

# From hybrid practice to epistemological framework: metamodernism in architectural knowledge production

James Benedict Brown

*Umeå School of Architecture, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article argues that metamodernism should be understood in architecture primarily as an epistemological framework – a way of knowing – rather than as an aesthetic sensibility. It demonstrates how contemporary architecture must navigate incompatible knowledge systems simultaneously.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The article bases its argument on metamodernism as oscillation and “as-if” epistemology, applied to architecture through five material constraints: materiality, duration, collectivity, publicness and capital intensity. It examines five paradigmatic case studies (Grenfell Tower, Svalbard Global Seed Vault, Beijing Daxing Airport, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Elbphilharmonie) and two hedonistic sustainability projects (CopenHill, Sara kulturhus).

**Findings** – Architecture demonstrates metamodern epistemology through productive impossibility: the requirement to proceed as-if contradictory goals could be reconciled while materially making their irreconcilability visible. This framework has significant implications for architectural pedagogy, requiring educators to cultivate students’ capacity to work within epistemological hybridity rather than seeking resolution.

**Research limitations/implications** – This article’s analysis is limited to European, North American and East Asian architectural examples, reflecting both metamodernism’s origins as a European theoretical framework and the author’s situated perspective as a northern European educator. Future research should investigate whether metamodern epistemology applies to non-Western architectural contexts or whether different epistemological frameworks emerge from other cultural and intellectual traditions for navigating productive impossibility. Many non-Western architectural practices already navigate multiple contradictory functions and producers; examining these through their own theoretical vocabularies rather than importing Western frameworks could significantly extend architectural epistemology’s geographic and cultural scope. This remains crucial terrain for extending these arguments beyond their current geographic concentration.

**Practical implications** – The article’s pedagogical argument has direct implications for architectural practice preparation. Architects educated in metamodern epistemology will encounter professional practices still organised around modernist structures: building codes presuming singular solutions, fee structures commodifying design as product and client expectations shaped by technological solutionism. This friction is inevitable but productive: metamodern thinking can equip architects to articulate what knowledge claims their buildings make, which validation criteria apply across epistemologies, and why contradictions cannot be resolved. Rather than seeking to eliminate this friction, professional practice should recognise and support architects trained to work productively within epistemological complexity.

**Social implications** – As architecture and construction face unprecedented pressure from the polycrisis (the climate emergency, social inequity, resource scarcity), training architects to work within productive impossibility rather than seeking definitive solutions has significant social consequences. Metamodern pedagogy prepares architects to hold incompatible demands (sustainability and development, community benefit and capital efficiency, cultural preservation and innovation) without false resolution. This capacity is essential for navigating the contradictions embedded in contemporary building: materials with embodied carbon used to address climate change, developments addressing housing scarcity while potentially displacing communities, heritage preservation and adaptive reuse. Metamodern epistemology offers architects intellectual and ethical tools for acknowledging rather than obscuring these contradictions, supporting more honest engagement with architecture’s role in social transformation.



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**Originality/value** – This article extends metamodernism from cultural theory into architectural epistemology, providing vocabulary for understanding how contemporary architecture must navigate the polycrisis. It positions architectural education as critical training for practitioners facing practice's inherent epistemological complexity.

**Keywords** Architectural knowledge, Climate crisis, Epistemological crisis, Metamodernism

**Paper type** Research article

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## Introduction: the epistemological crisis in architecture

If there is anything that living in the Anthropocene tells us, it is that the stability of disciplinary certainties and methods may no longer be adequate. (McEwan and Lechner, 2025)

The guest editors' call for papers for this special issue of the International Journal of Architectural Research gestures towards something more profound than mere methodological inadequacy: it points to an epistemological crisis. The question is not simply what architects should do differently, but how architectural knowledge itself is constituted, validated and transmitted across the hybrid territories of practice, pedagogy and theory. To that end, this article argues that, according to Vermeulen and van den Akker's (2010) definition, metamodernism offers not merely a new aesthetic sensibility but a fundamentally transformative epistemological framework for architectural knowledge production in the twenty-first-century Anthropocene [1].

Above all other creative arts, architecture demonstrates metamodernism's epistemological rather than aesthetic dimensions, because of the unique constraints and affordances of producing and adapting buildings. Buildings have a material permanence, social consequences, economic entanglements and far-sighted durational commitments.

Existing scholarship (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010) has tended to position metamodernism primarily as a cultural-aesthetic phenomenon. In their highly cited opening salvo, Vermeulen and van den Akker identified metamodernism across a range of cultural production, primarily in the visual arts and theatre, but also in architecture. Since then, studies on metamodernism have examined the artefacts of cultural production (e.g. Rowland, 2021; Dember, 2024; Drayton, 2024; Jordan, 2024) as evidence of a shifting epistemological worldview. A consideration of architecture in the Metamodern episteme forces the question further inward, away from merely cultural *expression* to cultural *knowledge*, from what we see to how we know it. This shift is not incidental but necessary: architecture's materiality, its requirement to both build and represent, makes visible to a greater degree than in other disciplines these epistemological structures.

