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**A question concerning the sacred and profane:  
In pursuit of an economic rationale**

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**Abstract:**

This paper discusses the economic reasoning of an architectural practice. The aim of the paper is to develop a snapshot picture of the economic awareness of the firm of architects by looking at how management and employees rationalize their economic perceptions. The question of analysis is triggered and formed by Leo Zakuta's model "perception of occupation" that distinguishes between two opposing yet inseparable perceptions of occupation: The sacred and the profane. In other words should the architects perceive themselves as a professional firm or as a mere service provider? It is argued that, by viewing the firm as both a sacred and a profane occupation, it is possible to illustrate how the firm of architects dramatizes money, profit and economy.

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## **Introduction**

As this paper intends to show the one factor that haunts every aspect of the economic argument of the firm of architects is the concept of "filthy lucre" as propounded by symbolic interactionist Leo Zakuta (1970). *Lucrum* means gain in Latin and Zakuta defines this gain or money as "filthy Lucre" when it is the object of sordid desire. The paper argues that this concept of "filthy lucre", as it begins to germinate in the economic unconsciousness of architects, becomes a hindrance to a far greater extent than the practice itself acknowledges. It is argued that the concept of "filthy lucre" as phenomenon influences the relationship between employees and management concerning the transaction of reward and contribution, it influences the identity and image of the architect as such, and it influences the perception of value chain processes. As we shall see below the filthy lucre complicates the process of argumentation and dramatizes the way in which the architect, both as manager and employee, perceives and handles economy and economy related issues.

## **The firm of architects as both sacred and profane occupation**

*"Money, of course, is kept discreetly in the background. Sometimes the prices appear nowhere on the menu, which is hardly an invitation to inquire about them, or they may appear only on the menu of the party's host. After the meal the check in nearly all restaurants is presented face down, but in these the handling of the money is carefully avoided. The check, the payment, the change, and the tip all travel on a tray. Cash registers are either nonexistent or inconspicuous. Credit cards increasingly facilitate a type of billing note not unlike the doctor's. Mint's, matches, and endless cups of coffee are offered to the "guests", who upon departure are likely to exchange thanks with their "host" (Zakuta, 1970, p. 267).*

This observation of how a top restaurant handles the formality of payment is particularly interesting because it illustrates an almost infected denial of the existence of an economic transaction between restaurant and customer. In fact, as Zakuta so rightly notes, the restaurant addresses the customer as "guest" and themselves as "host". The host seeks intentionally to conceal the aspect of money by means of different measures and diversions, and this is done despite the fact that payment in a top restaurant normally involves a considerable amount of money and is thus not unimportant for the guest, even the target audience considered.

Hence, the reason that the restaurant practices this concealment of payment and profit to almost dramaturgic perfection is to make sure that money, the incarnation of commercial value, does not ruin a culinary, gastronomic and in certain situations artistic elevated experience. As customers, Zakuta argues, we accept this manipulating play because we acknowledge its necessity and because both parties practice it - it is a mutual agreement so to speak.

Table 1: Perception of occupation, adapted from Zakuta (1970)

<b><i>Profane occupations</i></b>	<b><i>Sacred occupations</i></b>
Impersonal relations	Personal relations
Lower wants	Higher wants
Lesser skills	Greater skills
Responds to the wishes or orders of others	Control of the relation
Open payment	Indirect payment
Strong pecuniary motives	Financial motives secondary
Self-interest appropriate and/or inevitable	Self-interest secondary to the service of others

Zakuta distinguishes between two opposing and conflicting classifications of occupation: the profane and the sacred. Essential to the model is why people make these distinctions and their subsequent consequences. Zakuta writes: "the higher wants are

*thought to require rare and hard-to-acquire skills, which the consumer therefore feels unqualified to judge. Because of this sense of inadequacy and because he places so much stock on these matters, he turns to those whose skills and motives he feels he can trust"* (Zakuta, 1970, P. 264).

This morally inherent classification of occupation has historically existed in human behavior since the beginning of time. The moral rejection of the salesperson who seeks gain or profit for the sake of profit (*lucrum*) in favor of the artist who idealistically devotes him/herself to the mere creation of beauty for the sake of beauty is a historical fact. Selfishness is not well looked upon when human motives are evaluated while altruism, on the other hand, is well esteemed.

