

Architecture's existential crisis

Dion Moulton

Abstract

The article aims to outline and then solve architecture's long-lasting existential crisis by proposing a professional framework as a way of understanding architectural theories.

1 Architecture is not a profession

In architecture's 8,000 years or more years of existence, it has had about 112 distinct architectural styles (not counting regional differences)[13]. Each style represents a theory or a subset of one. More than half of these theories were formed in the past 250 years - a mere 3% of architecture's lifespan. At this rate you will encounter 10 more architectural theories during your average career. Simply put, *architecture has an existential crisis*.

Existential crisis a stage of development at which an individual questions the very foundations of his or her life: whether their life has any meaning, purpose or value.

An existential crisis creates two problems. The first is that *we are unable to define goals unanimously* as a profession. Without goals, our efforts become divided and ineffective towards serving society.

Uncertainty has spilled over into our schools of architecture. Thirty years ago Christian Norberg-Schulz charged that "the schools have shown themselves incapable of bringing forth architects able to solve the actual tasks." Things are no different today although we are more likely to meet with challenges to the very notion of "the actual tasks". Do we know what these tasks are? (Karsten Harries[7])

The second problem is that *we lose a professional foundation*. We are unable to be *disciplined* in our actions, *measure standards* of success, and *focus on the needs of society*. These are all professional traits that a foundation provides.

[A profession is] A disciplined group of individuals who adhere to high ethical standards and uphold themselves to, and are accepted by, the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised, organised body of learning derived from education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others.

Inherent in this definition is the concept that the responsibility for the welfare, health and safety of the community shall take precedence over other considerations. (Australian Council of Professions[2])

As a result of undefined goals and non-existent foundation, we get lots of theories vying for the industry's attention. However, at any one time *only a few theories are marketed as relevant*, each describing a certain type of society. Not only does this mean we are limited in our ability to serve types of society, but we get a schism in the architectural body into:

1. Those who apply theory as a discipline to the relevant group in society with shared interests. ie. part of a profession.
2. Those who apply theory as a discipline *without understanding* which society it was meant for. Exercising knowledge without considering the interests of others is *not* part of a profession.
3. Those who disregard theory and do what they please. This lack of discipline is also *not* part of a profession.

With architectural fame dominated by theoreticians who build, it is encouraged to critically observe the previous generation's philosophy and debunk it with your own[5]. This is childish bickering—creating a dog-eat-dog industry where we aggressively defend our individuality and treat it as a good thing.

This lack of discipline and resulting schism is why I propose that either the state of architectural profession is a short-lived movement waiting to be debunked, or *we do not have one*. Extending this movement into something that is timeless and bound by the definition of a profession is how we can solve the existential crisis.

Some might argue that continuously questioning our approach is a sign of dedication towards relevancy in society and see it as a good thing. This, however, is missing the point: it isn't about the details of each theory or how they are formed. It is about how theories are *marketed*.

Architectural theories are marketed as the be-all and end-all of architectural approach. Although hindsight continuously proves this to be wrong, our impression of current theory renders past theories outdated and somehow irrelevant. Our resistance to change then fixates our attention on the theoretical details between past and present, leading to arguments. This hinders our ability to see larger goals.

Additionally, we are still unable to outline goals or foundation *despite* increasingly and continuously questioning our foundations. If we continue generating theories at a rate of every 3-4 years without being able to highlight any one of these theories as being correct or still relevant today, then perhaps we are *searching in the wrong place*.

2 The foundation of Architecture

2.1 Why theories and styles are inappropriate

Goals and *foundation* are equally important to a functioning profession. However, although we have plenty of candidates for goals as offered by theories over the years, we only have a few candidates for architecture's foundation. As of now, we seem to mainly compete over architectural theories and architectural styles. These become our two initial foundational candidates.

An architectural style describes the *physical characteristics* of an era. This may be as specific as pointed arches in Gothic architecture, or as vague as chaotic forms in Deconstructivist architecture.