This article departs from the perspective of architectural education in the Global North. It is written by a tenured academic with a responsibility for courses in both the history and theory of architecture at undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as the overall leadership of a Master's degree in architecture. This is not to defend or dismiss the author's privileged position in the ivory tower, but to emphasise that the argument set out in this article has been developed from the desire to explore answers to a vital overarching question that is relevant across the Global North: how can we, as educators, support future architects to make sense of the world around them and the practice they will engage with at least fifty years into the future? This article's European and North American focus reflects both metamodernism's origins as a European theoretical framework and my own situated perspective as a northern European educator. Whether metamodern epistemology applies to non-Western architectural contexts, or whether different epistemological frameworks emerge from other cultural traditions, remains a vital terrain for extending these arguments beyond their current geographic scope, and future scholarship is eagerly anticipated.

This article proceeds in five stages. First, it repositions metamodernism from a cultural-aesthetic to an epistemological framework. Second, it examines how architecture operates as a hybrid practice across incompatible epistemologies. Third, through five contemporary buildings, it demonstrates how architecture's material constraints reveal this epistemological



hybridity. Fourth, it explores hedonistic sustainability as a specific manifestation of metamodern epistemology in response to the climate crisis, looking at two recent Scandinavian buildings. Finally, it returns to its starting point in the academy to address the implications for architectural pedagogy.

## Metamodernism as a hybrid epistemology

### *Beyond the modern/postmodern binary*

Just like the literary, performing, visual and media arts, sense has been made of the architectural production of the twentieth century through the twin theoretical poles of modernism and postmodernism. Yet, as the slowest of all arts, architecture tends to respond slowly to cultural and environmental influences, with its built products the outcome of lengthy debates and processes. A growing distrust of modern and postmodern theories has led to a diverse search for post-postmodern frameworks. [Eshelman \(2025\)](#) summarises these movements, arguing that:

Post-postmodernism is neither a total, completely discontinuous break with postmodernism nor its tacit extension or intensification. Rather, it reworks the postmodern way of constructing reality by negating and redirecting the functions of its basic devices. Instead of a relentless focus on infinitely receding otherness, it allows for the constructed creation of positive dyadic relations between humans, in the place of endless postmodern irony it imposes order (oscillation, double framing, metareferential authenticity) on that irony and by stressing a positively conceived, paradoxical unknowability it opens up a window of transcendence that holds forth some form of hope (or, if we want to be theologically more cautious, it creates fictive, imaginary horizons or projections that renew us ethically and emotionally). (19–20)

Vermeulen and van den Akker's ontological definition of metamodernism positions it as "oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (2010, pp. 5–6). The concept of oscillation has arguably come to both define and divide approaches to metamodernism. Yet, crucially, Vermeulen and van den Akker emphasise that this oscillation is neither a synthesis (one that would resolve contradictions) nor a mere alternation (which would keep opposing positions separate), but rather a double-bind: "a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles." (2010, p. 6) This formulation has profound epistemological implications. Metamodernism positions itself *with* modernism and postmodernism (sharing their concerns), ontologically *between* them (refusing resolution) and historically *beyond* them (recognising their limitations). But what does this mean for how we, as architects, educators and researchers, *know* about architecture? I argue that metamodernism's potential lies in its capacity to theorise what architects already know empirically: buildings must proceed from incompatible knowledge systems simultaneously. Whether or not one accepts metamodernism as an epochal diagnosis, as an epistemological framework, it very accurately addresses the contemporary conditions of architecture that have prompted this special issue.

Vermeulen and van den Akker's conception of metamodernism as an emergent structure of feeling is contested from some quarters. [Eve \(2012\)](#) argues that metamodern traits appear in literature as early as the 1970s, first in the work of Thomas Pynchon and later that of David Foster Wallace. For Eve, this 21st-century definition of metamodernism cannot function as a temporal marker. However, Eve's critique views metamodernism as cultural periodisation, a claim that I want to distance myself from. Instead, I want to deploy metamodernism as an epistemological framework for understanding architectural knowledge production. Eve himself acknowledges this use, concluding that metamodernism "holds value . . . As a set of tropes" for analytical purposes ([Eve, 2012](#), p. 22). For architecture, the question is not whether buildings are metamodern temporally, but whether metamodern vocabulary (oscillation, double-bind, and, as I explore in the next section, "as-if" thinking) illuminates how

architectural knowledge operates. Buildings demonstrate this kind of epistemological hybridity through material constraints (materiality, duration, collectivity, publicness, capital intensity) and not through cultural zeitgeist. Such critiques of metamodernism emphasise the value of employing metamodernism as an analytical tool rather than an epochal claim. I regard metamodernism, therefore, as both descriptive and normative. Descriptively, it characterises how contemporary architecture already operates: practitioners navigate incompatible knowledge systems, whether or not they identify this as Metamodern. Later in this article, I argue that this epistemological stance should be explicitly cultivated in architectural education rather than remaining implicit practice wisdom.

Whether or not metamodernism succeeds as an analytical tool, it provides an essential epistemological vocabulary for understanding how contemporary architectural practice already operates. I prefer to treat metamodernism as an analytical framework rather than a cultural prescription: something that is simultaneously both descriptive and normative. Descriptively, metamodernism characterises how contemporary architecture already operates: practitioners navigate incompatible knowledge systems, proceed despite uncertainty and hold contradictory goals in tension, whether or not they identify this as Metamodern. This epistemological condition exists independent of and prior to any theorisation. Normatively, however, this article argues that such a stance should be explicitly cultivated in architectural education rather than being entrusted to the implicit wisdom of architectural practice. In the last section of this article, I explore several of these normative pedagogical implications, namely that architectural education should prepare students to work within epistemological hybridity rather than seeking resolution or retreat into critique.

