**WTF TO DO WITH PHILOSOPHY IN ARCHITECTURE:
A QUESTION OF FAIR DESIGN**
Jacob Voorthuis

**All is fair in love and war, so the saying goes. But after the dust settles, what constitutes 'fair'
in a post-conflict scenario where the stakes are high for wrongs to be righted and injustices
to be addressed? Jacob Voorthuis dips into philosophy to get a better sense of what 'fair design'
might be, attempting a model against which one can systematically test each design decision
for fairness. Hint: it's a good idea to know your achievable ends and your available means.**

Let's begin by going over seemingly familiar territory
so that we get the relation between things right, in such
a way that we have something to talk about. One: Let's
take the term 'philosophy' as the thinking of theory and
practice. Two: in that case, practice is doing things. And
three: the ideas you might have about doing things form
what we could call theory. So we might have a theory of
fair design or a theory of sustainable design. And practice
would do well to take into account that theory. The role
of philosophy in design then is about thinking about what
you might want and why, and how you might go about
getting what you want so that you get what you hoped
for. It's that simple. People who talk the whole time with-
out doing what they talk about give talking a bad name,
while in fact, it is their doing that is the real problem.
Alternatively, people who do stupid and horrible things
because they hold silly ideas give practice a bad name
while it is their theory that is the problem.
　　　　When design is about enriching our experi-
ential world, it is a wonderful discipline, unequalled in its
impact. When it is charged with repairing things that are
badly messed up, the going is tougher. This is especially
true when we realize what it means to live in a world that
gets messed up precisely because we appear to have so
many different theories about what is right and what is
wrong, many of them in direct conflict with each other,
leading to some nasty situations indeed: war, rape, viola-
tion, destruction, humiliation, greed, and inhuman dwelling
conditions. How are designers to maneuver themselves
in a battlefield where things have become so complicated?

When the people around us appear to be led by some
very strange ideas, what ideas should we ourselves be led
by? There can be no clear answer to this, but there are
a few good and bad theories, good and bad practices.
To design in difficult situations, it is, for example, a good
idea to become clear about achievable ends and avail-
able means. One should take the time to acquire a well-
balanced image of the playing field, who the stakeholders
are, which stakes are urgent, which are important, and
how and under what conditions can they be responded
to. The rest of this column offers a model against which
one can systematically test each design decision for fair-
ness. It is not the only model; there are others. But it
might be worth taking this one seriously, as fairness is the
virtue that gets badly crumpled when things turn bad
and is the first that needs to be restored in order for
things to get better.
　　　　　Suppose, just for the sake of it, that existence
produces essence, that our life acquires and generates
meaning as we act and reflect upon our actions, rather
than having that meaning or essence fixed and pre-given.
Some, particularly those led by established religious
ideas, suggest that all moral boundaries directing our
actions would fall away to be replaced by a single-minded,
all-consuming focus on survival in a selfish world. We
would thus enter a universe where ends always justify
the means, the scheming universe of Machiavellian real-
politik. Moreover we would engage with this world without
a shred of conscience, after all, the world is *meaningless*.
It is a stark conclusion, which indeed many have arrived

at and put into effect by behaving accordingly. But perhaps this kind of nihilism is not quite radical enough. In fact it is rather naïve and tame; it rests upon a conclusion that does not follow from the premises. The world isn't exactly meaningless, it produces meaning and transforms it as we go through the stories we tell each other. From this we can conclude that we do not have to assume that we are irredeemable beasts, stuck in a mould that evolution has given us. In fact the mould evolution has given us is extremely dynamic; it gives us the power to transcend our selfish selves; it has given us the ability to learn and redesign our world through the institution of rules for cooperation and coexistence. And when we respect those rules and reform them when needed, things can get better, fairer. If we are truly radical we would realize that we are capable of transcending ourselves *because of evolution,* we can learn, through culture, through design and through the development of technology. Design is possible because of our capacity to explore and build experience, to negotiate usefully between blind or *natural* selection and deliberative *reflective* selection; call it evolution 2.0 if you will; call it *design*. And design is itself a product of evolution. It means that egoistic selfishness, which has served its purpose, can be overcome by design to transform itself into enlightened self-interest.

