

Architecture and guilt

Exploring facets of guilt and their impact on architectural production

Research plan

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November 2023

Introduction

As I was walking in the faculty somewhere in February of 2023 I came across a letter to the dean. Its author had placed it at the red staircase asking the members of the faculty to sign it before sending it to the dean. The letter was an alarming declaration of an environmental emergency so bad that “*The Faculty needs to declare a case climate emergency, directing all their efforts, studios, projects, research programmes, post-masters, PhDs to the topic of the climate catastrophe.*” I couldn’t help but notice that the letter was using a sentimental language and a moral tone that to me was unfitting to such a serious and scientific topic. To my surprise the letter was also signed by a very large number of students and other faculty members. To my even bigger surprise the dean replied by agreeing and validating its key points. To me, this letter was making me feel guilty for being an architect and made me want to explore why.

I began to think about my own experiences. I never really enjoyed doing “green architecture” and I was always feeling that my projects that were not about sustainability, circularity... were better than the green ones. What I hadn’t realised before coming across this letter was that the feeling of guilt when trying to be creative was probably the reason why I couldn’t enjoy doing this kind of architecture. I also came to the conclusion that many times many parameters that architects need to address such as bioclimatic design, sustainability, circularity, etc are used without having any proper and clearly defined meaning. In 2020 I was part of a team that won a distinction in a competition about a municipal public building in Greece. The jury praised our bioclimatic and sustainable approach. The problem was that we didn’t have any such approach -at least that wasn’t a main concern when we were designing the building- expect from a text (written the night before deadline) included in the documentation that was asked by the competition brief. Using the right words in a smart way that somehow relates to the project can make it sustainable. Even if it isn’t or at least hasn’t been studied and worked on hard enough to actually become one.

Theoretical framework

Guilt will be mainly understood as Nietzsche explored it in the genealogy of morality. According to Nietzsche the concepts of guilt and debt are highly related. The relationship between a creditor and a debtor is a reflection of the guilt that exists within an individual. This guilt makes the debtor feel as though they owe something to another person. As a result, the person to whom the guilt is directed becomes the creditor, and thus begins the relationship between the two parties. In other words, the feeling of guilt within an individual can create a sense of obligation towards another person, leading to the establishment of a creditor-debtor relationship. Throughout the human history the creditor – debtor relationship has been finding different ways to be expressed. God has been produced as the ultimate creditor who can never be repaid.

The feeling of responsibility is a product of a culture that was produced by working against the force of forgetting which is seen as a normal physiological function. Responsibility is used to make humans disciplined and is established by cruel means such as punishment and coercion.

Another condition that contributes to guilt is bad conscience. Nietzsche is approaching bad conscience as a terrible illness for humans, their sickness of themselves. But it’s a kind of a necessary burden as it makes sure that humans don’t turn against themselves.

Pharmacologically speaking bad conscience in small amounts can be useful as a means of self preservation but in larger quantities can become a burden that leads to great suffering.

Historically the concept of guilt evolved from a piece of animal psychology to an ever-growing moralistic concept. This moralization peaked when guilt before God became prevalent. **Sin** became a priestly interpretation of bad conscience. In Europe during the middle ages a guilty conscience was constructed by the Catholic church. Theologians and confessors lead the way to an oppressive theology of sin. Awaiting God's judgement everything can and should be seen as a sin. This mentality lead to an everyday guilt that was impossible to evade. As a result this guilt that everyone had to live with became bearable and people learned to coexist with it.

Western guilt is a term used to describe a feeling of remorse or responsibility that some people in the Western world experience in relation to certain historical events, societal and environmental issues. Colonialism, imperialism, the slave trade, the Holocaust, the environmental damage after the industrial revolution etc are examples of things that contribute to guilt.

The concept of Western guilt suggests that these historical events have left a lasting impact on the collective conscience of the Western world, leading some to feel a sense of guilt or responsibility for past actions taken by their ancestors or their nation. While this is a form of collective guilt it remains a very personal feeling affecting differently different people. This guilt can manifest in various ways, from support for reparations and affirmative action policies, to feelings of personal shame or self-loathing.

It is important to note that the concept of western guilt is controversial. For some it is simplistic and has a tendency of generalising. It can also be used as a means to victimise the privileged. Also some of the people who write about it have ties with the far right. Nonetheless, in this case this concept is useful and will be mainly used to build an argument about the relation between architecture and guilt.

