

Phronēsis and Dao: Cultivating Ethics and Wisdom in the Process of Making Architecture

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Abstract Contemporary China, the largest construction site in the world, is the centre of production of architectural ‘vessels’ that are compacted with technical and scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, traditional wisdom and personal cultivation is often neglected in this process of creating architecture. This paper makes a connection between the Chinese ideogram of 道 (*dao* = way), with the Greek term of φρόνησις (*phronesis* = practical wisdom), in the context of architecture. We argue that both terms bring forth the importance of ethics and practical wisdom in the making of architecture, as a process of cultivation. This argument is discussed through two case studies: a historical Chinese garden (Sima Guang’s ‘Garden of Solitary Enjoyment’), as a manifestation of *Dao*, and an educational situation from a contemporary architectural design studio in a school of architecture, as a manifestation of *phronēsis*. Both these diverse examples offer a possibility to see architecture as the creation of ‘vessels for life’ where ‘vessel’ and ‘life’ are inseparable.

Keywords Ethics · Wisdom · Phronēsis · Dao · Cultivation · ‘Vessels for life’ · Chinese gardens · Architectural design education

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1 Introduction¹

I agree that architecture needs this dimension [of cultural symbolization] to meet what I have called its *ethical function*... Different building tasks now claim something of the dignity that once belonged only to sacred architecture, giving voice to that claim by representing the sacred architecture of the past and thus usurping its place. Such usurpation reflects the *compartmentalization of our life*, the splintering of the old value system, *each splinter now claiming something of the dignity that once belonged to the whole*. (Harries 1997, 102)

This paper argues for the importance of the cultivation of ethics and practical wisdom in the process of making architecture. By ethics, here we do not mean the theoretical discourse that concerns notions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (Moore 1962, 3), but rather, the practical matter of acting in what one understands as a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ way, in the context of architecture (Koutsoumpos 2009, 170). This is attempted by bringing together two philosophical terms: the Chinese notion 道 (*Dao* = Way) and the Greek term, *φρόνησις* (*phronēsis* = practical wisdom). Despite the fact that the two terms come from very different traditions, we bring them together because they each have an inherent association with both wisdom and ethics in a practical sense.

The connection of the two terms is not new in philosophy, and some scholars have already pointed out interrelations between the ethical treatises of Confucius and Aristotle (Sim 2007, Yu 2007, Chin 1981). Nevertheless, research on the connection has never reached the western discourse of architecture, which thus far has focused only on the notion of *phronēsis*. Here, we shall emphasise the validity of the traditional Chinese notion of *Dao*, not only for contemporary architectural theory, but also as a critical notion that may be used to redefine the concept of architecture from being only a product, towards seeing architecture as a practice, through which ethics and wisdom can be cultivated.

The understanding of architecture as a product (that is left behind when the process of design and construction concludes) is ubiquitous in contemporary China. Being the largest construction site in the world, architecture in China today is usually treated as such a product, a mere object, which is dominated by political power, economic profit, consumers’ interests, and techno-scientific knowledge (Li and Zhong 2005). Underneath the seeming prosperity of the building market, the profession of architecture in China faces a crisis: architecture in China has no connection to the human being, and it is losing its identity (Li 2001). As Zhu (2001) points out, superficially, this crisis may be due to the lack of order and regulation in the profession, but deep down, the crisis reflects the absence of ethics in architecture, or in other words, a way of doing architecture in a meaningful way towards some notion of ‘goodness’ that exceeds commoditisation. There is, therefore, an urgent need to cultivate ethics in architecture based on practical wisdom, in order to secure a humane urban and architectural environment.

¹ An earlier version of this paper has been presented by the authors in the conference: Expressions of Traditional Wisdom, which took place in Brussels, on 28 September 2007, with the title ‘The Way of *Phronēsis*: Revisiting Traditional Wisdom in Architecture’.

This contemporary Chinese common practice of architecture exemplifies how architecture is now conceived around the world: buildings and landscapes stand as mere objects in space surrounding us. We would like to challenge this nigh universal view by adopting the definition proposed by the Greek architect Aris Konstantinidis who defines architecture as ‘vessel for life’ (Konstantinidis 1972) (Fig. 1). This definition is often misread to associate architecture with vessels or mere objects. Similarly, modern scholarship on the ethics of traditional Chinese architecture also tends to treat architecture as a mere physical (objective) environment that regulates human (subjective) behaviour and morality (Qin 2004). We would like to rather emphasise the second part of the definition—that is usually forgotten when it is suppressed by the first part—the life or the process of ‘living’ that is fabricated through architecture. ‘Vessel’ and ‘life’ are indistinguishable. Thus, by architecture, we do not mean a product, or an object, but the process of living or dwelling. Evoking the sense of living or being as moral self-cultivation in the traditional wisdom of both ancient China and Greece, we further argue that the ethics of architecture is a process of cultivation.