Finally, albeit briefly, metamodernism must also be distinguished from adjacent post-postmodern concepts. Unlike Bourriaud's (2009) *altermodernism*, which emphasises cultural translation and nomadic subjectivity, metamodernism foregrounds an emergent structure of feeling characterised by oscillation between modern enthusiasm and postmodern scepticism, holding contradictory positions simultaneously; and an "as-if" epistemology, proceeding as-if contradictory goals could be reconciled while maintaining awareness of their impossibility. Unlike Eshelman's (2025) *performatism*, which tends towards aesthetic closure, metamodernism actively maintains productive impossibility. Similarly, Kirby's (2009) *digimodernism* identifies digital technology's restructuring of authorship, reception and cultural production, foregrounding medium-specific conditions of contemporary culture. Moraru's (2011) *cosmodernism*, meanwhile, emphasises planetary interconnection and cosmopolitan ethics as responses to globalisation. While these frameworks illuminate important dimensions of contemporary culture, metamodernism, by contrast, concerns epistemological stance rather than technological mediation or ethical orientation – how knowledge is validated across incompatible frameworks regardless of medium or geographic scale.

To complicate matters, it should be acknowledged that there has also been an "explosion of socio-political, psychological and spiritual theories that also call themselves metamodern but that have little or nothing to do with Vermeulen and van den Akker's project and do not address literary or cultural issues in the narrow sense of the word." (Eshelman, 2025, p. 4). Linda Ceriello notes that "people like the sound of the word, and they are sticking it in a lot of places." (Janes and Snyder, 2019) Moyo Okediji (in Storm, 2022), for example, highlights the decolonial endeavour of metamodernism. In contrast, Storm (2021) himself sees it as a means to propose a new theoretical framework for all of the humanities and social sciences. Storm argues that metamodernism can be used to build a "process social ontology" that redefines the social world as an ongoing, relational and generative process. Other contributors to the wider field include Andersen (2019), Dempsey (2023) and Rowson and Pascal (2021), all of whom interpret the term to slightly different ends. Notably, writing in two self-published books under the pen name Freinacht (2017 and 2019), Daniel Görtz and Emil Ejner Friis use the term metamodernity as a shorthand for an evolution of Ken Wilber's integral theory, describing how cultural, psychological and institutional systems can evolve in tandem to further cognitive

development, a position expertly problematised in a series of articles on the Substack *The Living Philosophy* (2024). Mindful of these divergent interpretations, the author restates that this article aligns itself not with tendencies towards prescription or social engineering, but with the cultural theory of Vermeulen and van den Akker, and with Gibbon's metamodernism. In plain English, metamodernism can most productively be understood by the reader as a way of making sense of an *episteme* that emerged around the turn of the twenty-first century (Dember, 2024). My use of the word *episteme* is not intended to be epochal, but it is historically specific in the sense that it refers to the ways of organising knowledge that shape what can be known and how that is seen to have emerged in this period. "As-if" epistemology and productive impossibility.

Vermeulen and van den Akker align metamodernism with Kant's "negative idealism," what they call "as-if" thinking, citing Curtis H. Peters (1993): "we may view human history as if mankind had a life narrative which describes its self-movement toward its full rational/social potential ... to view history as-if it were the story of mankind's development" (117). Importantly, this is epistemologically distinct from both modern epistemology (the belief that truth exists and can be accessed through a proper method) and postmodern epistemology (the assertion that truth-claims are power-claims, that all knowledge is situated and contingent).

Metamodern epistemology proceeds differently by acknowledging that comprehensive truth may not exist or may be inaccessible, yet continues to act as-if the pursuit of truth remains meaningful and necessary. This is not naive belief, nor is it cynical performativity. It is "informed naïveté" or "pragmatic idealism" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, *op cit*). The architectural implications are profound. We routinely design new buildings as-if sustainability were achievable, as-if buildings could solve social problems, or as-if form could generate new ways of living, all while remaining epistemologically aware that these goals may be impossible or even contradictory. Architects might be accused of hypocrisy, but given the urgency of the situation we face, it is better understood as a *hybrid epistemology*.

Having established metamodernism as an epistemological framework, the next section examines how this is manifested in architectural practice.

## Architecture as a hybrid practice

### *The problematic concept of the hybrid practitioner*

In *The Hybrid Practitioner: Building, Teaching, Researching Architecture*, Voet et al. (2022) argue that contemporary architecture demands hybrid practitioners who operate across multiple modes of knowledge production simultaneously: firstly through building (enacting material practices and applying tectonic knowledge); secondly through teaching (enacting pedagogical transmission and applying generational knowledge) and thirdly through researching (enacting scholarly inquiry and applying systematic knowledge). Importantly, these are not separate *roles* that an individual might occupy sequentially, but rather integrated practices that inform and transform one another. The hybrid practitioner doesn't merely move between domains, but works in their productive tensions.

Because this article is written from the perspective of architectural education, this hybrid practitioner might most readily be imagined as a part-time or sessional architect who comes to the university 1 or 2 days a week to bring their material and practical expertise to bear on students' design projects. Whether teaching courses led by permanent faculty or directing their own elective units or studios within larger design courses, these individuals operate in a state of precarity, typically without access to the benefits of permanent academic employment, such as pedagogical training or research support. Likewise, their nontenured employment renders them invisible within institutional frameworks for supporting or recognising research as a scholarly activity, for example, in the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF). Despite these limitations, many schools of architecture employ teachers on sessional or annual contracts to both demonstrate their connection to contemporary practice and insulate themselves against unpredictable student enrolment.

