

Book reviews

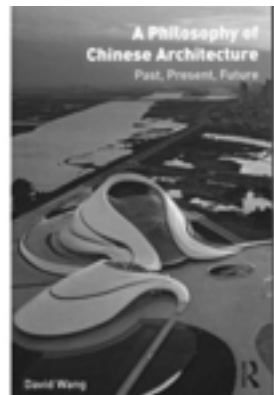
A Chinese Philosophy of Architecture: Past, Present, Future

David Wang

New York: Routledge, 2017.

Hardcover: \$180. Paperback: \$50

In this book, David Wang attempts to derive a philosophy of architecture from Chinese sources. The attempt is made at a moment when revivals of old ways in China are once again discussed in academic literature (for example, Billioud and Thoraval in their *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China*, which appeared in 2015). Wang's book cannot be read as a textbook showing how to systematically apply certain Confucian or Daoist ideas to modern architecture. Instead, it should be read as a philosophical reflection on contemporary architecture delivered from a Chinese point of view. The book contains many fresh considerations and provocative ideas about how non-Western sources can challenge well-established Western architectural theories.



The book is divided into three parts: Past, Present, and Future. The first part explains traditional Chinese architecture and contrasts it with Western paradigms. The “Present” part is concerned with the opening of China towards the West and the influence of postmodernism. The “Future” part talks about influences like virtual reality but also about the possibility for future development of a Chinese philosophy of architecture.

On the one hand, the book is inspired by Jianfei Zhu's *Architecture of Modern China: A Historical Critique* (2009), which suggests a new “criticalist” approach to architecture. On the other hand,

Wang does not address the theme of criticality that was important not only for Zhu but also for critics of Chinese architecture like Peter Eisenman who had once declared Chinese architecture conservative and accommodating because it lacks a tradition of resistance. For Eisenman, the critical consciousness linked to European Enlightenment is missing in the Chinese tradition.¹ Wang's comparative approach has a different starting point, which is not The Enlightenment but Plato. Wang wants to go back to the roots of all differences, which is Plato's essentialism and its absence in China. In particular, Wang employs Plato's distinction between matter and spirit to contrast Chinese philosophies of architecture with Western ones. Wang makes the following four distinctions:

First, in China, "excellence of being is not always dependent on infusions of moral value into material objects" (65) because the Platonic distinctions between matter and spirit do not exist in Chinese culture. This assertion put Chinese architecture on a completely different track missed by most Western architects.

Second, while the Confucian notion of the morally perfected person is important, the value of that person is entirely internal and will not manifest itself materially. Wang puts much weight on the quotation of a certain Wan Juren (source not documented) who would have written about Confucius's notion of ren that the virtuous nature is purely internal. According to Wan Juren, Confucius does not suggest that one should "externally pursue any kind of technical perfection or realization of material end," (5, the source is referenced as *Zuangzi*). The essence of things is not defined philosophically (as it was by Aristotle) and, as a consequence, no values or virtues can act on material or on architecture. Instead, "in China moral instantiation [remains] in between relational social roles" and the "moral focus is on people and their social enactments." (5) Chinese architectural conceptions are fluid because there are no essences like beauty or the good but everything depends on the social situation.

Third, in the West, spirit is individual, while in Chinese architectural thought spiritual components appear as constellations. Feng shui, for example, "is about losing human individuality into the larger cosmos." What matters is not the essence, but the "positioning alone assures beneficial outcomes" (5).

Fourth, the Platonic idea of reason leads to a concept of time-dependent progress towards ideals, which does not exist in China either. Due to its Platonic idealistic heritage, Materiality held negative

connotations as it is always opposed to the spiritual and non-material truth and able to retard progress. Therefore, Western architects attempted to introduce much non-material light, a goal not found in Chinese architecture, which is most obvious in Western religious architecture. (43)

Thus, with these four contrasts, Wang draws a sharp distinction in intent between Western Platonic essentialism and Chinese relational truths. But such an orientation invites the question: without such Platonic essences, some essential foundations, will those purely “relational” truths not lead to relativism? Wang offers a few provocative conclusions. For example, what is called pastiche in the West cannot be called such in China because “Chinese philosophy accommodates this style of affairs.” (6) Logically, you cannot have a pastiche unless you have some theoretical framework that informs what is not pastiche. There is no ideology of style in China, which means that anything goes as long as it is “relationally” justified: “prior to 1840, Chinese structures were not motivated by an ideology of style.” (7) After 1840, there is a proliferation of styles but no indigenous theoretical tradition to guide design thinking. This is how the Chinese could reinvent postmodern hybridity without being postmodern. The hybridity we find in China is “not a self-conscious choice” and therefore not really postmodern (124) in conception. Instead it is simply due to a lack of purified aesthetic ideologies.