Methodologically, this paper discusses from two perspectives how the ethics of making architecture is a process of cultivation by using two case studies: the first is an example from the history of Chinese gardens (Sima Guang’s [1019–1086] ‘The Garden of Solitary Enjoyment’) as a manifestation of *Dao*, and the second is a contemporary example of an educational situation from the architectural design studio in a school of architecture, as a manifestation of *phronēsis*.

At first glance, the two case studies appear to be very different. The first is an already designed and constructed architectural space (although no longer surviving) —a garden, while the second is a dialogue between a student and a teacher about a housing project that is still in the process of being designed. The first seems to be about dwelling in an already existing vessel for life and the other about creating a new vessel from scratch.

The seemingly random selection of these two case studies is simply explained: the two authors brought together their own fields of expertise (Chinese gardens and architectural design education) to defend a single thesis which suggests that *ethics and wisdom in architecture is a process of cultivation*. It was an experiment to bring

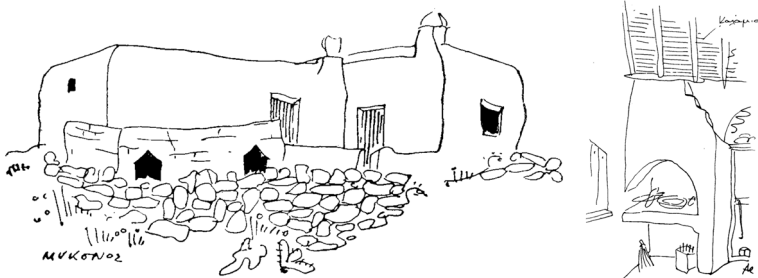


Fig. 1 Aris Konstantinidis (1947) sketches of traditional architecture at Mykonos

together two completely different fields of study, in order to test, through their asymmetry, the ‘universality’ of the argument itself.

Further reflection allows us to discern that the initial seemingly asymmetrical examples emphasise our argument suggested above: that the vessel and living are indistinguishable. The common thread in these two very different examples is the emphasis on the ‘process of doing’—the ordinary activities of gardening and making architecture in a design studio. In our view, both these activities constitute our understanding of architecture as cultivation of ethics through *Dao* or *phronēsis*. In this way, Sima Guang the historical gardener who was also the owner and the contemporary student/teacher interaction both participate in a revelatory creation of the *Dao* or Way leading to a phronetic and ethical understanding of architecture.

2 *Dao* in a Chinese Garden

The concept of *Dao* in Chinese philosophy has been used in many ways. Here, we confine our discussion of *Dao* to the meaning as understood by Confucius.² As Confucius says: ‘The exemplary person must be strong and determined, for his task is a heavy one and his *Dao* is long. Where he takes as his task becoming humane (*ren*), is it not a heavy one?’ (*Analects* 8-7) A conventional view of *dao* is way or path. Following David Hall and Roger Ames’ phenomenological view, we argue that for Confucius, *Dao* meant actively ‘engaging’ rather than being a static concept (Hall and Ames 1987, 226–227).³ As a way of ‘road making’ or ‘world making’,⁴ *Dao* is immediately associated with, if not defined in terms of, both the cardinal Confucian virtue, *ren* (仁) meaning humanity or ‘person making’, and the ultimate goal of human life, *le* (乐) meaning enjoyment or happiness (Hall and Ames 1987, 229). On various occasions, Confucius expresses that achieving *Dao* entails enjoyment or happiness (*Analects* 6-9, 6-21). This attitude of seeking active engagement in the world with the ultimate goal of happiness finds its parallel in *phronēsis*.⁵ As ‘practical wisdom’, *phronēsis* plays a role in unifying all the virtues

² We distinguish the Confucian *Dao* from the Daoist *Dao*. Whilst both schools consider *Dao* as a spontaneous ongoing process, the Daoist *Dao* is mainly envisaged as being self-oriented—one follows certain rituals to pursue individual longevity or spiritual freedom. This self-oriented approach to the Daoist *Dao* is not incongruent with that of the Confucian *Dao* for which a social dimension is indispensable.