Problem Statement

Western architecture has been coexisting and coproduced together with the guilty conscience of the West and for centuries. Architects have been producing architecture that translates this mentality in spaces where guilt can be experienced and internalised. Cathedrals and churches are prime examples of such buildings that had a profound effect on the concretisation of guilt. More recent examples of memorials, museums etc show that this collective historical guilt continued to be relevant in architecture. The relation between architecture and guilt has produced many masterpieces and generally it could be told that guilt was not working against the creative forces of architecture but on the contrary it could act as a positive force that inspires and produces good architecture.

This relation however has started to change in the last years and especially after the introduction of climate guilt.

During the 90's public awareness on the issue of climate change started to grow. This made the oil industry nervous as it threatened their business. Their initial strategy was to undermine the issue in publics eye and spread doubt about the reliability of climate science. While this strategy was working for some time it became harder and harder to deny science.

So the oil industry invested heavily in a different strategy: to shift the blame to individual consumers.

British petroleum used their marketing power to change the narrative of climate change and to make it the fault of the individual. They popularised the term carbon footprint by creating a carbon footprint calculator that by design emphasizes our personal contribution to climate change even by exaggerating data. The goal of this strategy was to make the individual feel overwhelmed with the sheer amount of things that he/she has to change to minimize his/hers carbon footprint so that he/she will end up giving up. This strategy succeeded as it worked well together with our guilty conscience for things that we cannot change to add a new layer of guilt: climate guilt.

Climate guilt, while collective, was by design internalised in a very personal way. Climate guilt is designed to produce inaction at worst and half-baked initiatives or exceptions at best. In its current form it cannot produce any collective solution to the climate change and it reduces it to a moral issue. So it should be seen as a problematic concept.

This milieu started to find its way into architecture. Architecture had to deal with this new guilt that was undermining its very existence by emphasizing its destructive nature. Architects, many times, have to create by knowing that what they're doing is probably morally wrong. And not only that, there also not clear directions on how to offset the potential of doing harm.

Compared to the previous relation of architecture with guilt where guilt could be expressed in creative and artistic way this new one has the potential to act as negative force with different consequences. Greenwashing can be understood as a means to cheat and avoid the sins that climate guilt is producing. In an attempt to evade this guilt certain materials, uses, and scales can be demonised just because of their bad reputation. Architecture can also become less fun and creative as in the threat of a catastrophe, artistic creativity starts to seem like a minor issue. But the direst consequence that this guilt can have is to make architecture as a whole to lose its importance as instead of trying to do its best to collectively try to find solutions to problems, it renders it lost in its own mythology of moral sustainability.

This new relation should be examined carefully. It is important to make the connections between the general milieu of a guilty conscience and the production of architecture to understand climate guilt is imported in the field.

Architectural competitions have become very important in the creation of new architecture. So, it would make sense to examine how they deal with the issue of guilt. I will argue that the relation of architecture and guilt starts at the very moment a competition brief is composed as it is there that the goals and the objectives of architecture are produced.

Research questions

Main question

How the introduction of climate guilt in the process of architectural design changed the relation between architecture and guilt?

Sub questions - these questions will try to explore the topic in a rigorous and extensive manner. Not all of them have to be answered.

When can this new guilt driven conscience be threatening to architecture?

How architects deal with the destructive nature of architecture?

Which are some examples of architecture that has been designed by guilt?

In which phase of architectural design is guilt more relevant?

Why a guilty conscience can lead to binaries?

Which are the consequences of climate guilt to architecture?

What are the differences between creating for guilt, creating by guilt and created with guilt?

How different types of guilt relate to architecture today?

How can greenwashing be understood as an attempt to avoid guilt?

How to avoid moralising scientific and technical terms?

How people outside the West deal with similar issues?

How to deal with this new guilt it in a positive way?

Methodology

- Literature review: To understand and explore the theoretical issues and questions arising from the topic I will mainly use sources of literature. Guilt and the other terms used in the theoretical framework will be understood as philosophical concepts.
- Case studies: To steer the issues in a more practical level and find where guilt is produced I will explore case studies. One of the arguments I will try explore is how guilt in architecture is produced even before an architect starts designing: during the design of the brief. To do that I will analyse and compare different competition briefs to find if and how they can lead to a guilt driven architecture. My goal is to develop a strategy of categorising briefs for their ability to produce or evade different types of guilt. This would also be the first step to develop a design assignment based on the briefs I will evaluate.

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