An architectural theory is a *set of ideas that outline an approach* towards architecture. These ideas are non-arbitrary, which may be implemented in one or more architectural styles. For example, modernism’s “form follows function” is a theoretical approach towards architecture, and one stylistic implementation is by removing ornamentation from a building.

Creating this distinction between style and theory is important as it reveals that *styles are insignificant*. They are merely a single manifestation of an idea that people copied. They are fleeting, superficial, and aesthetically subjective—but more importantly, they represent a *lack of understanding* of the discipline behind a building¹. These are not hallmarks of a good foundation to base the architectural profession upon.

In contrast, an architectural theory is normally based on the religious, political, social, technological and ethical ideas of the time. This encompasses more aspects of our total experience of the world and thus makes it a better candidate for an architectural foundation.

Theories have been described as that which identifies the practices, production and related challenges of architecture. They re-evaluate architecture’s intentions and relevance[9]. Although it shares the same intentions as a foundation, the fact remains that theories die and have a short-lived existence compared to architecture’s full lifespan.

If theories and styles are both inappropriate, a third route is to consider that theories are simply *strategies executed underneath a global and timeless architectural framework*. The theory is not the foundation of architecture, but an instance which tackles the issues that the framework proposes. This is in the same way that a style is an instance which tackles the issues that a theory proposes. Identifying this *global and timeless* architectural framework, and in turn, foundation, is the first step to resolving architecture’s crisis.

2.2 Characteristics of a framework

A framework is a basic structure underlying a system or concept. Rather than attempt to elaborate on this phrase, I will instead immediately present an architectural framework:

[in Architecture, an operative art] the end must direct the operation.
The end is to build *well*. *Well* [an ideal] building hath three conditions: firmness [sturdy], commodity [useful], and delight [beautiful].
(Vitruvius[14])

For a quote which has survived more than 2000 years, it seems to remain relevant and *encompasses* all architectural theories. No matter how different each theory is, each theory *first prioritises these three elements*, and then *prescribes a strategy* to showcase their prioritisation. For example, Gothic architecture may be seen as prioritising firmness and delight, or Modernism may prioritise firmness (technology) and commodity. Some believe all are equal (Vitruvius), but all theories form a stance in relation to these three.

¹This has been identified in the second group of the architectural schism.

We also notice that the framework's elements are neither prescriptive, proscriptive, affirmative or critical of anything. It is a listing of attributes which must be considered for a building, but offers no more guidance. It is a *description*, not an arguing point.

These elements are also *agnostic*. They do not rely on a culture, religion or belief. All physical forms have an element of structure (firmness). All living beings all have an intent (commodity). And when living beings are put together with structure, we give an aesthetic judgement (delight). This characteristic has given it a timeless nature.

These three characteristics (encompassing, descriptive, and agnostic) upheld by three elements (firmness, commodity, and delight) form an unquestionable architectural *framework*. Architects are now free to juggle different theories as *strategies* governed by the framework, but *must consider all elements of the framework*. They are also still free to implement a theory as an architectural *style*. Each style considers a theory, and each theory considers the framework.

A new hierarchy of Framework \rightarrow Theory \rightarrow Style shifts the focus of architecture away from the details of theories towards a set of commonalities. This allows us to treat theories as just another item in our toolkit towards solving bigger problems. It's no longer about getting caught up in the details and their changing natures, it's about selecting the right tool for the job.

This means that theories can be marketed as what they truly are: an approach towards a defined society, not a law unto itself. This helps prevent arguments about details and encourages speculation over the *elements* in the architectural framework as a root for theoretical strategies.

A resulting increased emphasis on society as a specific audience per theory allows us to be more aware of society's needs. This allows us to tackle multiple types of societies simultaneously with each theoretical solution tailored towards their interests. This satisfies the professional requirement of working for the benefit of society.

Because of the framework's characteristics, it may always be applied in all situations at all times without prescribing goals—a simple, agreeable outline that has always affected what we had done in the past, without restricting what we do in the future.