Turning our attention to the firm of architects we find an interesting description of the architectural practice in the canon of architecture put forward by the Danish Ministry of Cultural Affairs. Leading architects and architectural experts have authored the description according to which, among other things, architects *"in a concentrated form seek to frame the life conditions of our time, enjoyment, sorrow and hope. As a profession architects create, mold and design the physical context of mankind. The financial aspect is secondary because the primarily concern of the architect, ideally, is to create buildings that have great influence on posterity while at the same time make sure the present user gets his "elementary human register of experiences ploughed through"* (Canon of Architecture, Danish Ministry of Cultural Affairs). Thus, the canon says that the architect, ideally, not just designs shelters to accommodate the basic human needs such as protection from wind and rain, but rather designs a work of art that addresses the higher human needs of more existential character.

In the same manner, Martin Heidegger (1977) underpins the great importance of architecture in the existential understanding of mankind when he etymologically explains how the old Germanic word

for building, *buan*, originally meant to dwell. Heidegger continues by emphasizing how the words *buan*, *bauen*, *bhu*, *beo*, originate from the word *bin* as in the germane sentence *ich bin* (I am) that again originates from the imperative form "to be". Following this chain of reasoning Heidegger notices that the very fact of being human originally means to be on earth, to dwell (Heidegger, 1977, p. 323-339). The role of the architect in this picture is to design these existential frames that make possible the dwelling of humans and by doing this the architectural practice by definition, at least ideally speaking, becomes sacred in the context of Zakuta's perception of occupation table.

Thus, we can perceive the architectural practice as a sacred occupation. Yet, the firm of architects is also commercial business acting on market conditions among other competing businesses. The firm of architects must be cost-effective to be able to provide a certain yield for owners/partners, to be able to pay employees, and to be able to secure economic accountability by and large. As such, the firm of architects also relies on profane elements in the context of Zakuta's perception of occupation (see Table 1 above).

This dialectic, and this is essential, is, as I shall argue, causing a controversial tension that permeates the economic reasoning of the firm of architects. This tension emerges because of the intertwining of both sacred and profane elements, and it is in this particular setting that several interesting and contiguous problems occur. The firm of architects seems to be trapped in a paradox. On the one hand, it perceives itself as professional performing some sort of artwork and thus being subject to the "*doctrines of the sacred occupation*" (cf. Table 1.), which automatically make it controversial to talk about money and profit. On the other hand, it perceives itself as a commercial business and thus being subject to the "*doctrines of the profane occupation*" (cf. table 1.), which automatically make it controversial to talk about ones work as art.

How does the firm of architects deal with this tension and is it at all aware of this tension? In the paper I argue that the tension is highly affecting the awareness and handling of economic issues, which are in effect dramatized.

This paper serves as a kind of snapshot photo of the economic reasoning of the firm of architects and it is therefore not the object of the paper to come across as an altarpiece providing definite answers to the problematic. Instead, the paper is preliminary and basically it seeks to gain insight into the economic awareness of the firm of architects. The paper is based on interviews with three managing partners and three employees in a larger Danish architectural practice (100+ employees).

## **The sacred as safeguard against the intruding profanity**

*"Why do they (people) demand a service ideal from some occupations and not from others? Once they expect it, they consider that work to be a profession or to be worthy of that "honour". Some occupations designate their work as a professional service but encounter strong resistance to that claim" (Zakuta, 1970, p.263-264).*

As the following quote shows, it also works the other way around; some occupations designate their work as mere business but encounter strong resistance to or critique of that claim. A managing partner puts it rather incisively:

*"Originally, x, was started as a rebellion against the "ECCO shoes" bunch of architects and it was provoking to see architects wearing a tie. X was the architect of corporate business and quickly became the largest architectural office in the country and this really provoked the architectural community, which saw us not as*

*architects but as the developer's right hand. This is many years ago and we see ourselves as a completely different practice. We feel we are being treated a bit unfair because internally in the community we still have to put up with the image. But it takes time. It is really hard to push away, there are not so many practices in Denmark and people are fast to label one and changing one's image is not an easy task. But yes, we are moving in the right direction at slow pace but it could go faster. We need to win the recognition of the architects and demonstrate that x also is a practice capable of delivering great architecture. This is very important because our colleagues often are advisers in prequalifications. It is all connected"* (Translated from Danish by author).

