

# In Other Words.

## Observations on the Prescriptive Role of Sustainable Development Buzzwords in Architectural Discourse and Practice

(1) Enrico Chinellato  
(2) Niccolò Di Virgilio

### *Abstract*

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical perspective on the complex relationship between buzzwords associated with sustainable development and architecture. Particularly, by relying on architectural theory and discourse analysis literature, we contend that the communicative trivialization entailed by slogans and buzzwords such as “sustainable” tends to play a prescriptive role in architecture by exploiting certain tacit assumptions that characterize its discourse and, ultimately, its practice.

### Affiliation:

(1) Università di  
Bologna  
(2) Sapienza  
Università di Roma

### Contacts:

(1) enrico [dot]  
chinellato2 [at]  
unibo [dot] it  
(2) niccolo [dot]  
divirgilio [at]  
uniroma1 [dot] it

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Architecture is called to renew its capacity to connect with civil society and to demonstrate both its practical relevance and adequacy in improving our day-to-day realities.

*Architecture is the outcome. Introductory positions on the communicative trivialization of architecture*

The nexus between architecture and the practice of reducing its principles to buzzwords and slogans is undeniably complex, divisive, and indeed not a novel subject. Nevertheless, today it has become increasingly compelling as architecture is called to renew its capacity to connect with civil society and to demonstrate both its practical relevance and adequacy in improving our day-to-day realities. According to the observations of Korean thinker Byung-Chul Han, our era is marked by an ongoing proliferation of trivial words that generate a “*Kommunikation ohne Gemeinschaft*”, a communication without community (Han, 2021: 3). Indeed, the meaning of the word communication has been often linked with that of community (Habermas, 1987 [1981]; Tejera, 1986). This root has been gradually lost due to our society’s emphasis on mass communication, resulting in ideas being drained of their significance to be made easily accessible for immediate consumption by an ever-expanding audience. Philosopher Mario Perniola has advanced a famous critique of this phenomenon. In his book *Contro la Comunicazione*, he argued that “communication [...] abolishes the message not through its concealment, but through an exorbitant and unbridled exposure of all its variants”, ultimately aiming “[...] at the dissolution of all contents” (Perniola, 2014: 11).

In his notebooks, Ludwig Wittgenstein, philosopher and architect, advised against *talking about* values because they emerge from the linguistic game. As a result, assuming that *anything material* corresponds to a discourse on thinking or designing is a misconception. Thus, material form reveals itself as ultimate content. In other words, it *cannot be stated* ahead of time. As examples and assumptions are – at best – required to comprehend the meaning of material entities and their creation, one can only reason by *metaphors*. As Peter Volgger points out, “the special feature of metaphors is that they do not necessarily highlight the primary aspect of the area from which they were projected but, rather, particularly emphasize the periphery surrounding the focal point” (Volgger, 2022: 3). Indeed, metaphors are, in this sense, only an *instrument* used in an attempt to

explicate the tacit nature of architecture, which is continuously expressed *in other words*. Moreover, according to discourse analyst Orna-Montesinos (2012), “the linguistic choice of the [...] professional is weighted with the epistemology of the professional;” yet, “the linguistic vagueness is essentially the representation of the real condition of architecture, rather than an outgrowth of lack of attention” (Basa, 2009: 273). Mies van der Rohe, one of the most influential architects of the 20th century, is credited with coining the adage “form is the outcome” (Mies van der Rohe, in Pizzigoni, 2010). To this end, and as our initial position, we might reword his statement to pose that *architecture is the outcome*: there can be no *exact* preconception of the latter. Nevertheless, its production and its materialization are bound to impart ambiguity. Architecture cannot *a priori* commit itself to ideals that might ultimately undermine its constitution, as it must maintain formal openness, which is essential to safeguard its originality and distinctiveness.

In light of what has been discussed so far, we contend that the communicative trivialization entailed by slogans and buzzwords tends to play a prescriptive role in architecture by exploiting certain tacit assumptions that characterize its discourse and, ultimately, its practice. This contention is evidenced by three primary interrelated conditions, which reverberate in the architectural discipline and how its practice articulates under these circumstances: *spectatorism*, *rhetoric*, and *saturation*.

