



WHY ARCHITECTS HATE SUSTAINABILITY

Okay, you're right. Architects don't really hate sustainability; no one hates sustainability.

If we take the Brundtland Report's definition of sustainability—"a process or act that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"—then sustainability is basically a premise that is impossible to oppose.¹ You cannot hate it. Hating sustainability would be like rejoicing in mass destruction...or hoping for environmental apocalypse.

That said, the premise of sustainability poses some really tricky issues for architects, i.e. people who are in the business of designing new buildings; whose job is to make things that consume tons of natural resources and energy; who build new office towers for wealthy corporations, replacing open space [nature] with overly-air-conditioned cubicles. See the problem?

Let me illustrate the dilemma a little further by explaining a change that has taken place with regards to the architectural conception of "footprint." Pre-sustainability, a building's footprint was simply where and how it interacted with the ground—the surface or space occupied by a structure. Today, the understanding of an architectural footprint has expanded to incorporate the much more abstract notion of the building's impact and demand on the environment at large—the embodied energy it consumes and the carbon it emits. This change was initiated in part by ecologist William Reese's book *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Impact on Earth*, and has been expanded by the recent media emphasis on carbon counting and offsetting. Whereas the first type of footprint can be represented by a drawing of the building (a "plan"), the second requires a vast array of scientific

modeling and measurements, life-cycle analyses, data tables and excel spreadsheets.

The premise of sustainability carries with it a moral imperative to "minimize footprint." In its extreme form, this injunction leads us to question the very act of building—not building always has a smaller footprint than building. Thus architects, from the outset, find themselves in a compromised position. Unable to achieve the ultimate goal ["minimize footprint," "leave no trace," etc.] they must constantly weigh various options, trying to anticipate which undesirable option will make their work have the least impact.

Now, I know what you are thinking. The outlook does not have to be so bleak. Architects can simply do their best to minimize the environmental impact of their buildings. The result may not be perfect, but with new technologies and different strategies, it can be more sustainable than what we've got right now. Of course, you are right, and there are certainly architects who are working in this way (and perhaps an equal number who are pretending to do so, but that is another issue altogether.

It is not enough to blindly accept the premise of sustainability and to assuage our guilt by offsetting carbon in an effort to minimize our collective footprint. We should not be afraid to be critical of the premises of sustainability, and our critique should not be interpreted as a dismissal of the problems at hand. We should embrace today's tone of looming crisis as an opportunity to reevaluate our priorities and to think really carefully about what it is, exactly, that we are interested in sustaining. As an architect, I am searching for a position that is somewhere between loving the ideas of sustainability and hating its current implementation. **C**

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1. Our Common Future. [The Brundtland Report] 1987. habitat.igc.org/open-gates/ocf-cf.htm