Putting aside the example of the architect-teacher, we might go one step further to another understanding of the hybrid practitioner: not as a description or category of employment but as an epistemological condition. The hybrid practitioner is anyone who must navigate incompatible ways of knowing, whether they're a tenured or untenured teacher, a practising architect or a student. What makes any practice hybrid is not the job description but an epistemological stance: validating architectural claims across practice (does it perform?), pedagogy (does it teach?) and research (does it contribute to knowledge?). These different validation criteria are incommensurable because what counts as knowing in architectural practice differs categorically from what counts as knowing in academic research. The precarious employment of sessional instructors makes visible what is actually a universal architectural condition: proceeding from incompatible epistemologies simultaneously. Metamodernism provides vocabulary for theorising this condition regardless of employment status. The hybrid practitioner, understood epistemologically, is anyone working in architecture's inherent epistemological multiplicity.

### *Epistemological implications of hybridity*

What Voet, Schreurs and Thomas describe operationally in architecture, metamodernism provides a framework for epistemological theorisation. In the light, each mode of architectural practice produces knowledge differently:

- (1) *Practical knowledge*: emerges through making, is validated by performance and is transferred through the evolution of master–student apprenticeship that is so dominant in design studio pedagogy (Jones *et al.*, 2025, pp. 64–66).
- (2) *Pedagogical knowledge*: emerges from teaching, is articulated in syllabi and learning outcomes, is transmitted through the curriculum, and is developed through mentorship, peer review of teaching, and pedagogical training or qualifications.
- (3) *Research knowledge*: emerges through inquiry, is validated by peer review and is transferred through publication or exhibition.

These are not just different applications of architectural knowledge but different epistemologies. In other words, there are different ways of answering the question: how do we know what we know about architecture? The hybrid practitioner operates in the irresolvable tension between these epistemologies. A building that works (i.e. has validation in practice) may embody principles that cannot be articulated propositionally (validation in research). A pedagogical method that produces excellent student learning (pedagogical validation) may contradict sustainable building practices (validation in practice). This is precisely the Metamodern condition: holding contradictory epistemological frameworks in productive tension without collapsing into an either/or binary.

This understanding of hybrid practice provides the foundation for examining specific built examples, five of which are explored in the next section.

## **Architectural knowledge as metamodern epistemology**

### *Five constraints of epistemological hybridity*

Architecture, more than any other contemporary cultural practice, must confront this epistemological hybridity because of its materiality, duration, collectivity, publicness and capital intensity. In this section, we consider five paradigmatic examples of buildings completed or renovated in the first quarter of the twenty-first century that illustrate a confrontation of these modes. These buildings are paradigmatic not because epistemic hybridity is novel to architecture: architecture has always navigated multiple constraints and incommensurable knowledge systems. What makes these five buildings paradigmatic of an emergent metamodern epistemology is how they make visible the specific character of

epistemological hybridity under contemporary conditions: the climate crisis demanding impossible reconciliations, global capital flows enabling unprecedented resource commitments, algorithmic design tools coordinating incompatible expertise, post-colonial contestations multiplying validation criteria and durational commitments extending beyond knowable futures. Each building demonstrates one dimension of architecture's epistemological exposure in ways that illuminate what metamodernism adds to understanding architecture's unique condition: not that it is complex, but that architecture's vocabulary for theorising how buildings must proceed from productive impossibility rather than seeking resolution (modern) or deconstructing claims (postmodern). metamodernism provides the epistemological framework for understanding how twenty-first-century architecture must work through contradictions it cannot resolve.

*Materiality.* Buildings must actually stand, actually shelter, actually perform. They cannot defer these questions to interpretation or representation alone. In [Brown \(2024\)](#), I confront just some of the myriad ethical dimensions of architectural practice to explore the catastrophic and fatal material failures of three modern buildings that were destroyed by fire. The fire in the 24-storey 120-apartment Grenfell Tower apartment building in North Kensington, London, England, that started in a faulty fridge-freezer on the 14th of June 2017, remains one of the most horrifying examples of the requirement of buildings to materially perform.

The fire at Grenfell Tower spread quickly: not from room to room inside the building, but by igniting flammable insulation and cladding on the building's façade. 72 people died, and more than 70 were injured. Beneath the modern cladding, Grenfell Tower was a Brutalist tower block designed by the Clifford Wearden and Associates for the Kensington and Chelsea London Borough Council and completed in 1974. Government policies to encourage homeownership had led many tenants to purchase leaseholds on their apartments, resulting in a mixed public-private ownership structure by the time of the building's renovation between 2012 and 2016 (led by Studio E Architects). Windows were replaced, new exterior insulation was installed, and the building was clad with an aluminium composite material. The project aimed to enhance the building's thermal efficiency while also improving (and modernising) its appearance. The rough, unfinished concrete so associated with architectural Brutalism and the socialist origins of public housing was hidden beneath the bright new composite cladding, giving it an appearance more in keeping with modern tall buildings ([Hodkinson, 2019](#); [Brown, 2024](#)).