Firstly, spectatorism involves an attitude of passivity and neutrality on the part of architecture’s users with respect to the produced artwork-object, i.e. the *work* of architecture. Spectatorism is also frequently divorced from any concept of active belonging and usually does not entail processes of appropriation (between subjects and objects). As noted by Henry Plummer, the anthropomorphization of the creative process lends support to the culture of entertainment and consumption, which causes built entities to become seductive images for a spectator audience (Plummer, 2016). As a result, architecture and its thus-produced forms often construct a ready-made show that is sustained through consumption bound to aesthetics or, else, by aesthetically organized consumption (Hill, 2011: 28).

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This connotation carries with it a second condition: rhetoric, specifically the aggressiveness of rhetorical strategies pertaining to the architectural project, driven by the type of economic possibilities that tend to emerge with new, enticing technology in the present era, which itself centers on delivering product services rather than on production. This condition has increasingly resulted in forms devoid of creative spontaneity, thus diminishing the potential evolutions of a material product (e.g. a building) by its (rhetorical) inscription inside communicatively loud and carefully fabricated, yet frequently reductionist narratives. Such a scenario enhances the construction of either the so-called *signature-architectures* – an *elite class* of buildings – or of overly rational, quantifiable and repetitive (Barrow, 2004) *shells*, both accompanied by the sloganeering that sustains and popularizes them.

Ultimately, the two occurrences discussed so far bring about an additional condition, that is, saturation. Particularly, a conceptual and aesthetic-chromatic saturation, evidenced in instances such as the term *green*, is connected with the concept of “sustainability” and, more broadly, with current environmental concerns. One example would be the practice referred to as “greenwashing,” a consequence of the growing commercialization and marketing of everything “green” as sustainable. However, the significance of many of these rhetorical strategies is not always evident, nor are the assumptions relied on in their formulation and application. This results in systematic and totalizing constructs that turn the adjective into a noun, and the object into a fetish, by doing away with its variations, declensions, and thus its very own meaning, eventually influencing the architectural discipline in its entirety.

Given this conceptual background, we argue that this prescriptive tendency is notably (yet not exclusively) exemplified by the encounter between the (understandably) ever-so-present contemporary discourse of sustainable development and that of architecture. Besides the well-known 2015 to 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) introduced by the United Nations, the EU New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative is one of the most recent instances (announced in January 2021), stemming as a fundamentally cultural

expression of the so-called European Green Deal. That is particularly evident in the NEB recommended three main keyword-concepts: *beautiful*, *sustainable*, and *together*. However, those three notions are difficult to grasp without instances demonstrating their actual occurrence.

In the following sections we flesh out the argument outlined so far by discussing it in relation to the currently dominant discourse of “sustainable development” – and particularly the term “sustainable.” We attempt to illuminate why it plays a prescriptive role in architecture by relying on architectural theory and discourse analysis literature. Lastly, we conclude by suggesting additional possible lines of grounded investigation.

#### *“Just Good Architecture”: Sustainability in architectural discourse and practice*

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a critical reflection on the definition of *sustainable development* (from here onwards referred to as SD), or rather, a complete examination of its articulated discourse. Its context of reference, i.e. the environmental discourse, is already quite “fragmented and contradictory. Environmental discourse is an astonishing collection of claims and concerns brought together by a great variety of actors” (Hajer, 1995: 1-2). Therefore, the reader is referred to the already rich literature on this issue (see Teymur, 1982; Hajer, 1995; Guy, 2002; Guy, Farmer, 2001; Guy, Moore, 2005; Wines, 2000), departing from the known 1987 Brundtland Report, which first defined SD as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations General Assembly, 1987: 1). Instead, let us focus our reflection on one of the two elements constitutive of the SD rhetoric, namely *sustainable*, and in particular on why this buzzword (Edwards, 2005) plays a prescriptive role in the architectural discourse and practice.