³ Recent scholarship has increasingly echoed Hall and Ames’ view by emphasising that *dao* is a path which one can actively engage. See (Shun and Wong 2004, 141-2) (Wolf and Koethe 2010, 8).

⁴ This term ‘world’ as used by Hall and Ames (1987) does not refer to the empirical world, but is akin to their interpretation of *tian* or Heaven (207), which they read not as a preexisting principle which gives birth to and nurtures a world independent of itself. *Tian* is rather a general designation for the phenomenal world as it emerges of its own accord. Hall and Ames consider that *tian*, or the phenomenal world and cultivating the self have a correlativity, as evidenced in Mencius’ assertion, He ‘who realizes his natural tendency realizes *tian*’. (*Mencius*, 50 7A 1) We follow their use of this term ‘world’ in our discussion of cultivating the self.

⁵ Sim (2007, 23–25) discussed the similarity between Confucius’ *junzi*, the exemplary person who fulfils *Dao* and Aristotle’s *phronimos*, the person who has *phronesis*. Yu (2007, 25) suggested Confucius’ *dao* corresponding to Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* which he translated as happiness.



Fig. 2 Qiu Ying (1494–1552), Detail from *The Garden of Solitary Enjoyment*, © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, US

and leads through to *eudaimonia* (happiness) (Annas 1993, 73). Thus, we build this link between *Dao* and *phronēsis* in the discourse of architecture.

For the first case study (Figs. 2, 3), we consider an eleventh-century scholar garden, Sima Guang's 'Garden of Solitary Enjoyment' (*Dule Yuan* 独乐园), to exemplify that the garden, for Confucians, is a practice of dwelling dedicated to self-cultivation, and *Dao* is to be embodied through this practice.⁶ This garden belongs to Sima Guang (1019–1086), a one-time Chief Minister and leader of a conservative political faction. When Sima realised that he could have no further useful effect on official life, he voluntarily retired to the city of Luoyang and devoted his life to writing history. On a plot of land that he purchased in the northern section of the city, he developed his garden. It was small and rustic, covering slightly less than one acre of land. At the centre of the garden was a pond, in the middle of which was a miniature island. All buildings in the garden were small and simple (Harrist 1993). For our case study, we rely on Sima's essay 'Record of the Garden of Solitary Enjoyment' which provides a detailed account of his living in the garden:

He usually spent a lot of time reading in the hall. He took the sages as his teachers and the many virtuous men (of antiquity) as his friends, and he got an insight into the origins of humanity and righteousness, and investigated the ins and outs of the Rites and the Arts... The principles of things gathered before his eyes. If his resolve was weary and his body exhausted, he took a rod and caught fish, he rolled up his sleeves and picked herbs, made a breach in the canal and watered the flowers, took up an axe and cut down bamboos, washed his hands in the water to cool himself down, and, near the highest spot, let his eyes wander to and fro wherever he pleased. Occasionally, when a bright moon came round and a clear wind arrived, he walked without any restrictions. His eyes, his lungs, his feelings were all his very own... What enjoyment could replace this? Because of this he called the garden "The Garden of Solitary Enjoyment."⁷

First, it should be clarified why a scholar's garden like Sima's embodies Confucian, instead of Daoist, values. The common association of a garden with the Daoist value of 'doing nothing' reflects a rather widespread misunderstanding of both the

⁶ For discussion on Confucian scholars' garden as a practice of dwelling, see Zhuang (2012).

⁷ Sima Guang 'Record of the Garden of Solitary Enjoyment' from *Sima Wen gong wen ji* (Taipei, 1967), translated by Paul Clifford, see Keswick and Jencks (1978, 97) and Harrist (1993).



