



CONSEQUENTIAL QUESTIONS (THE NEED FOR TRUTH)

DesignIntelligence®
MEDIA
October 2024



CONSEQUENTIAL QUESTIONS (THE NEED FOR TRUTH)

Paul Hyett

Co-founder of Vickery Hyett Architects,
Design Futures Council Senior Fellow

In this view from the U.K., Paul Hyett reflects on the world, the U.S. presidential election and the architect's duties.

European Movements

The light of western democracy may not yet have dimmed, but it is certainly flickering, and the closing quarter of 2024 will have a profound impact on our political, social and economic direction for decades.

Social unease in Europe over recent years has prompted drifts, sometimes even lurches, towards the radical right across the continent. In Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia and Italy, nationalist right-wing governments have gained power, whilst intense pressure from the right is also manifest in France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria.

Germany – since World War II an exemplar of social democracy – is seeing growing support for the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany) party, which, until recently, was under police surveillance for its extremist views and occasional expression of neo-Nazi sympathies.

Similarly, pressures from the right have been growing in Estonia, Latvia and Poland, though 2023 saw the latter country break trend and reject its governing right-wing Law and Justice Party.

Even the U.K., normally a bastion of political stability, has seen a rightwards drift across all its mainstream parties, with new neo-liberal and reactionary groups emerging to undermine the “social contract” and challenge the hitherto long-standing political status quo.

The U.S.A. Choice, Its Implications and Antecedents

But as I write, all eyes move back to the United States and November 2024, to a spectacle “the likes of which we have never seen before,” to quote one of its participants. No presidential election in that still-great democracy has ever offered such a stark choice and contrast: a self-identifying Black woman against a White man; a professionally educated lawyer against a freewheeling businessman; a one-time public prosecutor against a many-times-convicted felon. You just couldn’t write such a script!

The outcome of these struggles will have profound implications for architecture and its duty, not only to serve the public interest, but also to fulfil its most basic role: the provision of safe shelter. All of which takes me again to Neville Chamberlain of “peace in our time” fame, consequent upon his efforts to broker an accord with Hitler.

Prior to becoming prime minister, Chamberlain had, as chancellor of the exchequer, recognised the interrelationship of housing, health and employment in serving social needs. Whilst he advocated national policies to safeguard public interests in each, he acknowledged that the ongoing adoption of mechanised production in agriculture and industry would lessen demands for labour, skilled and unskilled, within developed economies. More social democrat than conservative, he thus called for government to contemplate the need for new ways of financially sustaining and meaningfully occupying the growing proportion of the population for which work, and wages, would simply no longer be available.

Building on President Woodrow Wilson’s efforts in the aftermath of World War I, the Roosevelt/Cordell policy of promoting developing countries as bona fide trading partners served only to intensify the problems Chamberlain had identified so early. Add population growth within developed countries (the U.K. and U.S. populations have respectively doubled and tripled since 1930) and we see the complex scenario against which our modern socioeconomic and political systems struggle, only to be found wanting. Too many people, too little work, more wealth than ever before, but hopelessly uneven in its spread across countries, rich and poor, and within societies, developed and developing.

Divisions

It is this division of wealth and opportunity that generates the angst that underpins the unrest and fuels the political turmoil now so prevalent. In short, in the minds of so many, politics, as hitherto known, is simply not working. Its failures are seen in the high levels of unemployment amongst those whose jobs have “migrated,” leaving families in despair, resigned either to accepting robots at home or cheap unregulated labour abroad. As Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel wrote in “The Tyranny of Merit,” it’s not just the right to work and earn that has been “stolen,” it’s the right to contribute with dignity that has been eroded, especially amongst those who have traditionally offered their services in the form of skilled and unskilled labour.

The consequences of all this now find expression in new forms of planning and architecture. Witness the rapid installations of security fences and gates to our suburban gardens; the new elite “private” housing estates with controlled entry and patrolled grounds; and, ultimately, the emerging gated townships (really no more than forts) with their own shops, schools and leisure facilities, one of which, located in the United States, is described thus:

this area is considered one of the most secure neighborhoods ... and is behind a second gate only accessible to residents.