This statement describes perfectly well a situation in which sacred and profane elements are being mixed up causing tension between the parties involved. The seriousness is emphasized by the fact that the architectural practice is being "excluded" from the community and is looked upon as "not architects" regardless of their educational and professional background as indeed architects - that is, their identity. In other words, by ascribing to or complying with the doctrines of the profane they automatically abandon the privileged doctrines of the sacred. Thus, it is argued that this embodied conflict within the economic reasoning to a high degree cripples the argumentation of architects.

In search of an answer to this it is useful to examine the vocabulary of Zakuta (1970) who notes that people accept and understand the seller's desire for and focus on lucre because it is part of his very nature. It is of course frowned upon but is nevertheless accepted and once accepted by people the action of the seller is considered and assessed on profane criteria (Zakuta, 1970). Architects are in the exact opposite position. We saw it when the architect donned a tie in the 1970s and 1980s and became

corporate! Both architects and people in general perceive the architectural community as mainly a sacred occupation and consequently the question of economy becomes far more dramatic than in occupations of a more profane nature. This is so even though profit is not as occult as earlier as one of the interviewed partners notes. In this way, the sacred aspects of the architectural profession functions as a safeguard against the intruding profanity and thus dramatizes the very concept of money and profit.

### **On letting some profanity into the sacredness**

However, in the same manner as the sacred functions as a safeguard against the intruding profane, the latter functions as a safeguard against an all-embracing sacredness.

For instance, the "I can" report, an analysis of competencies carried out by a consultancy for the architectural association of consulting practices (DANSKE ARK, 2007) makes it clear that architects of today face great challenges, which demand great leadership. The report lists four main challenges that the architect firm faces now and in the future. These challenges are globalization, technological development, environmental development, and its own business development.

In this paper I argue that in order to deal successfully with these challenges the architect firm needs to lower its sacred guard and let in some "profanity".

Similarly, one of the interviewed partners notice that the aspect of money and profit is no longer as occult and suspicious as it used to be some decades ago. The partner continues, saying that the architect of today is put on the same footing as other businesses because the financial aspect in the process of constructing buildings is all pervading. Off course, the question of economy is very essential and saturates almost every aspect of the building process, but it could be argued that the consequences might be

disastrous for the architect profession as such, if architects end up in a service position per se.

For that reason it is important to control the intruding profanity. The control of profanity is important for the process of self-realization of architects as stated above. What attracts the future architect to the profession is, as stated, not the lucre but the creative development. Hence, the architect has to weight and take into consideration two opposing and competing, yet inseparable views. That they are inseparable is a determining factor and thus the architect must, in his economic reasoning, balance between the demands of both parties.

Although the management of the architectural practices does not talk of this problem in terms of sacred and profane elements, managers are, as shown below, aware of it and acknowledge it to a certain degree.

To the question of how the firm of architects considers the creation of value, the interviewed partner has this interesting answer:

*"There are two parameters. Two main parameters at least. A design parameter that never really leaves us. There are many important aspects of building a house but design is crucial for our brand and reputation. Then there is an economic creating parameter. If you run the process well, if you run it tight, if you are hardworking, do your job and do not act neglectfully, then you simply get better economic control"* (Translated from Danish by author).

It is notable that design is divided from aspects of economic art. The creation of design per se does not involve creating economic profit. Instead, the creating of economic profit is ascribed to the actual planning and control of the design and production process and thus a sort of sequential attention to economy is practiced in order to avoid dramatization of economy. In this statement, what could be

called the "*logic of design*" is counterattacked by what could be called the "*logic of economy*".

Through the preceding text it has been demonstrated how intertwined the architectural profession is by what Zakuta calls sacred and profane elements, which as a result dramatizes the issue of money and profit. Roughly speaking, there seems to be one main reason for this dramatization of economy and one answer to it. The reason concerns a historical lack of socialization of economy in the architectural practice. The answer concerns a question of sequential attention to economy. In the paper, I shall try to shed light on these two matters.

