competency • competition • Chinese thought • biome aesthetics

Competency Addiction

Commentary

-

Shiqiao Li

Abstract

We seem to be addicted to competencies; we train incessantly to improve existing ones and innovate to acquire new ones. Our curriculum vitae is packed with exquisite details of competencies in great variety. Competency is distinctly and deliberately formulated away from goodness, the long-standing moral quality that grounded virtue. Virtue is about the moral conditions of being, while competency is about an amoral effectiveness. When we say one is too clever for one's own good, we speak of a paradox of addiction: pushing adrenaline and dopamine towards the levels of harm. Business corporations and educational institutions seem to have self-selected their prestige by aligning themselves with market value and research funding, seeing them as benchmarks of competency and success. Like substance addiction, competency addiction began with genuine excitement of innovation and benefit but developed into an all-consuming desire for techno-utopias oblivious of their damage to ecology. Perhaps it is time to ask: why did we switch from virtue to competency in the first place?

Affiliation:
University of Virginia

Contacts:
sl2fa [at] virginia [dot] edu

DOI:
10.17454/ARDETH10.03

ARDETH #10 #11

Architecture and utility

The rise of competency lies in the thought – accepted to be so true that it appears to hardly need more thinking – that competency improves the likelihood of reaching the "end" of a process: that of knowing or making. This is Aristotle's *telos* that perpetually retrofits itself on to human labour to insist on a consequential distinction between better and worse. In the empiricist and pragmatist rendition of *telos*, the usefulness of knowledge and product becomes the primary legitimate reason for knowing and making. This view has come to dominate our understanding through, among so many other aspects, the powerful industrial-military complex as perhaps the ultimate fruit of the usefulness of knowing and making. There is nothing more useful in human affairs than a fast and efficient killing machine. This is a deceptively simple scheme, but one that has gained extraordinary traction over less use-based intellectual and aesthetic devices. This preference has become a moral commitment (and a false consciousness) that we must now reformulate by going back to key moments of its emergence.

The first moment of emergence of the usefulness of knowledge is in the late seventeenth century, when the idea of architecture as function took root. Architecture, as we have formulated as a discipline and a profession in the past four hundred years, has become a unique example of usefulness through centuries of transformations. It is perhaps worthwhile to pause for a moment to see how this happened. The debate between Perrault and Blondel in late seventeenth century France was about whether or not architectural principles should come from "customs" of the Ancients, or "reason" of the Moderns; Perrault clearly shifted the discourse from the authority of the ancients to the authority of nature. Nature gave him not divine proportion in architecture, but human knowledge of materials and structures. Competency from this new human-based knowledge of architecture did not come from knowing Greek or Roman precedents, but from knowing the building in a similar way as a physician knowing the body: like a biological body, a building was assessed in relation to structural and functional usefulness. Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke could not agree more with Perrault's new standard for architecture: Wren was also somewhat a physician, having trained his drafting and model making skills with Thomas Willis, the renowned anatomist of the brain and nerves. Wren's early view of a building was that of a physician's patient; his competency as an architect was to establish and restore the health of the building. In this sense, in his early buildings, he was indeed less competent in managing the customs of architectural design of the Greeks and Romans, but more competent in putting up a sturdy and useful building.

This monumental shift in the late seventeenth century has gradually given us two forms of contemporary competency in architecture: as managers of financial instruments and as designers of useful shelters. Philosophical frameworks such as Jeremy Bentham's goal-oriented theory (happiness) would eventually replace Kant's reason-based theory, argu-

ing that "reason" is far too fragile to be used as a basis for philosophy. Aesthetic experience of architecture also shifted from the classical love for perfect geometry to a love for the efficacious machine; today, one of the most enduring sources of aesthetic pleasure is in what Paul Virilio characterized as speed, a dromology, taking what is fast and efficient as the beautiful. Perhaps the most consequential result of this shift is the rise of a model of society which may be described as the "merchant republic". Since the heydays of Venice, the path to wealth shifted from trade to manufacture, extraction, and finance (and most often in combination), the social-political institutions formulated to manage these goals. These social-political institutions are constructed on the foundation of usefulness, as military power, and as commodities. The governments were flexible with a fluid balance of power best suited for commerce, different from the older forms with a static concentration of power on a single emperor or monarch or spiritual leader. Most important of all, the totality of society had been re-imagined as "economy", the idea that converted land to real estate, things to commodities, human life to labour, time to opportunity cost; this enormous monetization of society, so plainly explained by Adam Smith, is a rudimentary way to understand where competency in architecture is located today.

