

Identity and Judgment: Five Theses and a Program (c) David Kolb, 1994

The theses and program below ask about judgment and tradition in a self-consciously plural world. The little program points down a path I am exploring in a pair of texts, one on notions of identity in the history of philosophy, and one on the identity of buildings and places. The underlying issue of those texts is: what will replace the old notion of a particular identity?

Places, persons, and communities do not and have never had such simple identities as our concepts often made them out to have. But our world today defies the application of universal categories and judgments to fixed particulars. Our places and identities become complexly multiplied, they interpenetrate, the electronic no-place / all-place opens before us. Yet at the same time exclusions and particularities assert themselves everywhere.

If universal judgment seems unlikely, relativism is one response, but relativism remains within the horizon of universals and particulars. What kinds of identity can provide standpoints for describing and judging today?

Five Theses

I. Architecture has a distinctive exposure to community judgment.

Architectural works obtrude into the physical context to a degree and with a permanence that other arts seldom accomplish. They are exposed to daily use, involved in different activities and interactions. They shape our lives, so judgment about them seems important. In planning and constructing architectural works many people cooperate. During this process intentions are explained; functions are evaluated; choices are made. Compared to the other arts, there is then more evidence about the intentions and program behind the work and the choices made in its design. So judgment on these intentions and choices seems possible. Such community judgment can range from public debate about the appropriateness of a new town hall, to learned professional critical discussion of the merits and demerits of a new project, to two people saying after a party that they would never live in That house.

II. Architecture has a distinctive resistance to judgment.

Although statements of intention and program exist, they are texts that need interpretation. Perhaps there were unwritten agreements, perhaps there were private intentions, perhaps the parties understood the terms differently, perhaps the language has changed. No text is self-interpreting.

Although architectural works intrude into the public context, a context is not a predetermined and fully definite thing; it too needs interpretation, and the building may interpret the context as much as the context the building.

Although buildings have more flanks exposed to criticism, they tend to outlive their critics and the climate of opinion that judges them. Functions and modes of life change. Judgments that seemed firm lose their hold as time goes on. Grand old buildings become an embarrassment because no suitable use can be found for them. "That house" becomes something to be preserved for its unique quirks. The "inappropriate" town hall becomes a symbol of our city. The work that violated the rules of a style becomes emblematic of a new style.

III. Disagreement over standards cannot be legislated away.

Judges usually evaluate program and design choices on the basis of many sorts of criteria: function, appearance, immediate reactions, community standards, previous experiences, notions of function, rules of design, philosophies of art, and so on. It is not automatically clear what aspects of the context are relevant and what previous works should be taken as precedents. There are many possible relations of similarity. Who will judge the judges? In today's communities the "we" that judges is not so unified.

When there is disagreement about the standards of judgment, it is tempting but futile to insist that a building be judged only in this or that context or according to this one set of rules, because the differences may run too deep. For example, between Gothic and Classical in the nineteenth century there was no agreement on questions of style, but also about what should be the appropriate architectural precedents, which were the important similarities to be followed and functions to be filled, and ultimately about what the community was trying to be for itself.

Attempting to avoid the nineteenth century's seemingly arbitrary choices of symbolism and rules, many modernists tried to determine universal standards based on a small number of overriding functions. But either this forcefully reduced the scope of life or the restrictions were swamped by the vitality of social life. That same vitality makes us realize that agreement over standards is not necessarily a good thing; there are levels and creativity and conflict within any community. Uniform judgments may express domination rather than consensus.

IV. Judgment is not detached and arbitrary.

Another temptation is to see the judge as detached from any of the possible sub-communities and criteria. Such a judge would first perform (or accept) some arbitrary act of interpretation that established relations of similarity and precedent, thus defining the object and criteria of judgment. The myth of such a detached judge is the same as the myth of the architect as sovereign form-giver.

Arbitrary choice does not create inhabitation. We do not so freely locate ourselves; we find ourselves already within languages, forms of life, multiple ongoing projects and precedents. Their multiplicity and our mode of being in them keeps us from any simple detachment.

V. Judgment is not pre-defined.

The multiplicity of our places and forms of life, and of our mode of being in them, also keeps us from simply enacting any pre-programmed judgment. Our being where we are does not mean that we are already in a position to deploy completely definite norms, precedents, and criteria. The judging self, the community, the building, its norms, and the contexts are all involved together, but not as pre-defined items. Neither we nor the buildings are fully definite standing around available for judgment. Not all activity is on the side of the judging subject. Buildings act too; they can judge themselves and they can change us, and this beyond the intentions and choices of their design. The work is always in progress.

A Program

Many difficulties arise in thinking about architectural judgment and inhabitation because we rely on the categories of universal and particular. Our universal activity defines the particular. Or, our particular desires are universalized into standards. Or, judgment is a matter of finding the right universal concepts, or the right particular application of a given universal concept. If the judge's criteria are local to another particular group, what is their authority here? If they are universal and substantive, is there a universal community they speak for? If they are universal and formal, how do they get their content? Judgment seems to be torn between universal rules that have an obscure relation to local content, and a particularity that can lead to an enfeebling relativism. We see both of these today, as well as mixtures of the two as in standardized historical postmodernism.