### **Economy as a missing link**

*"I became an architect because it interests me and not for the sake of money. If I were to earn a lot of money I would have picked a different industry"* (Translated from Danish by author).

This historical lack of socialization of economy in the architectural practice is, amongst others things, attributable to the educational system, one of the main institutional settings of architecture. Scrolling through the program of the architectural education it is striking to note that not once does economy or economy related courses turn up whether as mandatory classes in the first years of the bachelor degree or as invitation to immersion on the graduate level. In effect architects are trained solely in being creative and artistic. They are trained to think in terms of space, form, scale, tectonic, aesthetic, construction and so forth. This is their historic heritage. Consequently, economic aspects like money and profit, as the employee in the above quotation says, is not socialized and embodied in the architects, whether we talk about the individual architect or of the organization of architects.

Hence, it is a completely different foundation or substance that matters and thus takes up the time of architects. Similarly, the "I

can" report of 2007 shows how the architect firm consists of only 6% employees from other educational backgrounds than the traditional ones, such as architects, constructors, designers, engineers and so forth.

Accordingly, what matters or what is at stake is the self-realization of the architect. The element of self-realization is very important, and one of the main driving forces that mobilizes architects. The architect thus seems to use elements of sacred nature in order to guard against the intruding profanity. They simply do not engage in profane activities or not as much as they perhaps could do for the benefit of the practice, at least.

One of the interviewed employees find this "depreciation" of economic sense of responsibility to ease and better facilitate her creative way of working. She perceives, so to speak, her work as a sacred profession and financial motivation is therefore secondary. What instead becomes important for the architect is a professional competency and to create, by means of this very competency, an image of being part of a practice capable of delivering great architecture in the eyes of not just the architectural community but also the outside world as such. The interviewee continues, saying that it is primarily via this competency that the architect firm should profit financially although it demands willingness to engage in projects that do not promise any immediate return on investment. However, as the interviewee believes, through this approach, practice can attain an image and reputation that in the long run increases tenfold, financially. In the same way one of the employees says rather eloquent that: *"I try to win projects by means of architecture per se and not by means of economy or anything else"* (Translated from Danish by author).

Here, we see the presence and practicing of a logic that follows the principles of an architectural profession in the sense of a sacred occupation thus distinguishing sharply between architecture and economy. This *"logic of design"*, referred to in the above, uses its

sacred character as a safeguard against the intruding profanity and in so doing dramatizes the aspect of economy and thus distances itself from the "logic of economy".

### **The sequential attention to economy**

There is no doubt about the significance of economy in architectural business, an inescapable fact that needs to be dealt with. However, what makes the issue of economy so hard to talk about openly is, as stressed, the perception of the position of architect as a sacred occupation, thereby making it controversial to be obviously interesting in making money. One way of coping with this dilemma is to consider goals as *"independent constraints imposed on the organization by the members of the organizational coalition"* (Cyert & March, 1963, p.164).

Hence, in doing so the organization facilitates a local rationality that enables the individual to deal with problems and goals limitedly by means of addressing problems to subproblems that are addressed to subunits (Cyert & March, 1963). Consequently, by decentralizing decisions and goals, the organization becomes complex and turns overall goals into simple and more comprehensible problems. However, the success of this line of thinking depends, as Cyert and March note, on the emergence of consistency among both the different decisions per se but also in relation to the external environment. As Cyert and March put it, one way of securing consistency in decision processes of local rationality is by applying a sequential attention to goals. They write:

*"Organizations resolve conflict among goals, in part, by attending to different goals at different times. ...The resulting time buffer between goals permits the organization to solve one problem at a time, attending to one goal at a time"* (Cyert & March, 1963, p. 166).

Directing attention sequentially to economy offers some potential possibilities for the firm of architects when they in

reasoning must maneuver through the waters of sacred and profane elements and avoid being shipwrecked by focusing too pervasively and one-sidedly on either sacred or profane elements.

The time-aspect becomes very important. In the case of the firm of architects one could argue that economy and economy related issues get their "time slot" so to speak. The concept of economy is really not actualized until the architect becomes project manager. An employee tells rather descriptively:

*"When assigned to a project manager it is not up to me any longer to consider the issue of money and profit. It's up to her. It's her job. It's her responsibility to tell about the financial situation. Many of us have no idea what so ever about money or where in the process we are financially. The project manager controls this in accordance with the client and our finance department"*

(Translated from Danish by author).

