse and fraud and must be resisted for the sake of our humanity. To the extent we submit to it, we become accessories to our own victimization. If we are to consider culpability for conduct leading to something as pervasive as the current built environment, we should consider and correct our own as well as that of the most obvious evil-doers.





INTRODUCTION

BY RAY SAWHILL

Too often it seems that posted prominently on the doorway to the arts is a sign that reads, “Abandon all rational thought, O ye who enter here.”

But why must the arts — the activities of making and experiencing, as well as discussing and thinking about them — always be such a murky realm? What, after all, do attitude and jargon really signify? And of what help is mystification? Broadening our experience of the arts, looking for guidance, we’re given to understand that there are levels of significance that — once having been initiated into the *cognoscenti* — we might gain access to. What a stirring privilege that would be!

We’re being sold, in Thomas Sowell’s great phrase, “the vision of the anointed”.

In fact, and although it’s much too little known, there’s an alternative view of the arts abroad. It’s a way of seeing and doing art that’s reasonable; that doesn’t defy common sense or plain experience; that’s based in what’s tried and true; that embraces the lessons of science and history; and that does all this not in any way that discourages or impedes the imagination, but that instead enhances and enables it.

The development of this view has been one of the most exciting and heartening developments in the arts in the last thirty years. It has also been one of the least-reported and most-unknown. Arriving in the arts-and-media worlds in the mid-’70s and being cursed with a certain kind of brain, I first marveled at the nonsense that was being spouted about the arts — it simply didn’t match what I was encountering. Then I went in search of people, writers and thinkers, who made more sense.

What I discovered during the years since was a cast of brilliant, heterodox iconoclasts: Christopher Alexander, Ellen Dissanayake, Frederick Turner, Denis Dutton, Léon Krier, Mark Turner, Philip Langdon, James Howard Kunstler, and many others, none of them well-enough known — artists, critics, scientists and philosophers who were taking advantage of the crackup of Late Modernism to give art itself a thorough re-think. What they seemed to share was the curiosity, honesty, and imagination to wonder: if the arts have taken leave of their senses, how might they reconnect?

The book you have in your hands is one of the most urbane and convincing examples of this approach that I know of. A professor of mathematics and physics at the University of Texas, Nikos Salingaros grew interested in architecture through his friendship with the great architectural theorist Christopher Alexander.

As his involvement in architecture has broadened and deepened, so has his engagement with the really substantial art questions. To read his work and accompany his mind is to sense art finding its footing. But why bother taking on Deconstruction? Isn't it the silliest of movements, condemned already by virtue of its ingrown solipsism to vanish soon without a trace?

I'm sorry to report that the above questions, correct though they are, are the kinds of things a down-to-earth person might ask — not someone, in other words, with much chance to make sense of the mind-warping hall of mirrors that is the contemporary academic avant-garde architecture world.

In point of fact, architectural discourse (and much architectural practice) is dictated by a small number of players. Many of these are well-situated — in academia, on boards, in the editorial offices of newspapers and magazines. And although a public art should get a good public discussion, the discussion of architecture is by and large dictated from above by an interlocking cabal of insiders.

This group, currently devoted to the style known as Deconstructivism, is genuinely dangerous. They're dangerous in the first place to the art they practice. To see what Deconstruction can do to a field, all we need do is look at countless English Departments, transformed by French-derived philosophical vogues into politically-correct wastelands. When the *Atlantic Unbound* asked the critic and professor Harold Bloom why the Theory people carry on as they do in the literary world, he answered: "These are ideologues, dear. They don't care about poetry." Should similar consequences be tolerated in architecture, let alone desired?

More important are the practical, built consequences. *The New York Times'* absurd architecture critic may have resigned, but the projects and architects he (and others) did public relations for will be with us for decades. Because of their positions at the controls of the public conversation, the Decon crowd is having an impact on our shared built environment far beyond their numbers. They're also training further generations of students to go do likewise. The basic fact that needs remembering is that architecture isn't just any art. After all, what does one more Theory-driven poem really matter? It's easily overlooked or ignored. But a bad building can ruin a block; it can even ruin a neighborhood. If enough such buildings accumulate, they can help bring about the ruin of an entire city.

What's it like to co-exist with these structures? In a comment on a recent web blog posting about a much-praised new Deconstructivist building, a man who had spent an afternoon in the building wrote about the feelings of vertigo and disorientation he'd experienced.

Being sentenced to live, work in, or pass by a Theory-driven, Deconstructed building can have an unpleasantly disorienting impact on the lives of hundreds, even thousands, of people for many years.

Dream though we may about letting the theorists and practitioners of Decon simply pass away, this is a trend that needs to be faced. But how? One doesn't want to contribute to the destructiveness, after all. And tactics are a challenge.

As everyone has discovered who has tried to engage a true-believing Decon partisan in direct conversation, once you admit any of their terms, it's almost impossible to avoid vanishing with them down a rabbit hole of illogic.

(Once again: this is the vertigo experience that the Decon crowd thinks is so important.) When you shake your head clear, it's only to be greeted by the spectacle of your opponent doing a victory dance. What to you seems like definitive proof that the Decons are up to pointless no-good seems to them like vindication.

With his articles, his website, and his books, Nikos A. Salingaros has become a senior partner in this alternative crowd. It's been a pleasure and a privilege to publish some of his writing on my website, *2Blowhards.com*, and to introduce his mind and his writing to new readers. This collection of articles and essays is direct and substantial; I've read few attacks on fashionable nonsense so devastating.

Dr. Salingaros was born in Perth, Australia. He grew up in Greece and the Bahamas, got degrees from the University of Miami and the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and has been teaching at the University of Texas since 1983. He lives in San Antonio with his physician wife, Dr. Marielle Blum, and their two daughters. He painted professionally — portraits, landscapes — as a young man, and is also an avid classical music buff.

Twenty years ago he met the architect and theorist Christopher Alexander, best known for his books "*A Pattern Language*" and "*The Timeless Way of Building*". They became friends and colleagues. Dr. Salingaros has worked with Alexander since on the editing and shaping of Alexander's long-brewing, long-awaited "*The Nature of Order*", a four-volume work on art, science, nature and beauty.

Over the years, Dr. Salingaros found himself more and more preoccupied with architecture, building, living form, and the foolishness of Modernism. About nine years ago he began publishing his own papers on these topics.

You'll forgive me for a moment if my inner aesthete takes over. I can't resist expressing the reading pleasure this book has given me. I love Nikos' dry and deadpan humor. I'm dazzled by his courage and straightforwardness, and impressed