This relativism is pushed one step further when Wang legitimizes an aesthetics of clutter. Since there is no aesthetic ideology of proportion and since the *wen* (cultural pattern) is clearly open-ended, clutter becomes a positive term. The Chinese notion of *wen* is an untranslatable term meaning, in different contexts “pattern,” “structure,” “writing,” and “literature.” The pattern of *wen* is found not only in culture but also in animals, vegetation, and cosmological phenomena. Wang applies this

in an unusual context. The clutter on Chinese sidewalks is “teeming with activity” (66) and Wang holds that *wen* can be understood as “a cluttered array of things.” (80)

In Chinese architecture, everything moves towards a fluidity-based paradigm, which can be contrasted with the essentialist styles of Western architecture in which purified or fixed notions of style tended to be justified by essentialist concepts of styles based on (Platonic-Aristotelian) philosophies. Chinese architectural reality is fluid as it is determined by the *yīng* and the *yáng*, which produces no essence but just *qi*. *Qi* is a cosmological notion providing coherence among all things. It translates as “breath” and is used in the sense of “energy flow” in traditional Chinese culture, especially Chinese medicine and martial arts.

After all those considerations of fluidity and interrelatedness one could perhaps conclude that Chinese architecture is organic. If this is the case, Wang could have developed this line of thought further. A fluid and dynamic perception of architectural space is precisely what organic architecture, initiated by Frank Lloyd Wright and developed by generations of architects, always wanted. Organic architecture promotes harmony between all elements, natural and architectural, precisely in the way in which Wang describes the *qi* flowing out of the play of *yīng* and *yáng*. As is, those tantalizing connections between East and West go unexplored.

It is in the context of fluidity that Wang also makes interesting statements about different preservation cultures in East and West. Fluidity-based architectural paradigms will find the preservation mentality pervasive in the West too restrictive: “In a correlative world in which fluid change is fundamental, wood gives way to fire, fire to soil, in a cyclical process.” (23) Is the Daoist penchant “to let things be” (67) favoring preservation or against preservation? There is no clear answer to this in Wang’s book.

However, in all his elaborations on fluidity and dynamism there is a paradox. European styles change while Chinese styles have remained relatively constant until the modern era. If architecture is so fluid in China, why did styles remain constant? Instead they evolved in non-fluid Europe. Stylistic evolution in the West owes much to an artistic self-consciousness arising out of the tradition of resistance of which Eisenman spoke. Wang acknowledges the stable character of Chinese architectural styles. His answer to the paradox of fluid architectural conceptions not bound by Platonic essences that nevertheless led to stylistic stasis is to explain the idea of fluidity within an overall largely static

conception by reference to the cosmic fabric called *fen*, which Buddhism-informed neo-Confucianism saw as a familial-social cosmic system guaranteeing unchanging social roles. (52) Each *fen* conducts itself in correct *li*-rituals. Similarly static are the *Yingzao Fashi*, (營造法式) a 12th century manual of Building Standards, which formalized imperial construction as an expression of social hierarchy. Another reason for stasis is the imperative of moral excellence that philosophies about the *li* tended to express in the form of theoretical logic. Here Wang points to Xunzi, who believed that architecture can be subsumed under the embrace of *li*-ritual: “A benefit of this approach is that moral excellence is embedded in the theoretical logic.” (143)

What seems to matter most for Wang is that there is no Platonic essence in Chinese thought able to formulate the good and the beautiful. Since nothing philosophical could be said about the goodness and beauty of material, Chinese literati never embraced architecture as a contemplative pursuit. Architecture was seen as a craft, which gave it a lot of freedom. This is possibly true. However, was the West that unfree? Ideas concerning the good and the beautiful have changed a lot over the centuries in the West. True, European culture tended to justify aesthetic truths in terms of philosophical truth (since Plato), which is not the case with the more vague Buddhist-Confucian prescriptions. At the same time, this lack of philosophical back-up might be the reason why, as Wang points out, modern Chinese architecture has not yet found its own vocabulary. (123)