Fig. 3 Qiu Ying, Detail from 'The Garden of Solitary Enjoyment' © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, US

Confucian *Dao* and the Confucian scholar garden. For Confucius, the completion of an exemplary person (*junzi*) is not merely about fulfilling a career in the civil service. Rather the complete person is based on cooperation between two spheres of human life, *li* 礼 (ritual action, orders) and *yue* 乐 (music, art) (Li and Samei 2010, 17–28);⁸ roughly the 'on-duty' and 'off-duty', or the public and the private, the outer and the inner, with an emphasis on the latter.⁹ In Confucius' view, the constitution of a flourishing life cannot be secured only from the outer force of the public sphere, but more from the inner force (sensibilities, attitudes, and dispositions) of each individual, as it is more clearly within the control of the individual who has such 'inner' force rather than 'outer' values: 'Let one's character be stimulated by Poetry (*shi*), established by rituals (*li*); and perfected by music (*yue*)'. (*Analects* 8-8) Confucius attained enjoyment in his off-duty life: 'when the master was dwelling without being occupied with business, his manner was easy, and he looked pleased'. (*Analects* 7-4) In the sphere of architecture, such a ritual-music mutuality is embodied in the reciprocal relationship between housing and gardens. As the Chinese word for housing, *zhai di* 宅第, shows that *di* means order, so housing embodies the outer force of the public life, while the garden, an indispensable part of a typical Chinese intellectual dwelling complex, is associated with inner cultivation in the off-duty life. If a ready-made, orderly laid-out house regulates a person's behaviour in accord with existing, static social orders, a garden which is always in the process of creation and appreciation develops the person's inner force. This may explain why the house seems to have vanished in the

⁸ Cf. Hall and Ames (1987, 274–283).

⁹ For similarities between Confucius and Aristotle on this, see Kupperman (1999, 153–155).

description of Sima Guang, the retired statesman's residence. Released from his official duty, Sima became entirely devoted to his inner cultivation through a garden life.

Second, Sima's record does not present the garden as an object. Rather it is a description of the gardening activities in a scholar's everyday life. We see how, as a true scholar, Sima gained knowledge from his library of more than five thousand volumes; how he spent delightful hours designing the simple effect of his various pavilions and streams; how he planted bamboos in a circle to look 'like a jade ring'; and how he tied all the tips together to make a leafy tent (Keswick and Jencks 1978, 84–85). It is through these everyday activities that the scholar cultivated an ethics of living in a garden. Seeking active engagement in the garden, Sima's garden ethics illustrates Confucius' thought on *ju* 居 (living or dwelling). With his consistent ethical perspective, Confucius focuses on the everyday activity of dwelling instead of considering the environment as an object or a 'vessel'. Confucius emphasises that the details of life, or the conduct of *ju* have effects on moral cultivation. 'Those who are without virtue cannot remain long either in a condition of hardship, or in a condition of enjoyment. The virtuous rest in virtue; the wise desire virtue'. (*Analects* 4-2) Such an emphasis on dwelling affecting one's virtue can be understood better against a twofold background: the Confucian recognition that man's very existence is perceived as a matter of self-cultivation (Ivanhoe 2000, 1–14),¹⁰ which in turn is dependent on his engagement in everyday life, and dwelling remains an agency for man's existence. Confucius' thoughts on living or dwelling undergird the activities that Sima Guang conducted in the Garden of Solitary Enjoyment. The garden was a living environment where Sima applied himself to the everyday activities of cultivating the garden and became absorbed into these activities. The cultivation of the garden was thus, for Sima, simultaneously a process of self-cultivation, or of what David Cooper characterises as 'unselfing' (Cooper 2006, 95–96), leading him closer to wisdom and an ethical understanding of himself in the world.

What is also worth noting about this Garden of Solitary Enjoyment is that Sima named specific scenes after a gardening activity engaged in by a famous historical figure. In a set of seven poems that he wrote to complement the garden record, he began each poem with the exclamation 'I love' followed by the name of each historical figure (Harrist 1993). As examples, 'The Reading Hall' (*Dushu tang*) refers to Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–c.104 BCE), a Western Han scholar who promoted Confucianism as the state orthodoxy. Dong himself owned a garden, but, fearing that it would distract him from his reading, he lowered the blinds of his study and did not look out at his garden for 3 years. Reading in his *Dushu tang*, Sima felt that the 'great masters were his teachers and the wise kept him company'. 'The Pavilion for Watering Flowers' (*Jiaohua ting*) alludes to the master Tang poet, Bai Juyi (772–846), who was renowned for his fondness of flowers. While living at Mt. Lu in a thatched hut, Bai Juyi planted lotus flowers nearby. Later, Bai devoted much attention to the peony flowers in his own garden in Luoyang. Sima Guang placed his pavilion in the Garden of Solitary Enjoyment honouring Bai Juyi to the north of an enclosure filled with peonies, the flower for which Luoyang was famous.

¹⁰ Also see Cheng (1987, 51–70).