Since the publication of my earlier work on these catastrophic fires, the second phase of the [Grenfell Tower Inquiry \(2024\)](#) concluded that the fire "was the culmination of decades of failure by central government and other bodies in positions of responsibility in the construction industry to look carefully into the danger of incorporating combustible materials into the external walls of high-rise residential buildings and to act on the information available to them." (p. 7) The paradigmatic epistemological lesson of this catastrophe was that the building envelope was a critical system that, until the fire, had remained largely in the realm of representation. The new cladding and glazing materials made a Brutalist council tower block *look* modern, and the improved thermal performance *looked* sustainable. Yet the building's architectural materiality became visible through a horrific failure. Knowledge claims about aesthetics, energy performance and fire safety all proved themselves incompatible. The fire at Grenfell Tower, a catastrophe that claimed numerous lives, proved that one cannot *know* material performance through specification alone.

*Duration.* Buildings persist across time, outliving their makers' intentions and contexts. Architectural knowledge must account for unknowable futures.

The Global Seed Vault (Peter W. Sødernan, 2008; [Figure 1](#)) on the island of Spitsbergen in Svalbard is a paradigmatic example of a Metamodern approach to duration because, unlike most new buildings, it is explicitly designed to last for more than two hundred years (and potentially outlive human civilisation) to provide safe, long-term storage of seed samples of the world's crops. As of December 2025, it houses almost 1.4 million accessions from 131 depositors in airtight storage rooms maintained at a constant  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$  ([Svalbard Global Seed](#)





**Figure 1.** The Svalbard Global Seed Vault, Norway (Photo: Philip Major for Crop Trust, CC BY-SA 2.0)

[Vault, 2025](#)). Norway, one of the world's largest producers of oil and gas, used the country's sovereign wealth funds to pay for the Seed Vault's construction costs of approximately 45 million NOK. The vault is managed according to a tripartite agreement between the Norwegian government, the Crop Trust and NordGen, the Nordic Genetic Resource Center.

Despite these attempts to plan far into the future, in 2017, the vault flooded due to the unexpected thaw of permafrost ([Carrington, 2017](#)). The permafrost surrounding the facility was intended to maintain the vault's low temperature in the event of an electricity failure. But warmer-than-expected wintertime temperatures caused meltwater to flood the entrance tunnel.

The vault makes knowledge claims about largely unknowable domains: the preservation of seeds, the effects of climate change, the geological stability of Svalbard and human futures. The building was designed to operate autonomously; however, since the 2017 floods, it has required 24/7 monitoring. A spokesperson for the Norwegian government explained that, "we must see what we can do to minimise all the risks and make sure the seed bank can take care of itself" ([Carrington, op cit](#)).

The vault was designed in a pure Metamodern state of as-if: as-if we know what future humans will need, what climate conditions will be, what technologies will exist. The 2017 flooding of the Global Seed Vault demonstrates this uncertainty and epistemological hybridity.

*Collectivity.* Buildings are inherently collaborative, requiring coordination across multiple knowledge systems. Architecture operates in a way where no single disciplinary epistemology suffices.

Zaha Hadid Architects' Beijing Daxing International Airport (2019; [Figure 2](#)) makes visible architecture's irreducible collectivity as an epistemological condition. On a purely technical level, the design and construction of the 700,000 m<sup>2</sup> terminal building required the coordination of more than seventy engineering firms with access to a wide range of distinct knowledge systems ([Zaha Hadid Architects, 2019](#)). Structural efficiency demanded massive column-free spans. Environmental performance required natural lighting and passive ventilation. Aviation operations required precise passenger-flow calculations. Security systems deployed facial recognition across the airport. Seismic engineering accounted for





**Figure 2.** Beijing Daxing International Airport, China (Photo: Arne Müsseler, CC BY-SA 3.0 de)

earthquake loads, and retail planning optimised commercial revenue per square meter. Each of these distinct knowledge systems operates under fundamentally different validation criteria: what counts as knowing structural performance differs categorically from what counts as knowing retail success or knowing airline operational efficiency.

Although Zaha Hadid Architects are credited as the project leader, no architect can claim to possess a single epistemology that could adjudicate between these claims. Like all megaprojects, the building proceeds by holding these incompatible ways of knowing in productive tension rather than resolving them into synthesis. (It also exposed the hypocrisy of a large multi-national architectural practice's allegiance with the climate crisis principles of *Architects Declare*, which Zaha Hadid Architects chose to leave in 2020; see [Hilburg, 2020](#).)

Like all megaprojects ([Flyvbjerg and Gardner, 2023](#)), the airport demonstrates that architecture's collectivity forces it beyond any singular epistemological framework: the building must simultaneously be validated by engineering, environmental, economic, social and political knowledge, each with different criteria for success. The role of the architect is not merely the negotiation between these expertise but epistemological hybridity: working between irreconcilable ways of validating architectural claims (and, perhaps, irreconcilable ways of responding to the climate crisis). While architect [Patrik Schumacher \(2009\)](#) has long described the advanced computational design used in projects such as Beijing Daxing Airport as *parametricism*, the term has become indelibly associated with the aesthetic of the office's projects. An alternative reading of the airport terminal's fluid form is that it materialises the impossibility of any epistemological unity: the building holds together what it cannot, in theory, cohere.

*Publicness.* Buildings operate in public space and are subject to public consequences. Buildings cannot remain in the realm of private aesthetic judgment, no matter what we in academia or practice may attempt to do.