I want to conclude by returning to the concept of the organic. Jianfei Zhu’s “relational critique” seems to point more consistently to the idea of an organic whole. Wang also mentions Liu Xiaohu from Wuhan who uses terms like *feng shui* and *xiao* (filial piety) in organic contexts (143). The Hangzhounese architect Wang Shu is also often

mentioned as a protagonist of the “fluency” inherent in Chinese architectural culture. Would a real alternative architectural thinking moving beyond Platonism but incorporating “criticality” with the organic not be the next step in this search for a philosophy of Chinese architecture? Wang does not take this step. He derives a critique of the Western tradition from Chinese sources. However, calling this a “a Chinese philosophy of architecture” seems to be too ambitious. An aesthetics of clutter and fluidity-based paradigms can inspire interesting critiques but it will take more work to develop those critiques into real philosophies.

ENDNOTES

1. Peter. Eisenman, “Critical Architecture in a Geopolitical World” in Cynthia Davidson and Ismail Serageldin (eds). *Architecture Beyond Architecture: Creativity and Social Transformations in Islamic Cultures*. London: Academy Editions, 1995.

Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature
Steven Vogel

Boston: MIT Press, 2016.

Paperback: \$24

reviewed by Tom Spector

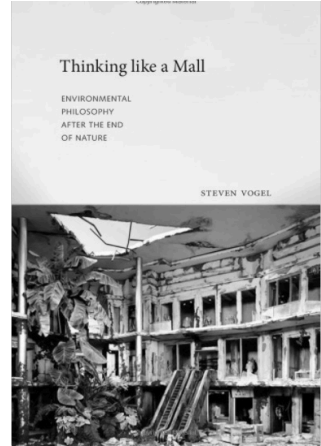
Steven Vogel agrees with what Warwick Fox called attention to two decades ago, a view which I believe all we architecture-philosophy types share: that an environmental ethic is both incomplete and of little effect without a robust account of the human-made environment incorporated into it. *Thinking Like a Mall* attempts such an account, not so much by describing the relationship between the built and self-determining environments as by dismantling the divide between them. Vogel takes his title from Aldo Leopold’s treatise “Thinking Like a Mountain,” in which Leopold describes his personal journey out of an ego-centric view of nature to one understood in more relational terms. If Vogel can make the case that that a shopping mall (that much unloved building type) is no less and no more natural than Leopold’s mountain, then he can well extend the argument to include all built environments. While he makes progress on these fronts, we may yet hesitate to agree he has

laid the problem to rest.

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Vogel argues that mainstream environmental ethics has tried to create a sense of separation between humanity and nature to justify its prescriptions. “What ends nature is nothing other than the human touch, a touch that, rather Midas-like, has the uncanny ability to transform the natural into something outside of nature.” (11) This divide creates an insoluble contradiction for environmental ethics in its current formulations. It seems that either we think of nature as everything that exists by and for itself without the interference of humans, or else we make room for a larger conception of nature that also includes what humans do as being part of nature. But here’s the problem: if we consider humans as part of nature, then there’s no reason to consider, say, hydroelectric dams as any more unnatural than beaver dams and cities are no more or less than the habitats we create that are most natural for us. But if we leave human activity out of the equation, then it becomes problematic to find untouched nature, and to determine how far back we have to go before the influence of mankind spoiled it. After all, it appears highly likely that humans caused the extinction of the woolly mammoth in Pleistocene times.

Environmentalists have avoided this contradiction by trading on an equivocation. They use “nature” to mean “wild, untouched and self-determining” when it suits them, but then they make an about-face and insist that humans are part of nature when it comes time to formulate an action plan. He sees an “odd inconsistency” if the nature we are called on to preserve is nonhuman nature. The environmentalists who worry about the destruction of nature also believe that “humans need to learn to live more in accordance with nature.”(11) Human anthropocentrism, the unwillingness to accept that



we should live more within the natural order of things rather than seek to transform them more to our liking, is the source of the problem. “But if the production of a toaster or the changing of a temperature or the restoring of a prairie involves the transformation of nature into something that is no longer natural, then it is not at all clear that humans are embedded in nature.”⁽¹²⁾ Here is the crux of the contradiction: If human actions are outside nature, then what could it possibly mean to advocate that we live more in tune with nature? Conversely, if we humans are in fact part of nature, then so are our buildings—and this leaves the environmentalists without a cause. There is no basis for bemoaning technology.