In this context, buildings are first and foremost understood as enormous stores of value; they have been one of the key financial instruments to keep cities afloat and merchants rich. Real estate has been the iceberg and architecture the tip, even though the academic discipline of architecture would like to think otherwise. Today we are accustomed to the beauty of buildings that are closely mapped onto their functions: as efficacious machines and as ingenious marketing strategies, all contributing to a cultural industry paralleling a commodities industry. It is in the efficacy of the machine and the ingenuity of development that professions hone their skills and schools train their students. The brave pronouncements of the Futurists were never just about cultural revolution, but about recalibrating aesthetics and morality with the demand of the efficacious machine and the ingenious real estate development. Unlike hot-headed architects such as Sant'Elia and Le Corbusier, Max Weber was, at the turn of the twentieth century, calmly pointing out the sinister side of the efficacious machine: its intentionally designed iron cage of bureaucratization and its unprecedented ability to inflict violence best suited for new versions of the merchant republic. While Weber's iron cage materialized today in our digital surveillance and nuclear weapons, Sant'Elia's and Corbusier's new future of equality associated with the machine never came to realization. The enlargement of architecture as real estate development – the latest version of which is the "developmental state" – has been vastly facilitated by our increasing ability to use architecture to the goal of endless accumulation of wealth. In other words, we have become so competent in monetizing and functionalizing architecture that we have far exceeded the capacity of the supply chain of the planet. By a twist of fate, we have become grossly and tragically incompetent as managers of the planet's

resources by becoming so narrowly skilled in so many ways. In the past decades, this paradox has been a primary focus of critical theory; it is worth noting that Bruno Latour's influential critical review of modernity began with the seventeenth century, with the same set of characters who also created architecture. Robert Boyle's air pump and Thomas Hobbes' controlled state came from the same context of Perrault's and Wren's patient-architecture (Latour, 1993). All of them worked together in and around the Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society (Li, 2006).
The second moment of emergence is much more ancient; it is embedded in the rudimentary elements of the Indo-European civilization. As the Greek origin of the notion of usefulness (*telos*) alludes, our contemporary version of competency has much deeper intellectual formulations. David Anthony, anthropologist, historian, and linguist, brings an important understanding of the deep connections between a model of language, an economy, and moral and aesthetic experience (Anthony, 2007). The understanding is that a combination of a phonetic language (Proto Indo-European) and the domestication of horses (archaeological evidence) enabled an unprecedented ability to expand across the world starting from about 4,500 BCE, from an area in today's southern Russia and Ukraine westward to Ireland and southward to northern India. There is an enormous amount of competency involved in this expansion; it is indeed grounded in an ability – in less purified ways than our modern varieties – to harness usefulness of the horse and the chariot. Conquest was the model of growth; it is a framework that morphed from conquest of territories and peoples to that of resources of the planet. Greek philosophy is perhaps the most outstanding crystallization of thought to pursue competency among early Indo-European cultures; it supplied a set of thought categories that we still use today. François Jullien, philosopher and transcultural thinker, suggests that it is a particular feature in Greek philosophy, that of "ontology", that gave rise to its powerful influence around the world. The ancient Greeks gave us a tool kit that first asks the knowledge question of "what is", and the corresponding moral question of "how to become". This turns the world into objects (the receiving end of the "is") and human life into the becoming of being (life as transition to its ideal state), largely bypassing the idea that life and things co-exist, and life is what is being lived instead of a transition (Jullien, 2019). An important understanding here is that Greek philosophy is as much a consequence of thought as it was one of language, the language of predication. Indo-European languages are inflected and predicational to guide thoughts to objectify, and to transform life to being. It is not surprising that twentieth-century critical reviews of Western philosophy, such as those of Heidegger, Benjamin, and Derrida, are heavily invested in the investigation of language and grammar.