Such accounts exemplify the tradition of using allusions in naming scenes in Chinese gardens and landscapes.¹¹ Here, we would like to argue that the above accounts indicate that Sima's garden dwelling was the practice of a way of living or *Dao* that linked him with the past. With names to evoke memories of virtuous scholars, hermits, and poets of the past like Dong and Bai, the garden appears to be a living history where Sima could converse with his role models who had all, like him, spent at least part of their lives in voluntary or involuntary retirement amidst unsavoury political situations. For Sima, this inherited way of living was not the same as it was for the virtuous of the past, but had to be adapted to his contemporary context in unique and qualitatively different ways. And so he did. During the years that he lived in Luoyang, he completed a massive survey of Chinese history, the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aiding Government*. It is from such a way of living that Sima engaged in the continuing tradition and obtained his own *Dao*. This reveals that *Dao* is not received as a fixed legacy. Instead, the realisation of *Dao* involves experiencing, interpreting, and influencing the world in such a way as to reinforce a way of life established by one's cultural precursors (Hall and Ames 1987, 227). This way of living is the wisdom practiced in the gardens of Confucians and leads through to their finding their abilities to cultivate their selves as well as their world. In this way, Sima's enjoyment is a natural outcome of his complete self-cultivation—'He walked without any restrictions. His eyes, his lungs, his feelings were all his very own... What enjoyment could replace this?' (Keswick and Jencks 1978, 97).

Thus, Sima's garden illustrates our point about the ethics of architecture as a process of cultivation, because more profoundly than the house, without constant engagement and active participation in taking care of it, the garden would not exist. Although initially there was a brief layout of Sima's garden, the realisation of the garden did not take place once and for all. It was not an object. Rather the real garden was being created every time Sima Guang engaged in gardening in which his self was merged, in his dialogue with *Dao* that extends from the past to his present, and in his realisation of *Dao* through his own experience and interpretation. It is the inseparability of the vessel and living that is important here—the way that living continuously alters the vessel not only in its superficial form, but also in its being.

Let us now see how this understanding of the Chinese garden and the concept of *Dao* can be related to the process of designing a contemporary house and the concept of *phronēsis*.

3 *Phronēsis* and the Design Studio

Contemporary western-focused architecture in both the east and the west seems very distant from and indifferent to the above analysis of Chinese gardens. The concepts of *Dao* and virtue are estranged from design processes and the interpretation of architecture. Nevertheless, the design studio in architectural education not only

¹¹ For previous discussion on this topic from a Confucian perspective, see Makeham (1998), Harrist (1993), Yang (2000), and Zhuang (2012). The concept of *Dao*, however, was not brought into these discussions.

allows a fruitful cross-examination between *phronēsis* and *Dao*, but also is suitable for our study because of its obvious impact in the production of landscape and the built environment. But before going into further details about the role of the design studio, let us first get to know the meaning of *phronēsis* in ancient Greek philosophy.

Aristotle was the first to define *phronēsis* as ‘practical wisdom’ that is ‘a state conjoined with reason, true, having human good for its objects, and apt to do’ (Aristotle 1937, 1140b 23). In the division that Aristotle makes between moral and intellectual virtues, *phronēsis* while being in the intellectual part keeps a very special place as a term that brings the two categories together. *Phronēsis* is central to the intellectual virtues (Fig. 4), between Scientific Knowledge (*Epestēmē*) and Art (*Technē*), on the one side, and Intuition (*Nous*) and Theoretical wisdom (*Sofia*), on the other. By this centrality, *phronēsis* or practical wisdom maintains the balance as the fulcrum between the extremely realistic and practical aspects of *epestēmē* and *technē* and the philosophical and theoretical aspects of *nous* and *sofia* of the human intellectual knowledge. At the same time, *phronēsis* bridges the gap between the moral and the intellectual part of soul, because it works as an instrument to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*), the ultimate human goal in his engagement in the world.

After Aristotle, the concept of *phronēsis* has gained the attention of contemporary western philosophy, especially in the strand of the phenomenological tradition. Apart from the mainstream Heideggerian philosophy, *phronēsis* has also been used by postmodern thinkers like Caputo and Lyotard (Gallagher 1993). Here, nevertheless, we shall primarily use the term through the way that it has been perceived through Hans Georg Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and specifically through the interpretations of Shaun Gallaghers philosophy of education (Gallagher 1992), because of the proximity to the educational character of our case study.

