Posing a productive question about ethics and aesthetics in architecture is no easy matter, for these subjects raise whole clusters of problems, not simple or single questions. That observation is not new; these complexities were apparent two millennia ago when the terms were first introduced. Aristotle wrote not one but three books on ethics; as for aesthetics, also three, if you count the *Poetics*, the lost book on *Comedy*, and the *Rhetoric*. After centuries of successive translations and interpretations, through semantic and conceptual innovations, as well as substitutions, alterations and forgeries, we have an exceedingly wide range of issues and meanings from which we borrow and select, always partially, sometimes uncritically. In our search for non-trivial form-making in architecture we have been invited to suppose that ethical considerations will help us imagine aesthetic approaches that are not limited to purely visual concerns. In the terms of a title frequently cited in discussions of both ethics and aesthetics, this question would ask how the beautiful might be relevant. An implied corollary is that ethical understanding in architecture can be made tangible through aesthetic creativity.

Although these premises are suggestive, I believe that progress along these lines will not be straightforward. The realities of professional practice in our time present a serious challenge to any *aesthetics-substantiated-by-ethics* thesis. Like it or not, architectural work today is largely a matter of business, in which project making is hurried and abbreviated by cost-cutting measures: mostly we ‘fast-track’ design development, reuse...
details that worked well in previous projects, specify familiar products, have specialists take responsibility for fragments of designs rather than allow single individuals to develop projects in full, and so on. These measures are meant to save time and assure outcomes. There have been business-minded changes in the ways architects work with builders, too. Building construction, a practice that traditionally involved both skill and innovation is now seen as the sort of labor that requires regulation by the various instruments of managerial science. Today’s design business also constrains the sorts of collaborations that have historically enriched projects—collaborations among architects, builders, clients, critics, and members of the public. Today we govern collaboration through contract administration. Design as planning and construction as management not only save money but allow confident investment.

These comments are not meant as a complaint, only an observation that conditions are no longer what they once were; that the sense of the discipline possessed by academics and critics is often out of step with the realities of practice. If reflection is to illuminate action, if the word is to render a service to the work—something I believe—then the divergence I have described must be taken into account.

As in most types of business, moral issues rarely obtrude themselves into contemporary design practice; except, of course, in the sorts of arguments that lead to legal proceedings. Architects tend to think that ethics is an academic subject, which indeed it is, with linkages to other scholarly pursuits: philology, hermeneutics, decision theory, and so on. The bearing of these on the architecture trade is far from obvious. The old idea that theory is unrelated to practice provides a historical context for the incompatibilities we sense. More significantly, architecture has been absorbed into a broader framework of technological thought and production, a kind of thought that emancipates design from place and functional purpose. Why? Because technical knowledge allows one to do again what has been done before, regardless of context. Nothing in work that is essentially technical acknowledges territorial obligations.

This is one of the reasons why technological objects enjoy world-wide distribution. Ethical action is just the reverse; its deliberations and decisions are always bound to concrete circumstances and ways of living, without which they lose their sense of urgency, difficulty, and criteria of relevance. Less positively, calls for ethical behavior sometimes lead to localism and insularity. In these cases the agreements that structure communities are buttressed by practices of exclusion.

Faced with this dichotomy, one might think that reciprocal support is the answer, that techniques could give concrete form to
ethical understanding and that judgments about what is right in given circumstances could give instrumentality a sense of what should—not only could—but be done. This possibility is implied in a wonderful aphorism from Georg Simmel: “The richness of form is that it can adopt an infinity of contents—the richness of content is that it can enter into an infinity of forms. Where both infinities meet, the finite construct emerges...”

Unfortunately, when today’s designers seek alternatives to technical reason they generally turn to purely formal operations—sometimes called “aesthetic” practices—and focus on geometric experimentation and innovation. We see a lot of it today. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with form; one cannot imagine a design without it. But, as with technical approaches, working with shape or geometry alone runs against the grain of ethical understanding because modern aestheticizing accents not so much what is shared in society and culture, but what is unique to a designer’s personal technique and vision, an architect’s brand. Critics reinforce aestheticizing by praising experimentation in architecture in the ways they would less practical forms of expression and authorship. We commonly identify architectural works with the name of their designer: a Nouvel, Gehry, or Ando building, as if an accommodation were nothing more than a representation, a paper menu the meal.”
representation, a paper menu the meal.

Despite these tendencies, one occasionally senses that there may still be some shared background for judgments about what makes a building good, even beautiful. This background is not so much what each of us might state as our values, but a historically constituted and forceful ethos that shows itself now and again in both the settings of everyday life and works of art. Obviously, the key question concerns the relationship between these two.