Undoubtedly, environmental issues have more relevance in architecture today – as well as in society and politics at large – than they ever had in the past. This is due to a widespread and more profound awareness of the magnitude and severity of the environmental impacts resulting from various anthropogenic activi-

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ties, not least the building practice. In this regard, SD is undoubtedly the current dominant discourse encompassing both environmental challenges and architectural design – and, as a result, architecture’s entry into environmental discourse – having been translated into a variety of institutional arrangements. On the one hand, SD – and especially the very notion of sustainability – tends to systematize the conceptualization of contemporary environmental concerns. On the other hand, the increase of regulatory requirements to quantify the real-life effect of design choices, particularly for the goal of energy conservation, has prompted intrinsic alterations to the architectural decision-making process (Sebastian, 2011). To be sure, establishing quantitative assessment systems of technical “sustainable” performances of buildings has become necessary as a result of these alterations. Accordingly, the concept of sustainability has, in itself, gained significant traction in global public policies over the last thirty years (Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010). Nowadays, clearing the fundamental ambiguity that surrounds this notion remains a significant challenge for scholars. Indeed, existing contradictions characterizing the term “sustainable” include long-term sustainability as opposed to short-term welfare, weak sustainability as opposed to strong sustainability, and the like. The inconsistent definition of the term is constructed not only by claims made by institutions or individuals but also by criticisms directed against these assertions. Moreover, because it retains a temporal and geographical dimension (Rydz-Żbikowska, 2012), what “sustainable” means may severely differ between the global North and South.

For what concerns our argument, elements of direct evidence of the growing saturation of architecture with the notion of sustainability manifests in its practice, theory, education, legislation, discussion, texts, and so on. Notable examples are the current prevalence of the overall rhetoric of SD in a variety of architecture schools’ specialized programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels; in new so-called training centers, such as the SOS – School of Sustainability founded by architect Mario Cucinella; as well as in the vast majority of architectural publications. Not least, it is also evident in the establishment of well-known performance-rating systems, such as

the US-driven Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program, or the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) established in the UK, among many others. Consequently, the widespread emergence of instances of this kind, particularly (but not exclusively) in the European and Western context, seems to show that the “infiltration of ‘sustainability’ concepts within the architectural profession, and migration of associated terminologies [...] have led to a corresponding transformation in the discourse, and an expansion of the architectural lexicon to incorporate sustainability-related epistemologies” (Alsaadani, 2017: 2). This trend well aligns with what Simon Guy defined as the “interpretive flexibility of sustainability,” which seems to have “become increasingly signaled as a key characteristic of debates about sustainable architecture” (Guy, 2005: 468).

The combination of “sustainable” with “architecture” creates a new notion (“sustainable architecture”) that, in and of itself, suggests a condition that, on the one hand, is *prescriptive* – or, at best, normative – (architecture *is required to conform* to “sustainable ideals” in order to be *labeled* as such), and on the other hand is permeated by the rather vague, contested, open-ended, and ever-shifting nature of the term “sustainable” – provided that one can define “architecture” in the first place. Indeed,

in discussing architecture, [...] words and reality experience an inevitable distance. And when the discussion shifts from constructions to their critical analysis, we run the risk of generating the effect of two mirrors facing each other: reality is infinitely multiplied, but it gets smaller and smaller, farther and farther away. This activity may seem vaguely onanistic, it is undoubtedly pleasurable for those who perform it, but it can lose touch with the object of its reflections (Rattenbury, 2002 cited in Corbellini, 2018: 11).

The “illusion of communication” enacted by the widespread use of this notion “indicates the factual evidence that this term designates a wide ambiguous field. [...] It is a field that lacks the accurate knowledge of its own practice and objects” (Basa, 2009: 273), whose rationale “appears to be a decorative performance rather than a structural act” (Basa, 2009: 274).

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Obviously, discourses and practices are deeply intertwined. With regards to sustainability, the evidence of how this condition has influenced the professional practice of architecture was well captured as early as the 2000s by James Wines, who had pertinently noted how:

increasing numbers of exceptionally talented architects are exploring a range of approaches and definitions for a new ecological architecture. For certain designers, the latest advances in engineering and environmental technology are central to their objectives; while, for others, it is important to return to the lessons of history and the use of indigenous methods and materials. For another group, the resource of topography, vegetation, solar energy and the earth itself are the means to achieve an expanded vision of organic buildings (Wines, 2000:67 cited in Guy, 2005: 468).

Indeed, in recent years the “greening” of architecture has generated a whole new class of architectural-ly-trained experts, characterized by sustainability-centered careers (e.g. sustainability consultants), who sometimes cooperate with architects or work in the background to label “green” – and therefore “sustainable” – a building design after the architect’s work is complete. Again, trivialized metaphors and buzzwords are instrumental either to the direct architectural conception or to its promotion and advertisement – which, in turn, feeds the constitution of the discipline, the discourse, the professional practice and its hyper-specialization, and ultimately of architecture itself.