Some Environmentalists would have it that the value of untouched nature is its independence. Others, its diversity or richness. Therefore, we have an obligation to help preserve its diversity. But how do we get from this definition to an obligation? What if we try to assert that there is something wrong with human-created global warming that extends beyond its effect on other humans and into its effect on the natural order of things? We could say, “yes, but its going to be very destructive,” but in the larger sense, this assertion is simply untrue. It will be just as productive as it is destructive. So we could amend that statement and say that it will be very disruptive, which is certainly true, but disruption is itself entirely natural and goes on all the time out in nature. So we could amend it still more and say that it will be disruptive at a speed and scale rarely found in nature, and that is also certainly true, but then that is not always the case either—nature can be astoundingly disruptive- and in short order: Every time a volcano blows, for example, or a 100-year drought occurs. So, if there’s nothing we are doing or causing that nature doesn’t already, then where is the foul?

Thus, Vogel thinks we do well to abandon the word “nature” altogether as a source of guidance for an environmental ethic. But he notes one last way the word nature is used, and this is why environmentalists have been resistant to abandoning it: it is often used normatively, natural is associated with what’s right, and unnatural is associated with what’s wrong. But taking nature as a guide for right and wrong human action is going to lead to some pretty odd results. Think of what a spider does with its prey. So, he says, trying to act more ‘naturally’ in this sense scarcely seems like a good idea.

Vogel concludes that Nature is a useless concept, not only because there seems to be so little of it remaining, not only because we cannot seem to decide whether we are part of it or not, but also because it

provides no moral guidance—only circularity. It becomes something more like a religion based in a set of unprovable assumptions and less like a set of rational reasons underlying prescriptions for how we should act. He wants to drop nature, and adopt “environment,” which includes the built environment, into an environmental philosophy. Thus, if we want to ground an environmental ethic, it will have to be that certain actions and products are bad or good for us humans—and we will just have to bring the rest of nature along with us. It is logically impossible to protect nature’s independence from us. All environment—shopping malls as well as the Amazon river basin are equally potentially capable of moral consideration.

Part of my hesitation in fully embracing this line of thought lies in how Vogel analyzes the concept of nature: much like a blender analyzes an avocado. You hate to congratulate him for liquifying a perfectly useful idea (within its limits) into something unrecognizable. Most any concept can be found to contain contradictions and irrationalities when pushed to its limits, but this should not cause us to abstain from the entire notion—which is what Vogel wants us to do. His point that environmentalists conveniently equivocate is well taken, but should that not be a reason to demand clarity from them and not necessarily a reason to abandon the term “nature”? I still think there is a commonsense meaningfulness to being in touch with or alienated from nature that finds expression in such useful antidotes as the Boy Scouts, the National Parks, treks into wilderness, dismay when native species are overrun by invaders, the desire to clean up roadside trash, immense sadness at the barrenness caused by coral bleaching, and so many more instances. Are we really supposed to give up on the idea that getting to appreciate what goes on outside of human purposes provides a source of moral import even if not a source of moral guidance?

Where I really want to take issue, however, comes in the last chapters, where he reduces environmental ethics to democratic politics. He says that since mountains and wolves cannot speak for themselves, then only humans in dialogue can speak up for them. This idea seems to leave no point of triangulation from which to critique what those humans in dialogue decide for the wolves. In fact, I find this surprisingly naive—philosophically as well as socially. It almost seems a desperate move. Apart from this disappointment, however, he does quite a nice job analyzing the tragedy of the commons in relation to global warming. He argues that the problem is not that any individual's contribution to the problem is negligible, and therefore futile to hold accountable, but rather it is the lack of mechanisms by which individuals can band together to act for the common good that lead to tragic results. As I was reading this section, I realized that the tragedy of the commons just is the state of nature.