How and when might this ethics-made-apparent-by-aesthetics come into being? I will begin my answer by citing an early modern architect, Adolf Loos. Personalizing his avant garde polemic, he wistfully reminisced as follows:

I did not grow up, thank God, in a stylish home. At that time no one knew what it was yet. ... Here was the table, a totally crazy and intricate piece of furniture ...[with] a shocking bit of work as a lock. But it was our table, ours! Can you understand what that means? Evenings, when I was a young boy and the lamp was burning, I was never able to tear myself away from it. And there was the writing table. There was an ink stain on it, my sister Hermine had knocked over the inkwell when she was a little baby. And there was the picture of my parents ...[with] a hideous frame ... a wedding gift from the workers at my father’s shop. And that old-fashioned chair, a leftover from my grandmother’s household. Every piece of furniture, everything, every object had a story to tell, a family history. The house was never finished; it grew along with us and we grew within it. Of course it did not have any style to it. That means there was no strangeness, no age. But there was one style that our home did have—the style of its occupants, the style of our family.6

My opening suggestion is that the style Loos describes embodies an ethos. It was not a personal matter, such as the manner of Henry van de Velde or Charles Renee Mackintosh, nor a set of rules or objective values. Loos describes a framework that was formed out of habits and shared practices, also conflicts, accidents and bad decisions. He does not say, but it would not be wrong to suppose, that some measure of design intention was part of it too, even if non-professional. Such an ethos attains concreteness in the desired and recurring situations of prosaic life, in the house of course, but elsewhere too, in all manner of situations, each with its own decorum and typical configuration. Ethical knowledge comes not just from the intimate but also from the public. It is acquired through encounter, meetings that are alternately familiar and challenging, assuring and conflictual. One title from Loos, Trotzdem, makes the difficulty of ethical action apparent. Shared sense is key, for it is what distinguishes ethical understanding from
the various kinds of technical knowledge possessed by individuals. Because it is teachable, technical knowledge individuates: a person taught to bake bread has a different contribution to a meal than a person who knows how to grow vegetables or play music. Architects know how to design, carpenters to construct. The living ethos Loos described is something different, neither taught nor possessed individually, but inherited in a given culture, modified slowly, and often taken for granted. Thus, there is a tension between the comparatively stable and shared ground of ethical sense and productive and relatively autonomous character of technical production. Negotiating this tension is the real work of design (neither experimentation nor affirmation).

I have used the English words ethics and ethos interchangeably. To explain my usage I need to take a detour into word origins. Two terms interest me, ethics and ecology. I will say why shortly.

Of the word ecology’s two-parts I will discuss only the first. Despite the fact that this compound was introduced in the nineteenth-century, the two-parts are ancient. The eco of ecology derives from the Greek word oikos, meaning household or estate—something larger and more inclusive than a single building. A faint echo of this origin survives in the grade-school subject ‘home economics,’ but that term is essentially redundant. Our modern sense of economics narrows the ancient meaning, which embraced all the tasks and understandings of domestic stewardship. Xenophon’s famous Oeconomicus described a well-run house, farm, or extended family domain. As a treatise on estate management, it addresses topics such as the arrangement and storage of furnishings and supplies, the hiring of slaves, the cultivation of soils, and the management of one’s family. His architectural topics included the building’s placement and orientation, with respect to times, seasons, weather patterns, and natural

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resources, as well as existing buildings and settlements. Further, his account presents a play of analogies between the building, body, and world, as well as practical advice on forms of cooperation, achieving health, undertaking simple and teachable forms of work, and living an honorable life. Here the ethical is linked to the ecological. Discussions of ethics addressed what is required for a good life, as the opening pages of Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* make clear. Local interests were at issue, but also involvements with outsiders. What involvement was to Aristotle orientation was to Xenophon. With respect to buildings, the latter’s basic premise—one I think we should restore to current thinking—is that the sources of architectural order are partly external to the work itself. For my part, I call this *architecture oriented otherwise*.

One way of making the work’s involvements clear is to repeat the fact that Xenophon describes an estate not a house. Much later, in sixteenth-century usage—Palladian theory and practice—this meant attention to the form and life of the entire villa, not only the casa. Pre-modern economics, then, was the discipline that allowed a person or family to keep a well-ordered residence, given limited means, energy, and time. Because *oikos* also pertained to an individual’s relationships with others, ethical considerations were key to ideas about the house. Economics involved good housekeeping for one’s family and for others as both groups existed together in the natural world. This style of thinking joins together two terms and two sciences—economics and ethics.