As such, the economic issue or the issue of profit is "associated with an organizational role and hence only indirectly with the personal motives of the individual who assumes that role" as Simon (1964, p. 21) points out. This aspect seems crucial for the success of an economic reasoning within the architectural practice. By putting profit and money relating constraints into subunits and subproblems attached to specific organizational roles, such as project manager, partner, and managing directors, the firm of architects couples the profane constraints loosely and indirectly to the local rationality of the members of the organization (Simon, 1964).

In the case of the architectural practice it is, however, important that the organizational members "playing the profane roles" are dressed for the job and thus are capable of not letting too much profanity into the sacred domain of architects. Consequences could be fatal for the profession if the product of architecture develops into a mere commodity relying solely on

the demands of the customer. As a result this scenario will introduce a more standardized work procedure for the architect. As one of the managing partner states, it would be obvious to implement or take advantage of the factor of reiteration and thereby producing an outcome faster and better for each project. However, as he concludes, the machine of architects, if run by this, would quickly be out of creativity and artistic skills. This would indeed be catastrophic for the firm of architects since those specific skills are the founding mechanism propelling architectural value, as stressed earlier in the paper.

What the managerial architect is afraid of is, for good reasons, to take the self-realizing aspect away from the architect. The manager of an architectural practice should, in Simon's (1964) words, balance the consideration of inducements against contributions - that is, aspects of work that the members of the organization desire against aspects of work they perceive negatively. The point to be made is that the firm of architects, focusing on local rationality and obtaining sequential attention to economy, better manages to maximize the inducement aspect while downplaying the contribution aspect.

However, one aspect has been neglected so far - decision making processes. These are vital for composing an economic reasoning that takes into account the criteria of the sacred and the profane doctrines. The discussion of this final concern also wraps up the paper outlining the many issues for further investigation.

### **The wisdom of a two-year-old**

Recently, I was at the playground with my two-year-old son. We were sitting on the edge of a sandbox looking over the playground when suddenly my son looks at me and says enthusiastically: "*Dad, let's build a sandcastle?*" I look at him seriously and say without hesitation: "*I am sorry but unfortunately it is not possible to*

*build any sandcastle today since I forgot to bring shovel and bucket!"* In my mind I brush aside instantaneously the suggestion from my son and in order to prevent a potential crisis of an obstinate child, I quickly begin preparing a strategy for diverting my son's attention from building sandcastles, which to me was not possible, to other activities such as swinging. My son on the other hand, looks at me with wondering eyes and in a self-evidently voice says: *"But we have our hands, don't we?"*

I'm dumbfounded by this somewhat incisive remark of a two-year-old boy on a Sunday morning in a Copenhagen playground. The story is both amusing and tragic. It's fairly amusing to witness a father being corrected by his two-year-old son but also quite tragic to witness a father so intuitively rejecting a valuable activity with his son. As the story goes, we did actually build a great sandcastle with moat, wall, towers, gate and courtyard. We spend a good hour in concentrated and valuable play and only because of a little but certainly not insignificant advice from a two-year-old.

What is problematic is not that my son and I, for obvious reasons, had different understandings of value but rather because of my lack of imagination I stuck to my narrow-mindedness and miss out on a potential valuable situation. Or so it seems. In fact, and this is the main point of the story, it is just the opposite that is unfolding. What actually happens is that I put too much consideration into the response to my son's suggestion. I rationalized that it was simply not possible to construct a sandcastle without technical devices like buckets and shovels and thus I categorically gave up the idea of building a sandcastle per se.

In other words, my mental model or cognitive capacity made me unable to see the possibilities and potentials in my son's suggestion. Mentally, I am proceeding ahead busy thinking about tactical operations for how to prevent a potential crises - those who got toddlers know all too well about the temper of a two-year-old! I am

focusing on consequences, and my behavior is very much characterized by a high degree of risk control and cost minimization rather than putting more energy and effort into being able to see the valuable situation that lay just in front of me. As a consequence I would have, if not for my son's remark, been missing out on a great valuable situation.