The design studio is the core of contemporary architectural education where the students of architecture come to design projects that imitate situations that they would deal with as professionals. The design studio relates to *phronēsis* because it is the place where design practice conciliates every theoretical and practical skill and knowledge that is acquired during architectural education (Fig. 6). It is where design practice meets philosophical query, not only in the same place, but into the same *activity* (Koutsoumpos 2007, 69). Snodgrass and Coyne have argued that the educational process in the design studio establishes *phronēsis* as an important mechanism that through constantly renewed metaphors interprets every different design situation (Snodgrass and Coyne 1992, 73). Moreover, Perez-Gomez has emphasised the fact that practical wisdom in the design studio is based on oral transmission rather than on textual information (Pérez-Gómez 2004, 27). In this way, *phronēsis* is the fundamental virtue that in the design studio can lead to the fulfilment of architectural *praxis* (Balaban 1990, 196).



Fig. 4 *Phronēsis* in the centre of the intellectual virtues

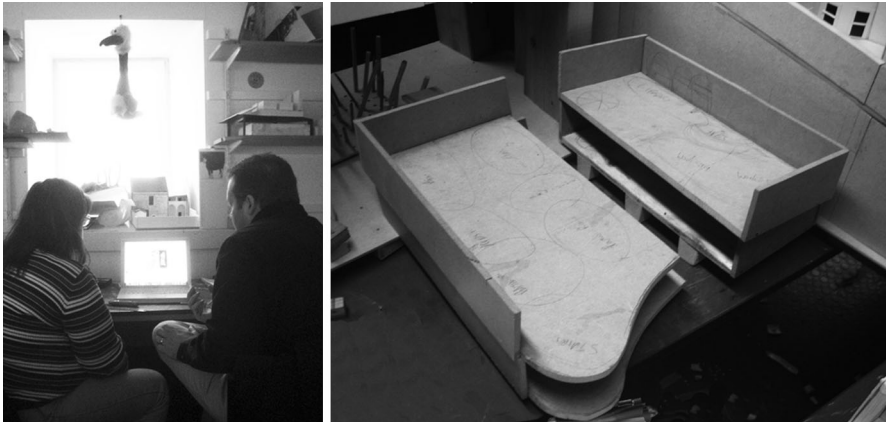


Fig. 5 Student (Mark) and tutor (John) discussing in the design studio (*left*), model (*right*)

In order to illustrate the above arguments, let us visit a real conversation in the design studio between a tutor (John) and a first-year student (Mark) (Fig. 5, left).¹² This second case study is a dialogue that was documented in the Architecture School of the University of Edinburgh during the academic year 2006–2007. The students were asked to design a small house in an urban environment. The project was still in an early stage, and Mark had just proposed a basic diagram of space adjacencies in a model (Fig. 5, right). In what follows, he tries to justify the curvy shape of the rooms.

- Mark: I didn't want boxy rooms... that's another thing which I didn't talk about. I don't really want to extrude these lines, as I'm sure I did, as you said before and create cells (...)
- John: Why? What's wrong with rooms looking like cells?
- M: Um, nothing but it's just a bit too everyday; sort of just the way we have to do things and I want to change it.
- J: Why do we do it like that?
- M: Because it's easier, it's just a box.
- J: Why do you think it's easier?
- M: Em, in like houses they'll look for the cheap way to do things; shoot them up as quickly as possible.
- J: So you're trying to make an expensive house?
- M: I'm not saying that, the architects just want to portray some form of good quality.
- J: And why good quality cannot be cheap?
- M: I just thought, I heard one or two people saying that extruding lines up from our diagrams...

¹² The names of the participants have been changed in order to secure their privacy. The key study is part of a wider doctorate study about ethics and architectural design that was accomplished through participant observation (Koutsoumpos 2009).

J: Well, I would agree but what you are proposing is again a diagram and you will just extrude the lines from this new diagram, so I think that you have to try to understand somehow deeper why we usually make the rooms like boxes and not just refute it—if you would like to challenge this notion then do it in the whole house and try and approach the things in the same way and not just making this strange thing (pointing in a plan at a corner of a project)... do you see what I mean?

In the above conversation, we can see a teacher and a student discussing the way that the project was evolving. In this discussion, John and Mark appear to participate in the educational situation, without a privileged outside fixed point. Both Mark's and John's knowledge about the situation was imperfect before the conversation, as well as after, since no final answer was given to the original questions. The discussion finished without any specific guideline about the evolution of the design. Although John (through his dual role as a teacher and a practitioner) had experience from the professional world, this experience did not serve as a predestined response, but rather as an awareness of the wideness of the overall discussion, opening the topic instead of closing it.