The unthought
In the past decades, we have questioned if the seventeenth century recentering of architecture from virtue to utility was wise, and if Greek philosophy operated too narrowly as to have produced an inability to

think complexity. What Jullien tells us is that if we are open to other intellectual resources, we may be able to circumvent the log jam of heavy ontological apparatus we carry with us all the time. He takes us to China; not the China of the East and West, but one that is "strangely normal". The East and West comparison gets us nowhere, as it perpetuates a dialectic that is deeply conventional in philosophy. Sinitic civilization is a strangely normal because it is subject to, in the words of French Sinologist Marcel Granet, "neither God nor law", yet it is able to maintain spiritual life and social order (Granet, 1934). This strangely normal life in China was not marginal in world history; Angus Maddison's research on sizes of economies over a period of two thousand years shows that, until 1850s, China accounted for twenty to thirty percent of world's economy, well above the total of Europe (Maddison, 2007). Historically, China was separated from the influence of the Indo-European expansion; Indo-European civilization, with its vast grip of the world from Ireland to India, stopped at the edges of the Taklamakan Desert and the mountain ranges of Tianshan and Himalaya forming a ring of geographical barriers. By the time northern nomadic tribes and European navigators entered into China from the north and the ocean, Sinitic civilization had sufficient time to mature, unlike other non-Indo-European civilizations such as Egyptian and Mayan. Chinese thought is not ontological, in the sense that it does not ask the question "what is"; it asks what always already works and how to be part of it. It would have considered the Greek focus on "becoming" and "being" as an intellectual digression that prevent us from grasping the larger picture of the "always already working". This larger picture, the ten thousand things or *wanwu*, is a key conception that justifies life; this was clearly formulated in early treatises of Daoism and remains influential in Chinese thought. The epistemological and moral framework of Chinese thought, in this sense, is the "unthought" in Greek philosophy. What is the unthought in architecture, and what is the parallel to competency in relation to this possible unthought architecture?

To engage with this question, we must go back in time to imagine the traditional archetypal person in China, the scholar-official (also known as the literati); one of the most interesting fact about the scholar-official is that they cultivated gardens. Chinese scholar-officials were never too far from their gardens; in fact, they thought in and with their gardens, while Jesus of Nazareth and Jerome of Stridon thought in desserts in isolation. Scholar-officials lived among rocks, ponds, plants, and animals and listened to their sounds, intellectual-monks in the West – Derrida calls them Greek-Jews and Jew-Greeks – paced in purified cloisters and craved for silence. Scholar-officials had their buildings built as if they are one of many, paying attention equally to rocks, ponds, plants, and animals; intellectual-monks had their buildings built as commanding objects of perfection. Scholar-officials sought aesthetic experience of architecture in figurative relationality among ten thousand things, intellectual-monks invested enormous prestige in the typological and functional classifications of buildings. Scholar-officials were materialists, intellectual-monks were

utopians. All cultures create gardens; but not all gardens are the same. Indo-European aesthetic experience of gardens, at a level of generality, derives from formulating human "viewpoints", forms of the "picturesque", a product of the eye's ray. Gardens in Chinese thought are a cosmos of living and acting things, forming a conviviality and an "equalization of things" (Zhuangzi's term). Anthropologist Philippe Descola suggests that in the world of Western science (that of intellectual-monks), all things have the same materiality but different spirituality (naturalism), an framework of understanding that sees nature as resources (Descola, 2014). Descola characterizes Chinese thought as "analogist", but I would argue that it is much closer to a form of animism in a sense that things in scholar-officials' gardens have different materiality but same spirituality.

The world of scholar-officials and that of intellectual-monks should not be understood as dialectical opposites, but divergences that must be kept intact and suspended in productive tension. They are not explainable in terms of similarities and differences. They do not "correspond" to each other. The moment they are subsumed into dialectic similarities and differences, they lose their genuine significance in this context. What becomes apparent is that our idea of architecture – an idea with some 150 years of development if we count from École de Beaux-Arts – is far from a foregone conclusion. This revisit of the past is about departing from the cloister and arriving at the garden, from object of ontology to the life of co-existence. Following from this journey, any notion of competency, in this sense, would have to involve a moral framework of equality between rocks, ponds, plants, and animals. It is, to trace one of the most cherished political values in the Indo-European civilization, a deep democracy. In this deep democracy, anthropocentrism and usefulness of buildings would have to be rethought.