3 The goals of architecture

3.1 The role of a framework in determining goals

Whilst outlining the framework gives us a foundation as a profession, it says nothing about the precedence of *welfare, health and safety of the community* as needed in a profession. To do this, we need to refine the architectural framework to pinpoint goals in society.

I use the phrase “pinpoint in society” because a framework *does not prescribe goals*. It is *descriptive*. It doesn't claim that the profession knows everything about the world and is authorised to make decisions for it. However, by outlining *elemental* considerations when people decide on a goal, it is able to *influence* these goals².

²This is still the case even if an element is marked as unimportant.

The current framework has three elements: structure/firmness, commodity/function, and delight/design/beauty. The first tackles built form itself whereas the latter two tackles community reactions towards built form. Whilst these latter two elements may tackle some aspects of the welfare, health and safety of the community, I believe the addition³ of a fourth community element may pinpoint this.

3.2 A new element: People are as important as built form

Architecture is a discipline where it is impossible to escape values. It's radically value-laden. I think it's possible that you can become an architect and see it as somewhat autonomous and not as a political act, which is incredibly naive. I try to make students aware of the radical, political, cultural, social nature of our work and how it's impossible to escape those responsibilities.

(Thom Mayne, Morphosis)

The element outlined above comes in the form of values and responsibilities. What governs our values and how to respond to these responsibilities are *ethics*⁴. As ethics also fits the requirements of a framework, I propose for *ethics* to be added as a fourth element:

- It is *encompassing*. It is based upon people, which is a universal constant for all built forms. Whilst Vitruvius already targets the aesthetic judgement (when people react to firmness), the moral judgement (when people react to commodity) is left unconsidered. Whether or not we are consciously making decisions based on ethics, it will have effects nonetheless.
- It is *descriptive*. It does not dictate the alignment of the moral compass but instead just highlights its presence as a quality of an architecture.
- It is *agnostic*. All cultures have a moral compass, and as such, applies to all cultures. Ethics also covers the relation between groups and individuals, which won't exclude individualistic cultures or the third architectural body who does what they please.

To further prove ethics as an element, we can list some theories who highlight their consideration to ethics: sustainability, where the primary value is that our decisions should not inhibit the opportunities of the future, modernism, where the moral value of truth was translated into an aesthetic quality, and then post-modernism, where the populist ethic was rejected[4]. As for older examples of theories, any theory governed by religious or political ideas has by definition shown consideration of ethics.

Ethics is also a useful addition as it fills a gap left by the original three elements⁵. The original three elements either consider the built form itself or

³Unlike previous attempts to extend Vitruvius' statement[12], this adds a new element rather than providing detail about existing elements. This is because providing detail converts the framework into a theory.

⁴Ethics, morality and *ethos* (original Greek) can be used interchangeably.

⁵Vitruvius did mention aspects of ethics[14], such as relationships between men, politics, and precepts, but treats it in the form of a prescribed theory, not a framework

the relations between people and built form. Noticeably missing is people themselves. A recognition of people themselves is needed to highlight the distinction between the roles buildings play and the roles people play. Ethics covers both people themselves and the relationships to built form.

This coverage of people themselves and relationships to architecture cover societal aspects: aspects such as politics, environment / sustainability, humanitarian needs, urban planning, right down to individual clients. Including ethics as an element clearly strengthens the link to the welfare, health and safety of the community - one step closer to an architectural profession.

All architects have two clients whenever they work - one is the person that actually pays the bills, and the other is society in general. I think an architect that doesn't see they are working for society in general doesn't know his job.

(Joseph Rykwert, Architectural Historian[3])

Understanding of the interests of society is a prerequisite for ethics to be considered. This means that adding ethics as an element helps encourage consideration of our actions in the interests of others.