Despite the lack of clear instructions that one can see in the above incident, both the teacher and the student engaged in an educational process that led them to a better grasp of the design situation. Nevertheless, this knowledge of how to grasp better a situation was not so predetermined as the knowledge delivered by a lecture. Rather it was a practical knowledge that had to do with the specific situation and was constructed on the way. Shaun Gallagher, referring to education, argues that *phronēsis* engages with situations in a way that the person cannot stand out of the situation in order to see it in an objective way. Knowledge of a situation is always imperfect knowledge gained *within* the situation, and the model for that knowledge is *phronēsis* (Gallagher 1992, 152).

If we recall Sima Guang and his Garden of Solitary Enjoyment, where there was no clear distinction between the garden and the gardener, similarly here the object and subject of the education cannot be distinguished. For it is characteristic that John did not answer his own original question and instead asked the student to contemplate further the reasons that led to the specific way of design and thus leaving the issue open for further contemplation. What is also common in the two case studies that has to do with a wisdom that is slowly acquired through *phronēsis* is that the student comes to face the unprovable dicta of the 'skilful' teacher. Something that could also expand to include the general opinions of the old and the practically wise men, no less than to those which are based on strict reasoning, because they see aright, having gained their power of moral vision from experience (Aristotle 1937, sec. 1143b, 13).

In this sense, engagement and participation *in* the dialogue appears to play a fundamental role for the possibility of education of ethics. And it is also in the dialogue that the very nature of architecture emerges, not as an artwork whose only commitment is to be self-expressive, but rather as belonging to the wider economy of 'unselfing', and the same for architects who are meant to lead an 'unselfed life'. With the term 'unselfing', Iris Murdoch means a process of detachment from

absorption in what peculiarly concerns one's own interests and ambitions (Murdoch and Conradi 1997, 385). David Cooper (2006, 95–96) has used the same term to label the virtues induced by garden practices. In this sense, *phronēsis* involves perception of ethically relevant particulars, which are hard to get an epistemic handle on (Reeve 1992, 76–77). For this, it is practical in the sense that any knowledge of ethical universals is seeking order that *phronēsis* can bring into bear in particular situations.

We can also claim that the discussion in the design studio was not about mere technical knowledge. Contrary to *episteme*, which, according to Aristotle, is being able to universally taught and learned,¹³ *phronēsis* is a kind of knowledge that cannot be represented by the knower. Rather *phronēsis* is a capacity to act (Halverson and Gomez 2001, 3). Because of the fact that practical wisdom studies things that admit of being otherwise (*endechomena*), it always keeps an eye on action (Reeve 1992, 74–75); and for this, it is an empirical knowledge that comes from the constant action, deriving from, and, at the same time, forming *ethos*. Aristotle also argues that knowing what is good is insufficient by itself to make one practically wise, but it is the practical action of becoming good or in other words, exercising the good in *praxis* (Aristotle 1937, sec. 1143b, 30). Furthermore, Gallagher clarifies the difference between technical and moral knowledge and claims that *phronēsis* involves a kind of self-knowledge that is not present in technological knowledge (Gallagher 1992, 153). Gadamer also defines that 'for moral knowledge, as Aristotle describes it, is clearly not objective knowledge, i.e. the knowledge is not standing over against a situation that he merely observes; he is directly affected by what he knows. It is something that he has to do' (Gadamer 2004, 314).

By practicing the dialogue in the design studio, Mark and John are 'making their way' towards a more *phronetic* attitude towards architecture, since the ultimate aim of architectural education is the cultivation of ethics, as the way of *phronēsis*. *Phronēsis* is part of our preunderstanding of ethics that is formed within society, and for this, *phronēsis* has an inherently ethical aspect (Coyne and Snodgrass 2006, 112). Finally, because it has for its object particular facts, which come to be known from experience, *phronēsis* is a virtue acquired through length of time and usually it is not possessed during youth (Aristotle 1937, sec. 1142a 14). Here, again, the case of Sima Guang stands as an example of a wise man who, despite his age, cultivates his mind along with his garden, in a *phronetic* way.

4 Concluding remarks

It [architecture] may be better grasped *as a verb rather than through its heterogeneous products*; it is a process with inherent value. The presence of a well-grounded *praxis*, the trajectory of an architect's words and deeds over

¹³ 'All scientific knowledge is thought to be able of being taught and what comes within its range of being learned. And all teaching is based upon previous knowledge'. *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1937, sec. 1139b 29). See also: Joachim (1951, 192).