Can we equate this early sense of *ethos* with our current sense of ethics? Yes and no. No, especially if we assume the original term meant something like morals or a code of conduct meant to guide everyone’s behavior. *Conduct* was signified by the ancient word, but it meant a more particular and less objectified sense of behavior than our sense of ethics typically implies. A good comparison is with health, for the knowledge one has of one’s own heath can be distinguished from the account presented in scientific description. That’s why good doctors always ask patients how they themselves feel, regardless of what the thermometer says. Ethos was also constituted culturally and apparent in patterns of behavior that were, in turn, subtended by the belief that they were good. The best translation of ethos I can propose is habit of dwelling. This usage accords with ancient usage and can work in modern understanding. Accordingly, habits are not only behaviors performed repeatedly but those that are right in specific instances. Dwelling habits can be seen as ethical if they embody the ways of life individuals and others desire in particular circumstances. Decisions about what makes a setting good are the ethical aspects of design.

Here, then, is a definition of architecture that acknowledges these
terms and builds on the premises they establish: built works give durable dimension and legible expression to the habits of residing that are commonly understood to be good. In ancient thought a single principle governed the design and construction of works of this kind: *decorum* in Latin, *prepon* in Greek. For Vitruvius *décor* was the principle that allowed one to judge that the form of a building was appropriate for its cultural value, use, and location. In rhetoric the term indicated the style suitable for the subject; gravity for funerals, for example. In everyday life anything or any act could be considered with respect to its appropriateness or fit: celebration is an appropriate response to victory, repayment to debt; likewise, fabric is a fitting choice for shirts, leather for shoes, and so on. The key is this: decisions of suitability were made concretely, in view of existing circumstances, seen as variations on a norm; in architecture, a cultural norm. Today, the word *decorum* sounds a bit stuffy or dusty. Our equivalents are character and atmosphere: a spatial setting has the right atmosphere when its dimensions, forms, and materials are appropriate for and express a given event or situation. Indefinite but unmistakable, the many types of spatial character or atmosphere allow a range of embodiments and encourage interpretation.

I have said that decisions about suitability are partly determined by conditions external to the work, but only partly. Good arrangements also depend on relationships among elements internal to the work. Since antiquity the term that named the right relationships between a work’s component parts has been *proportion*. Our English word derives from Latin, which translated the Greek word for *symmetry*. That coupling sounds puzzling when the bilateral sense of the latter term comes to mind. For the Greeks symmetry resulted from commensurate relationships, as indicated etymologically: *sym-metron* meant ‘of like measure.’ One way to distinguish the Greek and Latin words is to see symmetry as norm-
definition and proportion as norm-realization, the first quantitative, the second qualitative. Unfortunately, this simple distinction was complicated by Vitruvius’ introduction of a third term, analogy. Symmetry arises from proportion and the Greeks called this *analogia*. This last word was not explained by Vitruvius but the authors on whom he relied, Varro and Cicero, did provide definitions. Varro, in *Lingua Latina*, introduced both terms in his discussion of regularity, relation, and *ratio* in the inflection of terms. For relation or *ratio* Varro read *pro portione*, by proportionate likeness, which was in his opinion the same thing as the Greek *analogia*, that is, according to *logos*.

The word *symmetria* also appeared in the famous *Canon* of Polyclitus, a treatise on sculpture. The *Canon*’s importance is attested by many sources, most clear and instructive for us is a passage from the medical writer Galen: “beauty, says Polyclitus, resides not in the commensurability of the [the elements of the human body], but in the commensurability of [its members], finger to finger ... these to the forearm ... [and finally] everything to everything.” Galen’s distinction between *elements* and *members* defines the former as the “hot, cold, dry and wet” parts of the body and the latter as fingers, hands, arms, and so on. The commensurability of elements leads to health, that of members to beauty.

Thus for the doctor, proportionality could be discovered among the body’s warm and wet aspects; the balanced co-ordination—symmetry and proportionality—of the four elements defined good health, an ethos of suitable, known relationships. Widening the horizon, but earlier, the philosopher Empedocles argued that the qualities that enter into combination in the body are akin to those that make up the wider environment: the air we breathe is the air of the heavens, at the supper table our bodies incorporate the yield of the land. Again we see a connection between *ethos* and *oikos*, ethics and what would come to be called ecology. Earlier, still, in the Hippocratic texts, the connections between character and place demonstrated the same set of interconnections or continuities. The symmetry of elements, in both the body and the world, structures action and life. The key point is that these actions may appear to be beautiful in a metric or formal sense. When they do, in a well-proportioned plan, for example, the work is both suitable and beautiful; which is to say ethical and aesthetic.