David Adjaye's 2016 building for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC, USA, demonstrates how architecture's *publicness* subjects buildings to multiple, often contradictory, epistemological validations that cannot be

reconciled through design expertise alone (Figure 3). Whereas architectural knowledge might validate the building through formal innovation, material expression or spatial experience, the publicness of the museum demanded simultaneous validation across incommensurable frameworks: the African American community judged whether the building adequately represented complex histories of enslavement, resistance, achievement and ongoing struggle; the Smithsonian Institution evaluated its performance as educational infrastructure and cultural stewardship; the architectural profession assessed its contribution to museum typology and civic architecture; and the broader American public scrutinised its capacity to hold national memory and facilitate reconciliation. Each of these validations operates on different epistemological grounds: what counts as knowing African American history differs fundamentally across lived experience, academic scholarship, curatorial practice and architectural representation. Adjaye's design decisions – to reference West African caryatid columns in the bronze-coloured corona, to invert the museum's spatial sequence by beginning below grade in darkness, to position the building prominently on the National Mall – made knowledge claims that would be validated differently by different publics. Its location is a fundamentally urban epistemological question. A legitimate decolonial epistemology might question whether siting African American history alongside historically exclusionary museums and institutions risks narrative containment. But Adjaye's building emphasises not only the regal setting of the Mall but also Southeast Washington's historically Black geography. These urban knowledge systems operate from incompatible validation that the building cannot resolve.

The NMAAHC's publicness compelled it to engage with multiple epistemological accounts simultaneously. Four architectural critics lauded the building's formal sophistication and contextual response. [Alexandra Lange \(2016\)](#) praised its strategic connections to the 19th-century Washington vernacular, while Oliver Wainwright celebrated how it "rejects the



**Figure 3.** The National Museum of African American History & Culture, Washington, DC, USA (Photo: Ajay Suresh, CC BY 2.0)

sombre traditionalism” of the Washington Mall and its boulevard of predominantly neo-classical institutions. Yet some critics questioned whether the architecture itself might overshadow the content it houses. [Rowan Moore \(2016\)](#) argued that “it is indeed the content that should come before the architecture.” More substantively, Philip Kennicott’s review in the Washington Post acknowledged the museum’s “powerful stories” while critiquing its organisation as “disconnected and episodic,” suggesting that the spatial choreography was epistemologically at odds with historical comprehensiveness.

Scholars of African American history approached the building differently. In her first visit to the building, Tina Myles noted how Adjaye’s design “reminded me of layered African and diasporic artistic expressions, from the great pyramids of Egypt, to the carved crowns of Yoruba royalty, to the embellished cast iron gates fashioned by enslaved craftsmen in South Carolina.” (2017, p. 82) Moving inside the building, the experience shifted: “the metal surround—visible through windows—contributes even more nuance to a visitor’s sense of the physical place, calling to mind the perpetual encasement of black people’s lives in America, while at the same time letting in and shaping the light of the warming sun” (*op cit*). Writing in *ArtForum International*, [Copeland and Wilderson \(2017\)](#) critically compare the NMAAHC and the nearby National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). They argue that by placing these museums on the National Mall, they risk containing Black and Indigenous history within a sanctioned or “safe” version of American history. Copeland criticises the spatial logic of the NMAAHC, specifically the “ruse” of a narrative towards personhood from slavery to the presidential election of Barack Obama: “This narrative allows you to blithely think that a certain kind of historical project has been achieved, when the black body continues to be anything but a person, continues to be this thing that can be murdered, violated, appropriated, reified, and repurposed for any reason whatsoever.”

This example of divergence, not only between white architects but also between scholars of African American history, reveals that a building’s publicness multiplies rather than unifies epistemological validation. As a landmark of African American culture and history, the NMAAHC must answer to different, incompatible sets of criteria for what it means to “know” and to represent collective experience. Architecture’s publicness exposes its epistemological hybridity: buildings cannot claim a single authoritative knowledge. Still, they must operate across multiple ways of knowing, each legitimate within its own framework, none reducible to the others.

*Capital intensity.* Buildings require substantial resource commitments before their knowledge claims can be validated: in this way, architecture commits to *knowing* before it can fully *know*.

Herzog and de Meuron’s Elbphilharmonie Hamburg (2017; [Figure 4](#)) illustrates architecture’s capital intensity as an epistemological limit. The project allocated €866 million in public funds, more than ten times the initial estimate of €77 million, based on unproven claims about the building’s eventual acoustic performance, structural feasibility and urban cultural value. Herzog and de Meuron and the City of Hamburg acted as-if they knew how to build an unprecedented curved acoustic shell on top of a historic warehouse in a busy port, as-if they could predict the cultural and economic impact of a concert hall in such a complex setting. All of these knowledge claims could only be confirmed after a large and irreversible capital investment. The decade-long construction and cost overruns led to continuous public re-evaluation of the building’s worth, through which economic, cultural and architectural knowledge interacted, each validated in different ways. The building ultimately demonstrates that architecture’s capital intensity compels architects and clients to commit to knowing before they can truly know, embodying the metamodern as-if epistemology: moving forward despite impossibility, highlighting that the building cannot delay the question of knowledge until certainty is achieved.

### *Demonstrating epistemological metamodernism*

The fatal renovation of Grenfell Tower, the flooding of the Global Seed Vault, the epistemological collectivity of Beijing Daxing International Airport, the publicness of the





**Figure 4.** The Elbphilharmonie, Hamburg, Germany, under construction, 15th September 2010 (Photo: Gunnar Klack, CC BY-SA 4.0)

NMAAHC and the cost overruns of the Elbphilharmonie Hamburg demonstrate that architecture cannot be understood (or made sense of) within singular epistemological frameworks. This is not a failure of design, but a condition of architecture. This enforced hybridity distinguishes architecture from other cultural practices and positions it uniquely to demonstrate metamodernism's epistemological rather than aesthetic dimensions. Architecture operates differently from other artistic and cultural practices. A building's epistemological hybridity is not its subject but rather its condition.

