

Adam Wise

Dr. Amundson

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## The Role of Technology in Architecture: A Dialogue

### Characters:

**Architect:** An historically informed designer seeking wisdom for his practice.

**Master:** A philosopher character, deeply aware of the ramifications of technology, its effect on its user, its potential, and its potential for misuse. He believes that architecture, in utilizing technology, should first and foremost respect culture, that of the collective and individual.

### 1. -Isms and the Temptation of Technology

**Master:** To begin our conversation, I think it worth noting that technology has no agency of its own. It does not act of its own volition; it does not make decisions. It only does that which is in line with the whims of its user.

**Architect:** So, you insinuate then that the notion of Technological Determinism is false then?

**Master:** Yes and no, which might seem confusing, but I will explain. Human beings are not without bias and tendency; we often act in logical and consistent manners with our surroundings. We eat when we're hungry, we sleep when we're tired, we build when we need shelter; and, most often we do these things in the easiest and most natural way, the path of least resistance. Human beings react in much the same way to technology; whatever that technology has the most proclivity for is what we humans, broadly and statistically, end up doing. Iron does well in tension, better than stone; its existence is not some external will that necessitates the building of large iron structures, like Paxton's Crystal palace. Rather, Paxton saw this potential and dreamed up a structure accordingly.

**Architect:** would you that all technology is neutral, possessing no objective alignment?

**Master:** No, rather Technology has natural proclivities which humans reasonably take advantage of. A firearm, in the majority of instances, will not be used by a human the same way a stapler would. It takes an incredibly inventive person, one with willpower and ingenuity, to use a stapler as a firearm or vice versa. Technology does not make us do things, but it does tempt us.

**Architect:** So, what is your point in all of this? Are the natural proclivities of technology something that should be embraced?

**Master:** It is merely to acknowledge that the history being explored in our conversation today is preceded by a vast period of knowledge, tradition, and culture. The introductions of new technologies, beginning most prominently in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, had a vast impact on the world and its cultures. Industrialization

## 2. On Information and Preservation

**Architect:** Ah, your referring firstly to the publication boom, no? Essentially, the reason we look back and see the arrival and spread of both Neo-Palladianism and Neo-Classicism.

**Master:** Precisely. Easily copied books, particularly those illustrated, presented opportunity for architectural style to spread like never before, and people made it so. England quickly shifted from its gothic past to a more classical-inspired future.

**Architect:** Indeed, and that was in one aspect, precisely what Francis Pugin was objecting to: the degradation of society due to the introduction of technology.

**Master:** In a broader sense it was more than just a degradation of moral society, but a degradation or dilution of culture in general. Both the sharing of architectural style through communication technologies and the loss of “cleanliness” in cities due to industrial technologies quickly worked to overwrite the culture of England as they knew it. Pugin, at his core feared that the “carnival of architecture” would eventually work to replace what he understood to be unequivocally English.

**Architect:** As we know, his American contemporary and perhaps philosophical foil, Thomas Ustick Walter, felt otherwise. He believed that national architectural style, as it had been for centuries, was a natural development a natural reflection of the ideals of cultures distinct. One might say he felt style was expressed in the subtler nuances of architecture, those dictated by the climate, the unconscious of the designer, and the innate unexpressed values and qualities of a nation. Style to him was neutral and natural.

**Master:** Indeed, the dichotomy of Pugin and Walter raises the question of who is right? My answer is that they both make valid evaluations of reality and the present state of style as it had been influenced by technology. Pugin’s observations especially remind me of the astounding and eclectic variety to be found in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century within Modernism as well as the soon-to-be-Postmodernism. Pugin’s points on style are indeed warranted. Here is another way to put it: I would align Walter as being more in favor of the natural proclivities of technology, where as Pugin believes in the resistance of such temptation, in this case the temptation to dilute or even overwrite culture for that sake of that which is new, novel, and efficient.

**Architect:** With whom do you align yourself? I have my guesses.

**Master:** If that guess is Pugin, I'm sorry to say that you're wrong. It is not Walter either. Technology is not something to be feared, but rather embraced. One of my core values is that of diversity in architecture, and I understand that the sharing of information and novelty, new styles, new precedents, as well as new materials breeds creativity and imagination. In this, however, I also recognize the inherent value of distinct culture as its own diversity. If anything, I fall between Walter and Pugin: architects should practice with the intent to invent and create anew, but also to respect and maintain the culture out of which he comes. This pertains to architectural style, social values, and even craft traditions.

### 3. Honoring the Craft

**Architect:** Ah, I suppose in that sense you align yourself somewhat with Morris and his Arts and Crafts movement?

**Master:** I do actually, to a degree. Morris was responding to a similar context as Pugin, only his response was cloaked in language a bit more secular. I first and foremost applaud his pursuits of uplifting work for the craftsman. Too often we forget that the architect is a position of power and, likewise, responsibility. Like a king ruling over a nation, the architect has a responsibility to all who work in his or her footsteps as well as the client. Every subtlety of his design possesses ramifications far beyond that which is often acknowledged. A single pen stroke or CAD line, an eraser or delete command, each determines in some respect the livelihood of those who arrive to carry out his or her design.