Fig. 6 Design studio as place of *praxis*

time that embody a responsible practical philosophy, is far more crucial than the aesthetic or functional qualities of a particular work. (Pérez-Gómez 2006, 205 emphasis added)

This paper discussed the importance of the cultivation of wisdom and ethics in architecture. Architecture, here, was defined not as a product, or an object, but a ‘vessel for life’ where vessel and life are inseparable. The architect thus helps the shaping of this peculiar non-object vessel that houses people’s dwelling. Methodologically two case studies were used to illustrate this argument. The one was Sima Guang’s historical ‘Garden of Solitary Enjoyment’ where wisdom and ethics were discussed through the concept of *Dao*. The other was a real dialogue between a teacher and a student in a contemporary design studio from the school of architecture of the University of Edinburgh, where the same topics were discussed through the concept of *phronēsis*.

The two case studies show that there is an apparent connection between the cultivation of *Dao* in the Chinese garden and the cultivation of *phronēsis* in the design studio. Neither Sima, nor John and Mark treated their tasks as creating mere objects, but both demonstrated their understandings of garden/architecture as a process of cultivation and engagement in the world.¹⁴

This cultivation of *Dao* and *phronēsis* towards an ethics of architecture should not be taken for granted, because it is only seldom present in the contemporary practice of architecture. As has already been pointed out, in contemporary China, architectural practice has been dominated by the creation of objects or ‘vessels’ that usually aim to cater to political and economic interests and hi-technological ends. Traditional scholars’ gardens are mostly understood as demonstrating intriguing spatial organisations, whilst their meaning as Confucian scholars’ ethical dwelling

¹⁴ We should also note an asymmetry between the two case studies. The fact that it is rather possible to justify that Sima Guang lived a virtuous life, while we cannot justify Mark’s future moral stance. The historical perspective in the one case allows an overview that is not possible in the level of the contemporary design studio.



Fig. 7 Ai Weiwei (1995) ‘Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn’

has been largely forgotten. It is no surprise, therefore, that in contemporary Chinese cities, architecture is considered merely as an object, and international ‘starchitects’ compete with each other in formalistic exercises predetermined by the above factors. Especially in the case of public landscape parks and gated community gardens, they are mainly treated as objects that meet consumers’ superficial pleasures and comforts. Architects focus on the visual qualities of the garden, but leave little room for their and their clients’ ethical concerns. By focusing merely on the form of the ‘vessel’, they have neglected the ‘life’ that takes place in it. Architects have ignored their task of encouraging people to engage with their minds, their attitudes, and with the world in which they live. The precious non-object vessel that is architecture has slipped from their hands and has broken into a thousand pieces. Or could it have been intentionally dropped? (Fig. 7).

Contemporary architecture in China seeks a Western Cartesian enlightenment based on object–subject divisions, having forgotten the meaning of enlightenment in the eastern traditional philosophy. Architectural education in China (as well as, around the world) does not lack skilful design studios, nor historical references in order to make an architecture. What is lacking, most of the time, is an attitude in both teachers and students that seeks to cultivate an ethical understanding of the world.

Just as Li Xiangfeng and Zhong Dekun called for attention to ethical education in architecture (Li and Zhong 2005), we further emphasise that in Chinese architectural education (as well as in every other country with similar characteristics, no matter if it is in the east or the west), there is an urgent need to recall the missing traditional wisdom of *Dao* and *phronēsis* in contemporary architectural education. Recalling this wisdom does not mean merely copying the form of Western architectural design studios, but rather grasping the spirit of ethics that the

two terms, *Dao* and *phronēsis*, have in common, the spirit which transcends conventional west–east divisions. This recall seems to be a fruitful way to educate architects in ethics. Architects shall not have only a command of building skills, or techniques of form making, but more importantly, they shall be educated in *Dao* or *phronēsis* that will lead them to a thorough understanding of their commitment in the role of ‘world making’. In that world, the architect, like a gardener, will be working with the social, moral, cultural, and environmental soil, now only into cultivating him/herself through experiencing, interpreting, and influencing the world to reinforce a way of life evolved from one’s cultural precursors (like Sima Guang), but also into creating ‘vessels for life’, where the ‘vessels’ and the ‘life’ in them will be indistinguishable.

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