

PROJECTS

projects

RE-SCHEMING PYRAMID SCHEMING

"The reputation of all of the people who were the architects of this war is shot."

—Cokie Roberts

Use of the word "architect" as a metaphor will forever be indifferent to the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards' efforts to protect the professional title. Anyone in the business of designing buildings who has done a job search has experienced the frustration of finding their results clogged with calls for "Software Architects," "Information Architects," and "Systems Architects."

Dick Cheney, Karl Rove, Paul Wolfowitz, and others have all been called "the architects of the Iraq War." *USA Today* has referred to Ponzi schemer/scammer Bernard Madoff as an architect. In the cultural imagination, architects do not just design pyramids, they design pyramid schemes. What's an evil super-villain without plans?

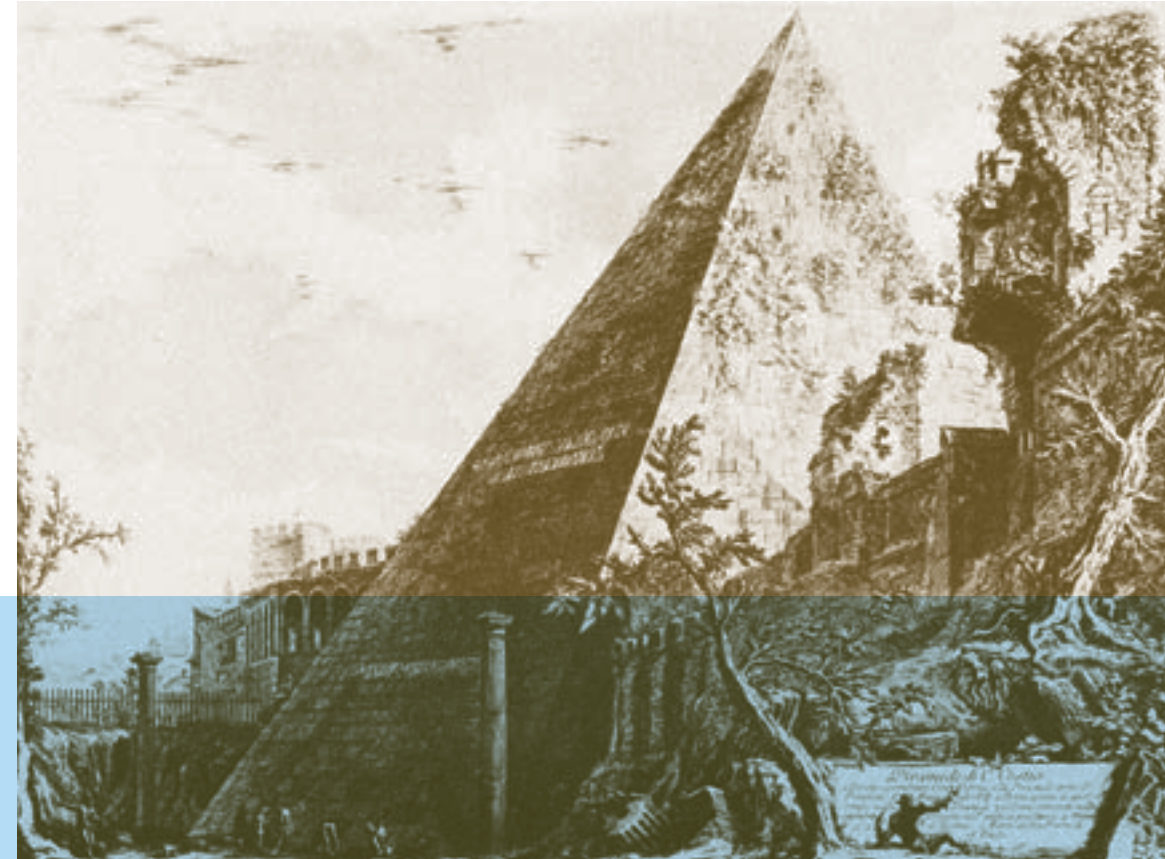
The word has come to be used to describe anyone who is engaged in the long term organization of other disciplines and processes into a piece of singular, constructed output - whether that output is a building, a website, or a war (or, as in the case of *The Architect* from *The Matrix* trilogy of films, an entire simulated exploitive reality).

Architects, now finding themselves with fewer and fewer actual buildings to design, have the opportunity to move beyond their annoyance at this re-appropriation of a regulated and difficult-to-earn professional title. The use of the word to describe malevolent power-hungry masterminds is a clue to the kinds of things we should be doing: taking better control over our agency as political actors.

Architects have been engaged in political processes at least since the time of Thomas Jefferson, who wrote, "Design activity and political thought are indivisible." To track politics is to track the planning, zoning, and funding channels that shape projects. Politics provides a context which it is at least as influential as the physical environment in which buildings exist.

In some respects, architects already use political means on a daily basis, as facilitators and community organizers. Before a project's outcome is tested at 1:1 scale in the real world, its viability is tested again and again on a different site—the conference table. All politics is local. At every meeting, the architect carries the responsibility of advocacy for the nonexistent object. While listening and learning from all the constituents—clients, consultants, users, culture, material, climate—the architect must also facilitate the production and maintenance of the group consensus long enough to create something new at the end of the process.

This is the key to the hijacking of the term architect by other professions, and also the reason why its use in an expanded sense can be recaptured to the benefit of our own discipline. People working in software and interactivity realize that the best models for making things at a certain scale and complexity are found within architecture. No other field needs to wrangle so much diverse input, and few others have consistently made output with so much potential long-term cultural influence. We can cede the use of the word to describe a general method of working and making, as long as we make sure that method stays true to the values and techniques that have made our own best work so impactful.



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Image: Pyramid of Cestius by Piranesi, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Once we have defined architecture as a method, we can start to ask questions of other disciplines to find out if the method is applicable. A preliminary set of questions would include: Are you self-critical? Do you have a coherent set of ideas that parallels production and allows you to talk about why you make certain choices? Are you able to position those ideas relative to the ideas of other peers and define a space for conversation or debate? Is the task large enough that it requires a division of labor, a split between concept and execution, and the continuous maintenance of evolving consensus between multiple stakeholders? Do you contribute to the public realm? Do you add more to the solution of a problem beyond the simple fulfillment of the brief?

Self-awareness, theory, discourse, community, and surplus—these are the things that the discipline of architecture has to offer other fields that make things. These are also the skill sets that those trained as architects can bring with them as they move into other jobs. Just as journalists are asking themselves about the essential nature of writing and publishing, now that the older models for making money in those professions have become destabilized, we architects have the opportunity to reorient and reprioritize our own work. When architecture is seen as an act of cultural production through political means, we have a chance to renew the possibilities of our profession and our training, and use our schemes for good instead of evil. **C**