When the balance between the body’s elements has been disturbed by disease the ancient doctor’s task was to devise a regime that would restore the correct *proportion* of the hot, cold, dry, and moist elements. A synonym for healthy is *well-tempered*, for sick, *ill-tempered*. The *intemperate* among us are characterized by asymmetry. This is what
Aristotle’s successor, Theophrastus, described in his famous book on character, which was the ancient source of later architectural theories about a building’s character (Boffrand, Blondel, Boullee, Quatremere, and Loos). Again, while this symmetry of qualities defines good health, it is not always apparent; Cosmetic arts—lip painting, hair coloring—fabricate attractive appearances that can cover disease and sickness. Yet symmetry is not only a matter of appearances. Cicero wrote that while the beauty of the body is attractive to the eyes because of the fit composure, proportion and harmony of its members, the order, consistency and regularity of words and actions, the *proportions of conduct* can also be judged beautiful.\textsuperscript{14} There is a similitude between physicality and attitude. Can the same be true of a building, or must architects make a choice between the measures that define the building’s physical body and the patterns of life the work is meant to accommodate. If not, what might illustrate their conjunction?

A common event—a shared meal—may provide an answer. Defined prosaically, a meal is a division and sharing of consumables. Often, though not always, one person is charged with the task of dividing the whole into the portions or shares that will be distributed to the group. As if the plate of food were akin to the plan of a building, two acts are essential in the work of apportioning: division and distribution (or disposition, *dispositio*, L., or *diathesis*, Gk.). Each act assumes a good sense of measure, of the dish and the desires of the diners. Here is how table-top proportioning works: obviously, no one is given a piece that’s too big or too small, but a fair share is not necessarily an equal one, a person’s rank or status—a house guest, for example—may entitle them to a larger or preferred portion, also a person’s hunger or size. Inequality is not only fair in dining but required. When the meal unfolds as it should, when the child and adult, family member and guest are given their due, the event can be said

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to be properly portioned or well-proportioned. Our current sense of a balanced diet derives from but abbreviates this idea, neglecting issues of social rank and expressions of generosity. Nevertheless, table-top economy presents a fairly good portrait of a group’s social structure and internal relationships and ethics. By portrait I mean legible appearance, which sometimes can be beautiful.

Edward Hopper’s *Table for Ladies* shows a man and a woman at a restaurant table, sharing some beverage, white wine is what I would like to think. His desire for a drink seems to have been interrupted by something she has said. They are not alone, or will not be for long, additional tables have been prepared for others; there is also a woman in black behind a countertop and register; and a waitress or cook dressed in white, grasping a basket placed among other items on display—I can’t tell if she is removing or returning it to where it belongs. With respect to the setting’s economy, emblems of excess and restraint have their place in the scene. On the one hand a principle of tacit serviceability governs many of the elements we see: the expanse of glass we are looking through, the chalkboard of prices, the plain wooden cladding, the mirrors, and black and white floor tiles all express modest and purposeful urbanity. Restraint seems to be the theme of the figure in black: looking down, curled into her work, concentrated and concentric, she is fully absorbed in collecting and counting, also limited by her work station, which is itself equipped with containers of various sorts—the cash register, toothpick dispenser, and vitrine. The figure in white shows something completely different, not limitation but outward reach, suggesting a range of involvements, or spread of interests: clearly she’s more concerned about something on the street than the basket of fruit—if only for the precise moment Hopper brings before us—but her apron links her back to the kitchen; her shadow in the first mirror gives her a place among the diners, and her reach ties her to the consumables on show. The line-up of fruit, meat, and greens says no one—at least the two at the table—will go hungry, or even thirsty for that matter, as the bottles below the server’s right elbow are clearly within reach.

This little scene, like any other, has its own internal coherence. The objects make the room all-of-a-piece. All that’s required for public dining is there, nothing missing, nothing unnecessary. The room’s geometries argue the same point, unbroken patterns, clear horizons, and repetitions bring all of the parts into coherence. But to say that the room is well-defined, that its parts are commensurate, does not mean it is insular. Topographically, the setting and events reach back to the kitchen, forward to the street, and upward. The diner’s hats and coat recall the weather and the town, the latter is also the server’s focus. More abstractly, or formally
the prominent diagonals (her back and its shadow line, the row of grapefruits, the window frame, and the hand rail) open the enclosure to settings beyond its ostensible limits. Just as the renaissance villa coordinated the internal structures of the casa with the external opportunities of the location—according to the principle of orientation and the rule of “ecology”—this setting’s character, temperature, or ethos result from the interplay between interior and exterior orders. The proportionality Hopper has constructed, the similitude of ratios that stages a possible meal, not only accommodates a way of life but also paints a portrait; in this case one of considerable beauty.