**Architect:** I can say from experience that this is true. It should be acknowledged that the presence of technology doesn't warrant the neglect of those responsibilities.

**Master:** Indeed, the nature of the design should not compromise the humanity of the manufacturer or craftsman. Morris indeed also did a remarkable job of putting these ideas to practice. The Red House, designed for him by Phillip Webb, not only included the craftsman, but the totally designed gothic character and materiality of the house also helped to sustain English culture, both in ideals and in crafting traditions, such as masonry and woodworking. The House was designed by an architect who recognized his responsibility. My only objection to Morris comes in his resistance to technology and industrialization entirely. As we know, he envisioned one day that such hand-crafted goods would become economically viable for all people.

**Architect:** The American Arts and Crafts movement, in some ways, performed better on that front. Many of those works were still for the wealthier, however. The movement produced some wonderful works of art, however. This is in part thanks to the machine and its potential to extend the abilities of the designer.

**Master:** Aha! Indeed, you reference Frank Lloyd Wright in that sense. I am in agreement; technology does indeed extend the abilities of its user. That is only one sense by which to ethically interact with technology, however. Wright was in some ways a power-monger. His design was his, to the neglect of any craftsperson that might be working under him. Looking back to Morris here, architecture as a unification of the Lesser arts should be a glorification of various individual creativities. In this sense, the Church of Jesus Christ Scientist, designed by Bernard Maybeck, was a finer piece of architecture in the movement than anything of Wright's.

**Architect:** A bold statement, and I one I'm not sure I can agree with. You may have your opinion nonetheless. However, this topic raises another point of dispute: that of the role of technology as it relates to the artistry. You're an informed historian; Werkbund-wise, would you say you align with more with Henry Van-de-Velde or Hermann Muthesius?

#### 4. It There any Place for the Craftsperson?

**Master:** Assuming the presence of manufacturing, this is in the question of whether design be attuned to the particular proclivities of that manufacturing, or whether design should occur independent of manufacturing considerations, as with many of the organic motifs of the Nouveau works? I personally sympathize with the position of Van-de-Velde in this instance. Irregular, complex design, in some sense, opens a window for the craftsperson to get involved, even if that involvement is not the design work itself. Muthesius' alternative is assembly line-monotony.

**Architect:** Haha, assembly line indeed. That reminds me of Corbusier's understanding of architecture as a machine. He literally designed buildings to look like vehicles: the Citrohan House anyone? That being said, I understand your perspective; you insinuate that the international style was an even less-equitable use of technology due to its further removal from human-crafted materials?

**Master:** That would be my point. Large scale industrial materials like steel, iron, and large sheets of glass tended to be favored. It is worth noting, though, that Modernist architects weren't always so alienating with their materials. Mies van Der Rohe and those of the Amsterdam School in the Netherlands knew how to engage with the unique qualities of the brick. Michel de Klerk should be especially recognized for those instances in his Het Schip where he provided creative space for the working of the craftsperson. In this, he not only engaged the creative rights of those working under him, he facilitated the continuation of local cultural craft tradition, stylistic tradition, and folk tradition.

**Architect:** Being that we've made it this far, we might as well finish the historical journey. My evaluation so far of your position would be that you emphasize the ethical responsibility of the architect and you believe that his or her utilizations of technology should always occur to both edify and respect individual and culture. This is to the end that diversity might both be maintained and expanded.

**Master:** You've been paying attention.

**Architect:** In that case, our last stop is Venturi and the Postmodern sensibilities of symbolism. Though it wasn't the case with all postmodern architects, Venturi understand the inherent value to symbolism in architecture, especially as it related to an individual place. Though Venturi's buildings were energetic, creative, and rather eclectic, they acknowledged their context quite well. Venturi's work on the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London recognized the importance of acknowledging and continuing present cultural tradition in and through architecture.

**Master:** You are a sharp one. Indeed, I could not have put it better myself.

## 5. Looking Ahead

**Architect:** Through this conversation on the preservation of tradition, I am reminded of a more recent event of which you are most certainly aware: the recent tragedy with Notre Dame? Though most of the stonework was preserved through the blaze, one cannot help but mourn the loss of the exquisite medieval woodwork used in the roof construction.

**Master:** It is indeed a shame. In my conversations with those unaffiliated with the intimacies of architecture, even they too acknowledge and recognize the great loss of history within the timberwork of that great structure. There truly are none left with the same craft skills or knowledge to ever do justice in its reconstruction.

**Architect:** I have seen a number of the proposals put forth for its rebuilding.

**Master:** we can only hope and pray that whatever proposal is chosen, it will be one that honors and edifies that traditions that came before it and the traditions that literally sit beneath it. Nevertheless, whatever the outcome might be, Notre Dame will stand as a symbol, within worlds both public and architectural, of the importance of the preservation both of culture and tradition. May such a tragedy never occur again.

**END**