The most obvious yet significant instance of this two-sided development in the architectural practice concerns the aesthetic domain, especially visual properties as prescribed by the sustainable imperative, propagated through buzzwords and enforced by experts. In other words, what does sustainable architecture look like? This question also implies that sustainable buildings and their observable features are often (however, not always) determined by a sustainable aesthetic agenda (determining how it should look like). Indeed, with regards to the notion of “greening,” the use of vegetation in architecture has been employed since the first decade of the twenty-first century either as an attempted constructional



modes integral to architecture – via different degrees of technological sophistication (e.g. internal spaces organized around roofed gardens as in the Institute for Forestry and Nature Research in Wageningen, by Behnisch Architekten) – or as ornamental performance readily marketable because of decorative potential of direct linkages between the natural and the artificial (e.g. autonomous forested facades as in Bosco Verticale in Milan, by Boeri Studio). However, “in its representational character, nature can be introduced mainly, sometimes solely, as fiction” (Daglio, Kousidi, 2023: 4). Indeed, both of these scenarios are presented and appreciated, albeit differently, as mere *attractive* visual-symbolic devices stripped of *moral* contents. Note that “moral” refers here to the moral imperatives promoted by SD and, in general, related to environmental concerns connected to architecture – being “good” in a moral sense: better energy performance, prudent use of resources, less contaminating production processes, and the like.

Nevertheless, when examining *practiced discourses* from a broader historical perspective, it is worth noting that architects have frequently paired a lessening built production with the extensive rhetorical promotion of their works, as an inherent source of legitimacy for their design practice so as to conform it to the prevailing – often politicized – fashions of the time. Among many others, the persona of Le Corbusier is symbolic in this regard. The Swiss architect stated in a famous sentence: “When a work achieves its utmost level of intensity, an unutterable space is formed” (Le Corbusier, 1946, cited in Corbellini, 2016: II). However, his massive advertising campaign, comprising over forty texts and countless slogans, indicates a persistent attempt to capture that “unutterable space.” Similarly, photographer and philosopher Koji Taki was the only person the Japanese architect Kazuo Shinohara entrusted to exhibit his work publicly (Joanelly, 2020), and he significantly contributed to the fabrication of Shinohara’s persona and stylistic narrative, frequently involving evocative metaphors. According to architect and publicist Tibor Joanelly, the concept of

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“naked reality” is another term from Shinohara’s essay and must be dealt with in more detail. As with the “third person,” it is not clear where it comes from, although it is likely that Shinohara’s use of the word also emerged from discussions with the philosopher Koji Taki. [...] Taki not only became a critic and photographer of Shinohara’s work, but also a congenial sparring partner during the development of the architect’s third style (Joanelly, 2020: 44).

Overall, we might pose that architecture is therefore governed by *assertive assumptions* and their manipulations. These “discursive figures” (Basa, 2009: 274) ultimately typify the whole field as a multiplicity of metaphoric discourses. Each one is then regarded as a (fuzzy and blurry) *convention* by the factual constitution of architecture itself, i.e. by practiced architecture.

If we are to paraphrase and systematize Wines’ statement regarding today’s architectural design production, some of these conventions are: the “technological” building; the “survivalist” building; the “vernacular” or “traditional” building; the “natural” “biomimicry” or “organic” building; the “green” building; and so forth. All those words that dominate the current architectural discourse – such as “sustainable” itself, but also “beautiful” or “together,” as is the case with the NEB – *evoke* these *sustainable objects* of architecture (Wales, 1990). Thus, keywords communicatively prevail throughout the whole field, even if they are fundamentally characterized, by their very nature, by a distinct indeterminacy of meaning. This condition initiates an endless chain of “value deferral” (Lyotard, 1984), through which *accurately vague representations* of “sustainable architecture” are “constituted from the statements that are first announced by experts with a special knowledge, appreciated by institutions, reproduced by popular enunciators and confirmed by the architectural community” (Basa, 2009: 274), then practiced and subsequently evaluated in quantifiable terms.