Although it is not the job of a framework to govern the application of its elements, it's important to make sure that it can be applied in the first place. ie. to ensure that ethics is not "good in theory but not in practice". This allows the element to be carried into architectural theories, and then implemented in architectural styles. We can prove this by citing religion, as well as agnostic hierarchies of ethical systems[10]. This practical side of the element means not only can it seed theories, it can fulfil the frameworks goals as a measurement tool.

Ethics is also *complex*. The inability to create a set of non-conflicting simple rules to govern ethics[10] over humanity's history suggests a NP-complete nature. This means not only can it be applied in practice, it can also take many different forms that will continue to change over time.

This consideration of the interests of others, nature, welfare, health, and safety changes Vitruvius' framework into a *professional* framework, ie. a framework pinpointed in society. We now have a framework consisting of *firmness, commodity, delight, and ethics*.

3.3 The final element: Resolving timelessness

The architectural framework has addressed a need for a foundation as well as the need for professional goals. There is still one thing missing: the ability to solve these goals.

The world is complex. As architecture is a *justified solution to a predefined problem using the world as its medium*, many of architecture's goals will also be complex.

Complex goals take time to solve. There isn't much use in introducing a framework to solve larger issues if we don't have time to solve these issues past a certain number of years or generations. We need time to understand the nuances of the world, test our solutions, and figure out where we went wrong.

This does not suggest that time is all that is needed to work the world out, if that is possible at all. It merely suggests that prolonged effort may be a good thing towards achieving goals.

To support complex goals that may bridge theories and allow us to carefully consider when we choose to advance a theory, I propose a final element to bind the first four. I propose *time*.

The word time refers not to itself, but its effects. This *may* be impermanence, permanence, change, conditions and their propagation.

- It is *encompassing*. It is based upon time, the flip-side of built form, which is equally a universal constant for all built forms.
- It is *descriptive*. It does not dictate an effect of time or a belief of how time works, but simply an awareness of its existence.
- It is *agnostic*. As people and built forms all are part of physical phenomena, they are all subject to time, regardless of psychological belief.

Again, many theories have already considered time, such as metabolism, who felt the urgency to adapt, Nazism, who modeled a 100-year Reich after Roman's "eternal classical architecture", and sustainable architecture, who thought about future effects. Theories which are neo, post or somehow reactionary or a revival towards an older theory or even future-looking are all addressing issues of time. All consider that *time happens*.

The reason time binds the first four is because it helps us frame the era where theories are valid. It makes us state exactly how universal our proposals are trying to be. This influences theories to be seen not as standalone items but as part of an ongoing process. This awareness of a larger process helps share traits across theories that tackle the same goals, giving us a little push towards spending longer on a goal before giving up.

4 Nature of a framework

The final framework: *firmness, commodity, delight, ethic and time* is nothing new. By definition it has to have existed, been practised and seem blindingly obvious to the profession in order to work. This is the final proof of its validity as a binding force to the profession and to its three outlined characteristics.

Although the framework is presented rather dogmatically, it is designed to be extended and interpreted by its users. The only restriction is in the way it is extended: in the form of theories which state their position on each of the considered elements before elaborating into detail.

If extensions of the five elements are considered, they should be considered being well aware of their goals. For example, this framework differs from the original intentions of Vitruvius, and the later famous extensions by Alberti. Whilst Vitruvius tells how buildings *are* built, and Alberti tells how buildings *are to be built*[1], this framework's goals falls somewhere in between. It is created neither to establish a new discipline or open a new epoch, as Alberti did, nor to be a custodian of tradition, as Vitruvius did. It is a guide between the two to solve an existential crisis.

As a guide, the framework is designed into architectural education. Instead of assuming a guidance of inspiration and genius, a framework provides a rational base. This ensures not only that architects are theorising and building, but join the two in a way that they are in full intellectual command of what they are designing[5].