Security is tight, and the surveillance system features facial recognition technology and license plate readers that can detect suspicious activity or unfamiliar cars entering the property.

Outside and beyond, along the sidewalks of the once great cities of San Francisco and Detroit, and in the no-go areas of Dallas and New York, the “undeserving” poor live and sleep, in ever growing numbers, in their tents and makeshift shelters, seemingly evermore helpless and evermore hopeless.

Ultimately, only democratic political processes, in wholly recalibrated forms, can offer answers to all this, but that is proving difficult as we drift into this post-truth age where basic trust in politics and politicians is at such a low ebb.

“
Is [this] the kind of country we want?
”

And that is precisely why the rigorous process of consequential questioning is so important. As Tara Setmayer, former Republican Party communications director has asked, “Is [this] the kind of country we want?”

The bottom line is this: In a democracy, we can only ultimately succeed through an educated, properly and morally informed electorate making the right decisions. That is why TRUTH matters so much – it is essential to informing the answers to our consequential questioning.

The Architect’s Duties

As architects, our duty is to visualise alternative futures and offer them for informed interrogation. Do we really want the antithesis of Jane Jacobs’ sophisticated vision for city life? When all the barricades are finally in place protecting walled and policed havens from the anarchy and violence without, will the protected be able to tolerate the suffering that surrounds them? Will consequential questioning reveal the true character of the built reality that would prevail? Or can we forestall this process and find an alternate, fairer way forward in terms of tomorrow’s planning?

And here’s the biggest challenge of all: the need to build sustainably, in particular, to service our buildings in ecologically responsible ways; the need to pursue net-zero carbon design solutions at this nanosecond to midnight for avoiding ecological disaster.

Evangelism’s Impact

This is where I turn the focus to the American evangelicals, for in no other developed country does any religious group have so much influence on the outcomes of elections. Some sources suggest as many as 80% of evangelicals support the Republican cause, a situation decades in the making (<https://www.oah.org/tah/november-5/evangelicalism-and-politics/>). Others suggest the influence is markedly less, but there is universal agreement that it substantially favours the GOP, and this is why it is both fair and necessary to challenge the evangelical position in the context of the eco-agenda and architecture’s duty to deliver that net-zero building programme.

The AIA has facilitated major advances in this area, and prominent architects (Ed Mazria and his various initiatives, such as the China Accord and the 2030 Districts Movement, and William McDonough, author of “Cradle to Cradle,” to name just two) have offered brilliant

thought leadership at the international scale, but any such progress is quickly upended by blind belief in such frightening policies as “Drill, baby, drill.”

The irony of the evangelicals’ support in this respect is extraordinary. This is the pro-life party simply failing to press home the consequential questioning so evidently required. All scientific evidence points to disaster if carbon emissions are not severely and rapidly reduced. Architecture cannot function at the simplest level of providing shelter if the host environment is too hostile for survival.

Consequential questioning has never had such a critical role in our safe survival.

What kind of world do we want?

Profound Hope

To end on a note of profound hope, let us consider corporate giant Toyota’s latest initiative. Vice President and Chief Technology Officer Hiroki Nakajima has just announced their prototype water engine, which will run on pure water. It achieves this by using a process of advanced electrolysis to convert water into its constituent parts of hydrogen and oxygen to make chemical energy that produces power to drive the engine with only water vapour emissions.

(Learn about it here: <https://youtu.be/F1xT6rK02Ik?si=fxS5pQPlqleTmCHd>.)

No vested corporate, institutional or theological interests should be allowed to obstruct such progress, and every pressure should be mounted upon political parties to facilitate the rapid development of such initiatives. Consequential questioning dictates there is no other way – not even for the evangelicals.

Paul Hyett is past president of the RIBA, co-founder of Vickery Hyett Architects, a senior fellow in the Design Futures Council and a regular contributor to DesignIntelligence.