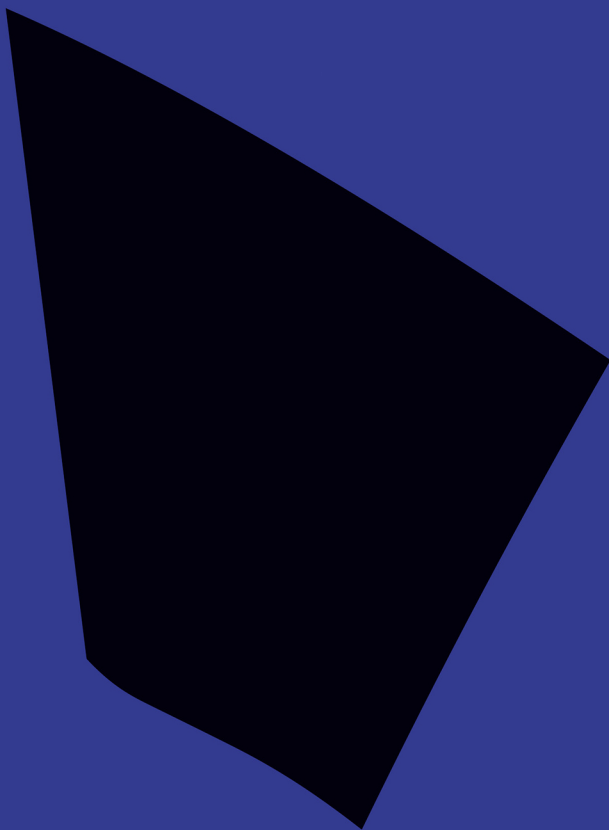


On Architecture and Greenwashing



The Political Economy
of Space Vol. 01

Ed. Charlotte Malterre-Barthes

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CANTZ**

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Architecture's Good Intentions, or the Political Economy of Space

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes

*No one, after all, can be in favor
of “unsustainability.”*

David Harvey, 1998¹

Is construction today unsustainable *by design*? Pressure is increasing to diligently address the material harm caused by the built environment. Despite this, the efforts to face issues arising from the construction and use of buildings have not been proportionate with the 40% carbon emissions accounted for by the building industry.² And beyond the carbon data mania, the unquantifiable social, cultural, and environmental harm linked to construction remains largely unaddressed. Rather than questioning its destructive, growth-oriented space production model, the industry's response has been to parade greenwashing practices as solutions. Typified by the much-lamented tree-adorned skyscrapers, the age of sustainability is manifested by delayed net-zero pledges, opaque ecolabels, unrealistic offsetting programs, cosmetic “reinvention,” and questionable

techno-fixes.³ Postponed and partial accountability and technological positivism fuel a dramatic misalignment in our epoch's reaction to the climate crisis that allows harmful practices to continue under the guise of future remedies.⁴ This overreliance on yet-to-be-developed technologies is incredibly risky, as it banks on speculative solutions rather than implementing genuine methods. Furthermore, such technologies also rely on raw materials for production and use, thus stimulating further material consumption and emissions.

Marxist geographer David Harvey has exposed how capitalist expansion needs technological innovation, positing a “techno-fix” parallel to the “spatial fix” that is “perpetually seeking to resolve the crisis tendencies of capitalism (overaccumulation) through the production of space.”⁵ Since greenwashing offers technology as the answer to the sustainability agenda, it has also provided a new existential purpose for disciplines and industries linked to construction, such as engineers, architects, and product manufacturers. Business can run as usual, with greenwashing being capitalism's new “techno-fix.” Unfortunately, as Imre Szeman observes, “the current environmental crisis is a tear in the gap of reality that cannot be sutured by Keynesian accommodations or resolved (as capital hopes it will be) by technological innovations designed to clean up capitalism's act.”⁶

There are attempts to reign in greenwashing practices, notably by public regulators and legislators.

For instance, France introduced two significant laws—the Circular Economy Law (2020) and the Climate and Resilience Law (2021)—which regulate corporate green claims, ban advertising for fossil fuels, and impose heavy sanctions for noncompliance effective January 2023.⁷ In the US, investment bank Goldman Sachs paid US\$4 million to the Securities and Exchange Commission to settle allegations that it had deceived investors about funds advertised as being focused on environmental, social, and governance aspects.⁸ Despite such regulations, greenwashing is rampant in the building sector. Supported by the planning disciplines, it covers and fuels the ongoing devastation through technological escalation and material overuse.⁹ A genuinely sustainable architecture and construction sector cannot allow business-as-usual practices to continue unabated, shielded behind fallacious narratives. Global forecasts predict that material consumption will double by 2060, with one-third of this increase attributed to construction.¹⁰ Course correction is urgently needed to avoid the complete system failure such numbers imply.

It is high time for architecture, urbanism, civil engineering, and the like to shed the façade of sustainability and focus on redesign to reduce material consumption, reject neocolonial resource exploitation, and challenge excessive real estate production. However, to achieve such goals, it is also imperative to remember that the road to hell is paved with good intentions—the fundamental

questioning of our existing economic model demands that we confront the potential pitfalls of insincere sustainability efforts and do away with greenwashing. It may be helpful to liken architecture's good intentions to a psychoanalytic phenomenon known as Freudian transference, which is operative in this context. Transference refers to projecting past experiences or desires onto an unattainable goal. In the case of architecture, this goal is the desire for environmental sustainability, which remains unrealized, perpetuating the semblance of striving for an end that remains out of reach—sometimes referred to in corporate literature as “greenwashing.”¹¹ As in therapy, a transference reaction is a valuable tool that can help us gain insight into unresolved conflicts. Hence, even if individuals or organizations cannot fully realize their environmental goals, the intention to do so can catalyze movement beyond superficial claims.

This publication is the first volume of a forthcoming series by the laboratory RIOT at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology-Lausanne (EPFL). It draws from four public lectures hosted by RIOT at the Section of Architecture at Archizoom in 2023, centered around the theme “Mercury Rising: Architecture Beyond Greenwashing.” This brief prompted practitioners to reflect on sustainability, their views on greenwashing, and their activism within their architectural operations. The present publication, *On Architecture and Greenwashing—The Political Economy of Space*, owes a great deal to Marc