However, if we are to agree that, in order to create “sustainable architecture,” the field of architecture has to achieve objective unanimity, i.e. *criteria* rather than mere *concepts*, then “until a consensus is attained, the ability of the architectural community to adopt a coherent environmental strategy, across all

building types and styles of development, will remain elusive” (Brennan, 1997, in Guy, 2005: 470). As the non-specificity of the term “sustainable” occurs because of an already ill-prescribed field of expression – that of SD and, more broadly, of the environmental discourse – its further prescription within architecture perhaps leaves us with the “common sense” – yet seemingly informed – vagueness of subjective takes of what “sustainable architecture” is: “just good architecture” (Norman Foster, 2001, cited in Guy, 2005: 469).

### *Conclusions*

The distinctive uncertainty that characterizes the term “sustainable” ultimately suggests that the universality of the concept itself can never be represented directly. Indeed, the term is an *empty signifier* (Lévi-Strauss, 1987 [1950]) that has to be associated with – and thus it has to *refer to* – the common signifiers of architecture, its discourse, and its practice (first and foremost, the word *building*, both as a noun and a verb) in order to be semantically charged and secure meaning through the articulation of “chains of equivalence” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:144): “the more words in the chain, the more the meaning of any of those words comes to depend on the other words in the chain” (Cornwall, 2007:482). This results in the rhetoric of sustainability – and thus of SD – exerting a prescriptive role on both the discursive (its agenda) and factual (its materiality) formation and practice of architecture itself, in that it “attempts to coordinate and regulate the field of architecture according to its priorities (as well as its ignorances)” (Basa, 2009:273).

In advancing further lines of research on the argument outlined in this paper, one of the concerns that inevitably arises is: what are the effects of such a wide diffusion of empty signifiers in architectural education? Moreover, if we are to critically question the “hegemonic” grip – in a Gramscian perspective – of uncertain buzzwords and slogans in architecture, we might start by turning our argument upside-down and therefore ask if and how architecture itself influences, in turn, other domains – not least, that of sustainable development. However, because discourses and practices are inevitably intertwined, before proceeding any further the following set of questions

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must be answered first. Can the uncertainty between textual output and materialized architecture forge a new pathway in the worsening of the current architectural crisis? Can written architecture (or rather: *unrealized architecture*) acquire a unique identity and inherent worth that transcends its function in the factual world? Can architecture reconstruct itself exclusively in the digital realm, a medium that supposedly provides significantly fewer constraints? Or, should architecture instead reclaim a pragmatic quality that is necessarily tied to action and focused on contextualizing each activity within its particular scope, *locus*, and tangible possibilities?

In this perspective, we contend that architecture – and particularly its practice – should be regarded as a *verb* (*building*, as an *act*) rather than just a mere *noun* (*building*, as an *object*). If this holds true, the architects' role is thus that of *enabling* as opposed to *providing*, as participants in a process that impacts not only their own work but also builders, clients, citizens, and individuals in the act of constructing the set of circumstances *in and through* which they reside. Ultimately, a thorough reflection – perhaps a necessary further line of investigation – would bring about the problematic relationship between the architectural design practice and its narratives. Indeed, as noted earlier in this paper, since the beginning of modern media, a deluge of words and images has conditioned and potentially degraded the very modes of production of architectures (buildings) in the city. Contrariwise, the unutterable space, the lack of words, stillness, emptiness, intimacy, and remoteness might be all significant topics to critically inquire as structural to the development of “architecture as an outcome” and the basis of a new design endeavor – both materially and conceptually. Therefore, it is necessary to question if and how such instances are influenced by the continual remarketing and instrumentalization of the contemporary architectural discourse, which prioritizes, among other factors, the digital experience above the sensual encounter. As a closing remark, we argue that it is reasonable to assume that architecture still offers a unique platform to study and challenge our current views on reality, not least the environment and environmental issues. Indeed, “the arts and architecture open up

spaces of possibility beyond solid experience and prognostic value. They are committed to the uncertain – that is, to what we do not (yet) know, but about which we can speculate” (Volgger, 2022: 8). This, in turn, may generate new and varied approaches and re-conceptions of contemporary concerns, therefore increasing the spectrum of practical solutions beyond what is only evoked by buzzwords and slogans.

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