These buildings are paradigmatic not because epistemic hybridity is novel: architecture has always navigated multiple constraints. What makes these five buildings paradigmatic is how they make visible the specific character of epistemological hybridity under contemporary conditions: the climate crisis demanding impossible reconciliations, global capital flows enabling unprecedented scale, algorithmic design coordinating incompatible expertise and post-colonial contestation multiplying validation criteria. Each of them demonstrates the epistemological hybridity characteristic of architecture produced in the Metamodern episteme. But it would be erroneous to suggest that these ideas define this unfolding era. If the architecture of the first quarter of the 21st century is to be defined by any overarching condition, none is more influential and important than the climate crisis. How future architects will respond to the unfolding environmental crisis is fundamental. To that end, two recent Scandinavian buildings that address architecture's relationship to the climate are explored in the next section: Sara *kulturhus* (cultural centre) in Skellefteå, Sweden and CopenHill in Copenhagen, Denmark.

### **Hedonistic sustainability as an epistemological double-bind**

Readings of architecture have remained largely absent in Metamodern scholarship. However, [Vermeulen \(2018\)](#) briefly refers to the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels' conceptual rendering of "hedonistic sustainability" ([Ingels, 2011](#)) as a distinctly metamodern attitude towards design, one that sidesteps typically quantitative conceptions of sustainability in favour of a more

aesthetic and sensuous approach. (2018) This reading, while productive, risks reducing hedonistic sustainability to an aesthetic strategy (i.e. a question of how buildings look). A deeper epistemological reading instead can explore Ingels' "hedonistic sustainability" as an impossible knowledge-claim: the assertion that we can continue modes of consumption (hedonism) while fundamentally transforming their consequences (sustainability). This is not a marketing slogan but an epistemological wager.

*Amager Bakke, aka CopenHill (Bjarke Ingels Group, 2017)*

Denmark is a flat country. When the 2022 *Tour de France* held its *Grand Départ* in Denmark, Danish rider Magnus Cort won the King of the Mountains jersey after just 206 metres of climbing. Where better to build an artificial ski slope? *Amager Bakke*, more famously known as *CopenHill*, is a waste-to-energy plant in Amager, a suburb of eastern Copenhagen, Denmark (Figure 5). The plant features an 85-metre ski slope and a chimney. The facility incinerates waste generated in metropolitan Copenhagen and converts the energy into heat and electricity for use in the city. It replaced a much older and less efficient incineration plant. Uniquely, the facility combines this prosaic municipal function with additional leisure components: a year-round, all-weather ski slope, a climbing wall and public access to a viewing deck.

CopenHill is perhaps the most obvious illustration of Ingel's conceptualisation of hedonistic sustainability: a building that does not sacrifice delight or pleasure in pursuit of improved environmental responsibility. In CopenHill, all the contradictory and competing knowledge claims at work in a single building are made visible. They are rooted neither in modern confidence (solving the problem of waste) nor in postmodern critique (by critiquing greenwashing). The building embodies a distinctly Metamodern stance: we must proceed as-if sustainable hedonism were attainable, while simultaneously embodying all the reasons why it is not. Burning waste generated by Copenhagen's citizens yields energy, embodying in built



**Figure 5.** Amager Bakke, Copenhagen, Denmark (Photo: the author)



form specialised engineering expertise. However, waste incineration also generates emissions, and these embody environmental knowledge. The building embodies educational knowledge by making visible (and prominent) the environmental costs of consumption through the steam and smoke from the building's chimney, which can be seen from downtown Copenhagen. Finally, the building embodies cultural knowledge by commemorating consumption through recreation. Ingels argues that the building may dissuade Danes from taking highly polluting flights to mountainous countries for their annual ski holidays.

#### *Sara kulturhus (White Arkitekter, 2021)*

A few years after the completion of CopenHill, a very different building with an arguable claim to hedonistic sustainability was completed by the Swedish architectural practice White Arkitekter. *Sara kulturhus* is a mixed-use building in the centre of the north-eastern Swedish city of Skellefteå (Figures 6 and 7). It houses a hotel, a spa, a public library, two museums, theatre auditoria and restaurants. The centrepiece of the complex is an 80-m tower containing the hotel, spa and rooftop restaurant.

Just as in CopenHill, highly contradictory and competing knowledge claims are visible in *Sara kulturhus*. Firstly, and most curiously, the building's name invokes Skellefteå's most famous daughter, the author Sara Lidman (1923–2004). Lidman was born and spent much of her life in Missenträsk, west of the city. A writer and political activist, Lidman's most famous *Jernbanan* sequence of historical novels explored the early industrial exploitation of the northern Swedish forest. In her books, the arrival of the railway and the commercial extraction of timber and raw materials are depicted against the environmental and human cultures of the forest. Yet, in terms of materials, the building's principal structural material is wood, a product of northern Sweden's industrial forestry and a major contributor to Skellefteå's economy. The building also employs the skyscraper typology, a product of the Industrial Revolution, the Modern era, and the globalisation of material extraction and architectural production.