To end I would like to describe something similar in the works of the great Norwegian architect Sverre Fehn. Fehn lectured often but wrote little,

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just one essay, which is really a gloss on his visits to Moroccan villages.¹⁵ His account begins ecologically and ends ethically: furthest out from the village center, at the threshold of the desert, he found covered stalls that protected the livestock. Closer in were small storerooms for animal fodder, which were necessary because grazing was impossible in the parched environment. Still closer to the heart of the village were the dwellings, ringing its center. The center itself, however, shifted in dimension and configuration, by virtue of changes in the perimeter rings, as if by some reversal of the laws of physics ripples of land and building form converged on the center in order to shape it. About this central space Fehn had little to say, his description abruptly turned at this point to the dwelling itself, seen in section.

He began with a workplace, observing that the cool temperature and deep shade that result from its lower position are congenial to housework when the summer heat and light are too fierce for work of any other kind. Just as the sectional position of these rooms reduces heat gain, so does the thickness of the house’s walls. Above the ground level is the floor for food preparation, above that the level for sleeping and living. Little furniture gives a trace of these activities, but there seems to be no uncertainty about uses to which these rooms are put, for their long history makes these practices strikingly stable, contrasting domestic topography with the shifting sands outdoors. And these uses are not only the kind we might call functional, the ethos they express is also symbolic: the instance Fehn gives of the latter is the removal of shoes before a meal. Enabling the meal also is a mat or carpet on which one sits, and the table around which people gather. While Fehn does not elaborate the analogy, he implies that a ratio or symmetry governs the use and meaning of these architectural elements: what the mat is to the dwelling floor the table is to the village center, both serving as gathering places that give orientation to a “round dance” that ties together the settings that make up the perimeter, the very same ones that accommodate the dance’s functional patterns. As if they were capable of performing this dance, the several pieces of furniture in the house are “mobile.” This movement of people and their accommodations, Fehn explains, is a remnant of nomadic culture, the steps and shoes of which still carry ancient sands into the house, challenging the distinction between inside and outside just observed. With this entire structure in mind—from livestock stalls to the central carpet—Fehn’s approach can be called cultural ecology, or an aesthetics of ethical life.

There are two aspects of this account I want to hold onto: the rings of distance that encircle the house, giving its settings and events their orientation and limits, and the coupling of the practical and representational aspects of architectural elements, as if ways of living and of showing, ethics and aesthetics can, indeed, be linked together.
In the Schreiner House, finished several years ago, Fehn indicates just this coupling, this double proportionality: forms to functions and house to environment. The corner of the dining space, where the window and side walls meet will be my point of focus. Reportedly, Fehn himself rather liked this position, especially during wintertime meals, when the brick bench on which the leather cushions sit radiated heat from the fireplace behind. I sat there just once, in summer, but could easily imagine the spot’s thermal sense. The social dimension of a meal there benefited from the spatial dimension of the situation, between the warm surround and the open prospect. Tectonically, this corner joins together the building’s two basic types of enclosure, timber cladding and window walls. Using the term ‘wall’ for both the glazing and the cladding is perhaps incorrect for each is really a ‘partition,’ which is to say a non-load-bearing element that structures space, modulates natural forces, and confers character. When seated at the dining table, the view into the garden is unimpeded; the glazing extends from the floor to the ceiling and from one side to the other. An adjustable blind hangs from the top frame, ready to block any glare that might arrive from the late afternoon sun. The right hand edge of the glass panel also operates in the milieu: a narrow louver that edges the glazing screens the interior against insects and admits fresh air through a full-height hinged panel. Turning to the timber cladding to the right of the dining table, we find another well-proportioned ensemble: at eye height a cantilevered book case sets one level, the horizontal boarding extending the enclosure establishes another, and the clear story glazing that admits direct light to the depth of the room defines still another horizon. Through these means the changing conditions outside the house—the environment’s constructive and corrosive forces—are modified to suit the interests and needs of the interiors, preserving its quiet stability and warm intimacy, which is to say its character, atmosphere, or ethos. The atmosphere Fehn has made is both tangible and legible. Is it also beautiful? My answer is yes because its aesthetic shows nothing less than how we might share the sense of the world it accommodates and expresses.

ENDNOTES
2. I borrow this phrase, “the word rendering service to the work,” from Paul Ricoeur; see: “Work and Word,” History and Truth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 197-222
3. The argument is developed in the concluding chapter to David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi, Surface Architecture (Cambridge, Mass.,: MIT, 2002), 215-