This sojourn to Chinese thought cannot be completed without noting the closeness between poetry, writing, and gardens (Li, 2014). The Sinitic is not Indo-European primarily because it did not share the phonetic scripts. The consequence of this civilizational choice is immense. When scholar-officials thought with their gardens, they wrote poems instead of systematic treatises. Systematic treatises, as the normative intellectual output in Indo-European cultures, could be seen to have been an anthropocentric fortress that fends off the presence of other things in thought. Scholar-officials wrote in shapes with brushes, simultaneously as literature, poetry, and art. Phonetic languages purges shapes from writing and figures from thought. The links between shapes in writing and shapes in gardens are particularly rich as a source of moral and aesthetic pleasure. Systematic treatises on architecture undoubtedly procured buildings of extraordinary sophistication and grandeur, but the closeness of scholar-officials' buildings, writings, and gardens, through their modest size, locate a field of thought much closer to the environment. Here, the "discipline" of architecture is horizontal rather than vertical. The center of aesthetic experience in the garden – as manifested in the sixteenth century *The Peony Pavilion* to the nineteenth century *Dream of the Red Mansion* – is

intertwined with the complex relationships between equalized things in the garden. The highly cultivated art of landscape painting in China – a much earlier development than that in the Renaissance – is an example of how the closeness between thoughts, buildings, writings, and gardens could look like in art.

Among all the Orientalist flings with Chinese culture, this closeness between thoughts, buildings, writings, and gardens is perhaps one genuinely productive idea. Leibniz was one of the first philosophers to take note on this; he sensed that the continuous violence between religious sects (he was born at the end of the Thirty Years War, perhaps the most destructive war in European history over religious differences) he witnessed had something to do with faith treatises resulting from a linguistic fault that distorted the correspondence between thoughts and things; he believed that it was a problem of language of predication (Leibniz, 1998). Predication is based on separation. Leibniz argued that a language similar to Chinese, a "universal character", would be able to create a different philosophy, and a different and less violent understanding of religious differences. Perhaps the most insightful comment on the Chinese language came from the diplomat and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt; he suggested that the nature of the Chinese language enabled a "thought of generality" rather than the thought of specificity of the Greeks. The thought of generality – not gendered, not timed, not subjectified, not objectified – is where a closeness of thoughts and things can take place, while Greek thought, driven by its inherent demand for grammatical specificity, distances from things by turning things into classified objects (Humboldt, 1999) through the use of abstract signifiers. If religious violence was the driving force for Leibniz to look elsewhere for ideas, environmental collapse is our own moral and aesthetic struggle; we need all the intellectual recourses in the world.

A global rehab: Biome aesthetics of architecture

Reflecting on this detour in Chinese thought, and on the moments of emergence of our architectural profession and discipline, we may be in a better position to consider a rehabilitation program for competency addition. There seems to be several "original distortions" in how we have so far understood architecture. The first is the distortion of valuation. It is perhaps to be found in Adam Smith's ideal of a "free market" and the "invisible hand" in assuming a perfectly rational buyer and a perfectly rational producer. Neither had been the case, and this is perhaps why classical economic models often fail to account for and predict outcomes. The key distortion here is not the absence of perfectly rational marketplace, but the omission of compensations to damages to ecology when producers extract "free" resources. Today, we use a rather bland and de-moralized term "negative externalities" to describe damages as if to gloss over and moderate the destructive nature of this omission. The nature of "negative externalities" is pillage and violence; the "negative externalities" of extracting "free labor" in slavery parallels those in extracting

"free resources" from the planet. The valuation of architecture inherited this original distortion and has so far not calculated the cost of extraction. Like compensations for a human labour measured in units of expended energies in accomplishing a task, compensations for extraction can be measured in expended biome units in producing building materials. If we need legal frameworks to actualize these biome expenditures in the same way human labour laws have been instituted, rights can be extended to things, ecosystems, and biomes. Latour's "parliament of things" and Bennett's "vibrant matter" are examples of political theory taking on this "last frontier" of emancipation. In my design studios taught at the University of Virginia on "biophobia" and "a parliament of things", students envisioned what political spaces could look like if we indeed succeed in this monumental struggle to confer rights to ecosystems and biomes. At the same time, real estate can be re-valued in relation to the biome incomes in such a legal framework, giving architecture a different foundation. Legislation is the superstructure of moral values, and this moral endeavour to include the spirituality of ecosystems and biomes as equal to ours is most compelling if it is framed against the original distortion of economies entirely invested in the singular notion of utility.

