

Educating through Design: Eco-Architecture as a Form of Public Awareness

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Abstract : Eco-architecture today is being assessed and judged increasingly on the basis of its environmental performance and its dedication to urgent stakes of sustainability. Architects have responded to environmental imperatives in novel ways since the 1960s. In the last two decades, however, different forms of eco-architecture practices have emerged that seem to be as dedicated to the issues of sustainability, as to their ability to 'communicate' their ecological features. The hypothesis is that some contemporary eco-architecture has been developing a characteristic 'explanatory discourse', of which it is possible to identify in buildings around the world. Some eco-architecture practices do not simply demonstrate their alignment with pressing ecological issues, rather, these buildings seem to be also driven by the urgent need to explain their 'greenness'. The design aims specifically to teach visitors of the eco-qualities. These types of architectural practices are referred to in this paper as eco-didactic. The aim of this paper is to identify and assess this distinctive form of environmental architecture practice that aims to teach. These buildings constitute an entirely new form of design practice that places eco-messages squarely in the public realm. These eco-messages appear to have a variety of purposes: (i) to raise awareness of unsustainable quotidian habits, (ii) to become means of behavioral change, (iii) to publicly announce their responsibility through the designed eco-features, or (iv) to engage the patrons of the building into some form of sustainable interaction. To do this, a comprehensive review of Canadian eco-architecture is conducted since 1998. Their potential eco-didactic aspects are analysed through a lens of three vectors: (1) cognitive visitor experience: between the desire to inform and the poetics of form (are parts of the design dedicated to inform the visitors of the environmental aspects?); (2) formal architectural qualities: between the visibility and the invisibility of environmental features (are these eco-features clearly visible by the visitors?); and (3) communicative method for delivering eco-message: this transmission of knowledge is accomplished somewhere between consensus and dissensus as a method for disseminating the eco-message (do visitors question the eco-features or are they accepted by visitors as features that are environmental?). These architectural forms distinguish themselves in their crossing of disciplines, specifically, architecture, environmental design, and art. They also differ from other architectural practices in terms of how they aim to mobilize different publics within various urban landscapes. The diversity of such buildings, from how and what they aim to communicate, to the audience they wish to engage, are all key parameters to better understand their means of knowledge transfer. Cases from the major cities across Canada are analysed, aiming to illustrate this increasing worldwide phenomenon.

Keywords : eco-architecture, public awareness, community engagement, didacticism, communication

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