In architectural criticism and philosophy debate tends to oscillate between these extremes and there are various philosophical and critical strategies for trying to blunt the alternatives. In politics we are familiar with attempts today to assert universal standards, and with sometimes violent attempts to assert purified local particularisms. What those opposed trends have in common is a defense of the opposition between universal and particular against a more multiple identity for places.

The identity of places is not well described by the traditional opposition between universal and particular. The way places become definite is not by assembling particular pre-defined details nor by particularizing a pre-given universal essence. If inhabitation is more than particularizing a universal identity, then the judgment whether something is appropriate involves another kind of discernment than applying a universal rule. If the identity of places and people is not well described as a collection of particulars, then judgment is more than the collision of particular desires with or over particular objects.

Discussing the problem of finding criteria for judging forms of life and consciousness, Hegel said "consciousness simultaneously distinguishes itself from something, and at the same time relates itself [in its own being] to it" («MDUL»Phenomenology of Spirit«MDNM», Introduction, paragraph 82). There is no one-way judging distance. Building, place, judge, and community are linked; for Hegel the ensemble evaluates itself when it tries to become actual and definite. When the culture, or the building, or the judge tries to "posit itself" as definite and affirmative it discovers built-in tensions and transgressions within its criteria and its presumed wholeness. It judges itself by its transitions towards something different and more inclusive. For Hegel there is a necessity to this process, based on the development of structures of reason, and this leads through many stages to a self-conscious community whose inhabitation encompasses division and negation without being torn apart.

This Hegelian dream seems a quixotic and metaphysical goal today. On the one hand, we find around us what Hegel would see as relapses into too easy affirmation of simple universal norms, or of given particularities. On the other hand, we declare our age post-modern. Some of that post-modernism is yet another easy historicism. But a mutated audacious variant of Hegel's gesture appears in deconstructive claims about the necessary transgression involved in any posited unity or the necessary homelessness within any dwelling. Self-deconstruction and Hegelian self-consolidation both refuse to isolate the judge, or the building. Both seek kinds of necessity that are not the application of universal rules to particular cases. For both, the building judges itself when it tries to do what it seems to be, and this judgment does not reduce to a detached subject measuring the fulfillment of a function. For both, there is no simple given identity to places and selves--or to buildings.

Could we rethink the particularity of places as neither simply given nor simply constructed (or judged) by an active subjectivity? Could we follow the suggestion that self and place become definite, in varying rhythms, together, yet without falling into Hegel's sometimes extreme holism or into deconstruction's sometime extreme resentment of unity?

Like many people, I remember as a child trying to write my full address in concentric circles: David Kolb, 36 Kenwood Road, Garden City, Nassau County, Long Island, New York, U.S.A., North America, Western Hemisphere, Earth, Solar System, Milky Way Galaxy, The Local Group, The Universe. That neat concentric hierarchy made me feel both very important and very insignificant. That hierarchy included many systems of objects, but few places as I would define them now. Now I would have a hard time writing my full address, for I live in many places at once that are not concentric nor stacked into neat levels. They intersect at angles and lie together at foldings and are open and closed to one another in complex ways without exclusive borders. My inhabitation is multiple, and that multiplicity is not just an additive series of smaller seamless inhabitations. Even the single places are fractured; they are not definite particulars resting easily under universals. Which is not to say that the places are indefinite, only that it is difficult to find ways to think their identity and interrelation. This complicates judgment but does not make it disappear. For within those multiple places, perhaps as a condition of their standing together, there are some norms that go beyond particular local preferences yet are not of some universal place.

What would judgment enact in a space that is not structured according to universal and particular? It would not repeat a movement of sovereign constitution. Passing judgment would not be the authoritative act of the official critic (or of rivals for that status). The judge would not stand passing sentence based on the final universal or the dominating particular. Perhaps there would be judgment on architectural works in the way we might assay a craft object for its workability and for the way it speaks to us while also forming us. That judgment would not be univocal, for our identity is not simple. There would also be judgment in the way a place or a building articulates the complexity of its identity and of our inhabitation.

David Kolb received his PhD in philosophy from Yale University, and is the author of «MDUL»The Critique of Pure Modernity«MDNM» (a comparison of Hegel and Heidegger and their views on modernity), «MDUL»Postmodern

Sophistications«MDNM» (a discussion of the role of tradition in philosophy and architecture), and «MDUL»Socrates in the Labyrinth«MDRV»«MDUL»«MDNM» (a collection of hypertext essays about non-linear writing in philosophy). He has published essays on architecture and planning, postmodernism, and topics in the history of philosophy. He has taught at Fordham University, the University of Chicago, Nanzan University in Japan, and is presently the Charles A. Dana Professor of Philosophy at Bates College in the northern state of Maine.

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