This little observation that I did a few weeks ago on the edge of a sandbox serves as a good and illustrative example of how disciplined and indoctrinated our cognitive capacities are. Yes, undoubtedly the sandcastle would have been more beautiful in a manner of aesthetics and surely more robust if I had brought along proper tools like bucket and shovel. However, the point to be made is from quite another perspective.

What the observation so illustratively demonstrates is a striking paradox. When focusing so narrowly on risk control and crisis management, the produced outcome has in reality the opposite effect of what I intended. By being so preventive I am actually creating the incentives for the emergence of the very crisis I am trying to prevent. I am trapped in a cognitive web spun by my blinded reliance on devices and tools. My capacity to engage in, to anticipate and to discover value creating processes is in other words paralyzed by my inability to detach myself from an embodied cognitive model that relies too heavily on technical as well as cultural devices. This paradox, I advocate, is very suitable as an illustration of the described movement in the economic awareness of the firm of architects.

According to March (1994), the intelligence of action can best be considered or evaluated *ex post*, thereby demanding the decision maker to rely on future values and experiences. It is March's point that you can not, beforehand, determine whether an action is intelligent or not *but* you can, however, approximate it by practicing a logic of appropriateness whereby identities are being fulfilled by following rules that seem as appropriate ways of

reaching that fulfillment. In the sandcastle observation I did not act by this logic, but instead by a logic of consequences in which I attached great importance to an evaluation of alternatives and their impact on my preferences. The outcome of this is already mentioned. If I had acted with a logic of appropriateness in mind, I would probably not have rejected my son's suggestion so promptly. In focusing on future values and experiences I would have looked for ways that somehow could have solved the immediate problem of not having brought along bucket and shovel.

One crucial point of the paper is that if the firm of architects does not mind its steps when opening up for the profane activities, it could potentially end up making the same mistake as I did on that playground. And I guess that the firm of architects does not have a two-year-old to set it straight!

In order to profit on the creative skills, management of architectural practice implements a list of devices that ensure profitability. Controlling the logic of design by means of the logic of economy is done very tightly via mechanisms of optimization, such as a budget, time framing, and a document that sequences the decision process. This is all very well, and off course necessary for the functioning of a firm acting in a global market. One problem, however, is that the firm of architects might, if not being cautious, get blocked on potential valuable situations because it relies too heavy on risk control, minimization of cost and contractual responsibility. By doing this, profit is obtained by evaluating the consequences involved in the building process and thus doing this, decisions are based on alternatives and preferences. In other words, the firm of architects, like me in the sandcastle observation, puts too much consideration into the question of whether a certain approach to creating value is eligible.

When one of the employees says: *"I try to win projects by means of architecture per se and not by means of economy or anything else"*

she really adopts to the logic of appropriateness instead of the logic of consequences as stated just above. In relation to the playground observation she acts as my son - figuratively speaking. For her, what creates the good result is a focus on the process per se, in which her professional competency and creativity unfold without being constrained by the logic of economy and logic of consequences. This position or economic reasoning, I speculate, characterizes a large part of the architectural profession because of the general perception of architecture as a sacred occupation in the terms of Zakuta (1970).

This process is independent of controlling devices thereby increasing the possibility of catching and realizing valuable input and thus by focusing too narrowly on and relying too heavily on profane aspects, the firm of architects jeopardizes this process.

So, how does the firm of architects deal with this problem? As mentioned, it is surely in a tight corner. On the one hand, it needs pay attention to the self-realizing identities of architects as being creative and artistic and, on the other hand, it needs pay attention to the money-making processes of the creative work. This problem is, however, not at all reserved to the architectural profession as such but is a current problem for any creative businesses.

So, why is it that the firm of architects is falling behind in integrating or socializing profane elements compared to other creative industries as advertising and film? As argued by the paper the one main reason for this is the concept of "filthy lucre" as propounded by Leo Zakuta (1970). The practice as being perceived as a sacred occupation dramatizes money and profit and cripples the economic reasoning of the firm of architects to a much higher degree than other creative industries. However, by applying a sequential attention to economy, and by creating local rationality in subunits, thereby addressing the economic issue to specific organizational roles, seems like a rewarding way to operationalize and strategize

in order to cope with the intertwining of sacred and profane elements.

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