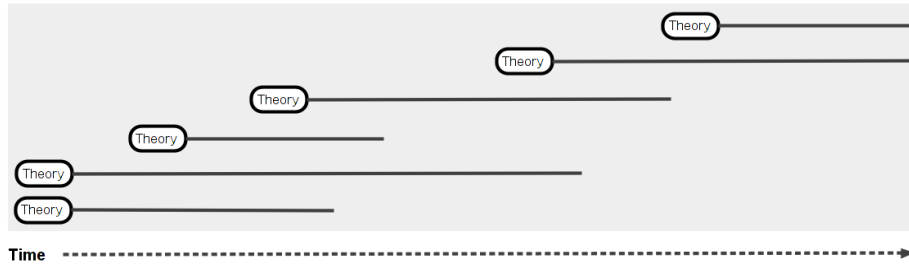


Figure 1: The current mentality. A time-focused view with each theory dominating. This model creates periods of existential crises.

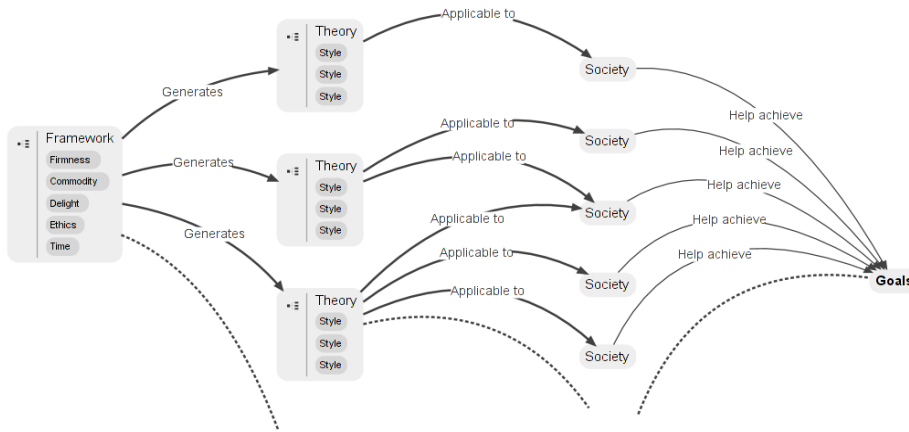


Figure 2: Architecture's foundation - a framework to achieve goals. Theories are no longer marked as irrelevant after a certain time period, but may be reapplied depending on the society. Existential crises can no longer exist as long as everything is described against the framework.

Architectural *discipline* is its true value: as a tool and indicator to help define architectural goals that are larger than individual theories. It converts theoretical argument into a greater synergy across the profession.

A framework is also a declaration. It declares an understanding that we cannot predict the world, but can't ignore it either. Even if we choose to ignore elements in the framework, it will have to be a conscious decision.

Finally, perhaps the most important nature of a framework is its communicability. Its simplicity allows it to be understood by those outside the profession and quickly empathised by those entering it. This *concreteness* helps form the basis of any abstractions used in the industry and distils it to useful, beneficial applications. Because we can once again connect to society on *disciplined*, *measured* and *focused* foundation, we can once again serve it as a profession.

5 Where to from here?

With an army of theories at our command, hundreds of tested implementations, and a framework to generate new ones should we need to, the only thing left is to actually define goals.

The question is, does architecture have a political meaning? The answer is, self-evidently yes. Should architects, like Le Corbusier or anyone else, today, try and change the world? The answer is also yes. Should architects have a blindness to who the client is? The answer is no. (Ricky Burdett, London School of Economics[3])

While the framework cannot prescribe goals, I can propose some as an individual. But what long-term, with high ethical standards, widely recognised, measurable, focused, disciplined, world changing goals are appropriate for the needs of society and the interests of others?

[The eight Millennium Development Goals] form a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries and all the world's leading development institutions. (United Nations[11])

Is it possible? Certainly not at the current state of the industry. Not with focus on theory and undisciplined schisms. Not without foundation. Not without society oriented goals and time to solve them. But perhaps it could be, just perhaps, if we became *professionals*.

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