In this way we might rediscover useful boundaries to our behavior in the realization that, as survival goes, surviving in a pleasant world where kindness, consideration, and fairness reign, and where we do not allow ourselves to be at the mercy of those capable of doing horrible things and those who are led by strange fictions, is ultimately better, and at the very least, more comfortable. There is surely only a lonely, or at best conspiratorial joy in the horrible. The joy of a friendly and committed world is infinitely greater, if slightly more sedate. As such it is not only worth being kind and considerate to others but it is worth building trustworthy institutions to ensure that we prevent ourselves doing horrible things to each other and to ourselves. In fact the most radical kind of existentialism combines with the most radical view of evolution to give us … fairness and civilization, the grand project of trying to live together. The important point to be made here is that these virtues do not become self-defeating when adopted by everyone and can easily and usefully be adopted unilaterally. And it might be worth doing so when you are responsible for the meaning of your own life and career.

The attraction of an existentialist position is that it does not assume any one theory necessarily better or worse than another; it happily allows for religion or capitalism. They are not the problem in themselves, their meaning is generated through our engagement with the world, meaning is produced by what we do and the ideas we have about that. Furthermore it encourages a unilateral approach: we are in charge of seeking our own responsibility in every situation. In order to act well and seek your own responsibility, you do not first have to convert others to a specific point of view. You work by example. Morality comes into play as actants claim their use of the environment they act within. Intentions behind our actions and the consequences of our actions are discussed against our actual engagement with the world in order to seek out the point of view from which any decision appears to be either a good or a bad idea. We can do all this unilaterally just by doing things as well as we are capable of. That point needs to be stressed.

Design presupposes experience and exploration. Where design has developed useful answers it relies on experience, where it doesn't, it engages creative exploration, which must be left free to explore any road it chooses. At the same time both paths, design by experience and design through creative exploration, should be regulated by testing each decision we make against a clear idea of the quality we are trying to realize. At this point I would like to introduce two simple rules of thumb or maxims designed by the philosopher John Rawls, to do just that. Rawls arrived at his model precisely because of his horrifying experiences during World War Two. The maxims are called the principles of liberty and of difference respectively.

The first one, which should take precedence over all others rests on this idea: *All people (including those living in the future) should be left free to pursue their own idea of the good*. The design maxim goes as follows: *design so that you pursue your own good in such a way that you enable others to pursue their good*. In the negative variant it goes: *Design so that in pursuing your own good you do not prevent others from pursuing theirs*. Now, you might object and reply: "That is silly, it is impossible!" Impossible it may be, but it is worth striving for and it is not nearly as difficult as you might think. Built into this maxim is a crucial restriction that limits the number of goods you need to take account of in your design. You see, when *everyone* is to be left free to pursue their own good, any good that prevents someone else pursuing theirs is automatically disqualified. Only the goods that can be described as fair, are left over and need to be taken seriously. Experience shows us which goods have shown themselves to be fair, and explorative design can find new ones. Another objection might be this: "you said that *everyone* should give each other that freedom. In other words we first have to convince everyone to live by this rule before it can work!" Well, sure, it would be wonderful if everyone did, but the fact is that this isn't the case and will never be the case. This need not stop you from doing the best you can.

The second idea is this: *difference in the distribution of goods is not a bad thing in itself*. The difference between, for example, rich and poor becomes a problem when riches are acquired at the cost of others, making them poor. So the design maxim derived from this idea goes like this: Design in such a way that you improve not just your own lot, but also the lot of the other stakeholders (and not just the ones paying you or intimidating you). In other words, try to make every design decision a win-win situation. You might object here again and say: "well that is impossible". But again I beg to differ. Benefitting one stakeholder more than another is not a sin within this system of fairness. It is only bad when you worsen the situation of one to benefit that of another. It requires you to show due consideration to all users, including yourself. And when the inevitable conflicts do arise, we have a basis for negotiation, namely fairness.

I would suggest that this is a practical theory that gives us a model for all sorts of sustainable design, ecological, political, social, you name it. It does not get in the way of radical and creative design and at the same time it encourages discretion and consideration. It would seem to me to be a model that could usefully be applied in those situations where conflict is rife and the need to understand the situation is essential to a sustainable solution of the problem.