The second is the distortion of objectification. Greek philosophy frames knowledge with the question "what is". If we take the detour to China and see the question "what is?" as a secondary one next to the question "how to", as Jullien has shown in so many ways, we will end up with different kinds of architecture. Literary cultivation has a central position in the world of scholar-officials in gardens; if we map a contemporary equivalent of poetry and calligraphy, we would perhaps arrive at a point of convergence between departments of literature, architecture, and landscape architecture in universities as the new field of architecture. What would architecture look like if landscape architecture is the primary ground and literature and architecture as the primary competencies? We will probably arrive at a "biome aesthetics".

Biome aesthetics is the successor to the efficacious machine aesthetics and that of the twenty-first-century descendent of global real estate anchored by iconic architecture. Biome aesthetics operated in a reformulated valuation scheme that reflect a much more accurate value chain to reflect the value of systems of life. Its principal visual tool is the axonometric view rather than perspectival view. It judges monumentality of efficacious machines – from those of extraction to those of real estate orientated "ecocities" – as failing projects. It values fields more than objects, thriving networks more than self-referential intricacies. It is outward looking rather than inward looking. Above all, it is always in thing scale and biome scale simultaneously. Biome aesthetics has a "AIA Graphics Standards" – so far only describing the human body – for every living and nonliving thing.

If the extremity of moral failure in human affairs is murder and genocide, the equivalent in biome aesthetics is entropy. Death is unthinkable, as it has nothing to be thought and no thought to think it; entropy is unthinkable as there is no thermodynamic predictability and no life. Entropy,

rather than murder, is the new extremity of moral failure today. The shift in the ground of architecture in this direction reframes functionalism to an "earthism". Biome characteristics underscore earthist architecture. This decenters "form" – topographies, typologies, tectonics, architectonics – as architecture because they have no depth; the new center of architecture is not form, but purposeful and complex organizational processes. Architecture cannot nor is necessary to replicate the high-level complexities of organizational processes of biology, but it is possible to begin architecture, not with a singularity of utility-based typological, tectonic, and mechanical objects, but with a doubleness. Recalling our China sojourn, this would be the *yin-yang* principle, not as a singularity of dialectic opposites, but as a doubleness. Rather than the defiant isolation of the designed exceptions, there are more exchanges between materials. Entropy comes from thermodynamic insights, such as material exchanges of heat, which is the new aesthetic foundation for waves of innovations in architectural practice and education to be set in motion, just like architecture reinvented itself in the late seventeenth century and early twentieth century. Like its earlier reincarnations, architecture absorbs new understandings and knowledge in biology and environmental sciences, insights from philosophy and critical theory, and technological innovations to articulate its new field. It understands how living matters suspend themselves over entropy. In a global rehabilitation program, we put competency addiction on a pause by focusing on the doubleness of systems. We switch from being competent experts to being wise diplomats.

References

Anthony, D. (2007), *The Horse, the Wheel and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*, New Haven, Princeton University Press.

Descola, P. (2014), *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Granet, M. (1934), *La pensée chinoise*, Paris, Albin Michel Editeur.

Humboldt, W. (1999), *On Language: on the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Jullien, F. (2019), *From Being to Living: a Euro-Chinese Lexicon of Thought*, London, Sage.

Latour, B. (1993), *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press.

Leibniz, G. W. (1998), *Writings on China*, Chicago, Open Court.

Li, S. (2006), *Power and Virtue: Architecture and Intellectual Change in England 1660-1730*, London, Routledge.

Li, S. (2014), *Understanding the Chinese City*, London, Sage.

Maddison, A. (2007), *Contours of the World Economy 1-2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.