Epistemologically, *Sara kulturhus* embodies the environmental knowledge that industrial forestry is responsible for damaging forest ecosystems (and, in Lidman's eyes, families and communities as well). It embodies the cultural knowledge that the cultural identity of northern Sweden is closely connected to the surrounding forest landscape. But it also embodies the economic knowledge that continuous growth requires continuous resource extraction. It embodies the scientific and climatic knowledge that timber has the capacity to sequester carbon for the lifetime of a building. The contradictions of these knowledge-claims are irresolvable. The building proceeds with a Metamodern epistemology, as-if these contradictions could be reconciled, while at the same time making them visible and highly public in its form.

As a tall timber tower, *Sara kulturhus* doesn't merely represent the tension between an environmental consciousness and continued consumption; rather, it enacts it. The choice of wood and the choice to build a skyscraper is simultaneously a technical decision (enacting structural engineering knowledge), an environmental claim (enacting climate science knowledge), an economic calculation (enacting forestry industry knowledge), a cultural statement (enacting Nordic building traditions and proposing new knowledge about new techniques), a pedagogical gesture (enacting a very tangible demonstration of possibility) and a political statement (enacting a political gesture in the form of a new landmark building as part of Sweden's much vaunted green transition).

These knowledge systems are mutually contradictory. Structural engineering typically maximises material efficiency rather than consuming large volumes of wood to manufacture engineered timber capable of supporting a 20-storey freestanding tower. An environmental commitment would demand sustainable harvesting that limits extraction and clear-cutting. The economic viability of a public library, regional theatre and hotel is inconsistent with the costs of constructing a tall-timber building in a low-density regional centre. Finally, the



**Figure 6.** Sara kulturhus, Skellefteå, Sweden (Photo: the author)

cultural authenticity of a building named after an author critical of the effects of industrialisation would reject industrial methods. A building cannot resolve these contradictions. It can only hold them in productive tension, a fact that is made visible in the many details where structural elements meet (Figure 8). This is epistemological metamodernism: proceeding as-if these contradictions can be reconciled while, in fact, knowing that they cannot.





**Figure 7.** South elevation of the Sara kulturhus, Skellefteå, Sweden (Photo: the author)

CopenHill and Sara *kulturhus* are not examples of metamodern architecture because they *look* metamodern. Instead, they demonstrate how they embody metamodern knowledge through their numerous contradictory knowledge claims. In the next section, the article returns to the academy to consider the implications for those of us engaged in educating tomorrow's architects.



**Figure 8.** Structural detail inside Sara kulturhus, Skellefteå, Sweden (Photo: the author)

### Implications for architectural pedagogy

We must support the development of future architects capable of understanding not only *what* metamodernism *looks* like but also *how* it knows. As explained in the opening section, this article is primarily concerned with the consequences of these speculations for the education of future architects. In most of the Western world, as much as 50% of the academic credits in an architecture education must be earned in studio-based courses. The studio is the signature pedagogy of architecture education (Schön, 1985) and a pedagogical realm that, when designed with care and attention, can support productive oscillation.

Educators can write briefs that explicitly require students to pursue contradictory goals simultaneously, not to balance or synthesise them, but to work in their tension. For example, an undergraduate design brief might challenge students to design a public building that maximises social gathering spaces while minimising carbon footprint, or a building that engages with local vernacular and craft traditions while also deploying digital fabrication. These goals cannot be fully reconciled: maximising space almost always increases building footprint and therefore carbon emissions from construction and operation, while craft traditions often resist digital fabrication processes. Metamodern studio pedagogy asks students what design decisions can make these contradictions visible rather than obscured. How does a building materialise productive tension between incompatible demands?

Shifting studio pedagogy in this direction requires corresponding changes to assessment criteria. Modernist frameworks of pedagogical assessment continue to shape primary and secondary education worldwide (Webster, 2008), preparing students with expectations of binary right/wrong, good/bad evaluation. Architecture studio assessment must move beyond rewarding either complete designs (modern validation) or revelation of hidden assumptions (postmodern critique) to instead examine how students work within contradictions.



Assessment criteria should ask: What contradictory knowledge claims does this design hold? How are these contradictions made visible through design decisions? Which validation criteria apply, and how does the project engage multiple epistemologies simultaneously? Evidence of metamodern epistemological capacity includes explicit articulation of incompatible goals in presentations, design decisions that materialise rather than resolve tensions and critique participation demonstrating awareness that multiple validation criteria operate concurrently.

When done well, the studio is a realm in which students can be supported to engage in critique as a process of negotiation rather than judgment. A transparent introduction and negotiation of contradictory goals can support students as they develop from “does this work?” (a modern validation) and “what assumptions does this reveal?” (a postmodern critique) to more meaningful discussions of “what contradictions does this hold and how?” But when done badly, the studio is a place in which teachers uphold and preserve the damaging characteristics of the hidden curriculum (Dutton, 1991), best described as “the knowledge and practices that students learn and incorporate into their praxis without being explicitly taught” (Jones *et al.*, 2025, p. 271). And for studio educators who connect their teaching and research, there is also an opportunity to use the studio as a place in which to conduct research-by-design with students as an epistemological practice. Design processes generate knowledge differently from purely propositional or analytical research. This is not inferior knowledge, but a different epistemology, and it requires that educators articulate that difference if their work is to be understood and recognised by the wider academic community (especially in bureaucratic methods of assessment or valuation, like the UK’s REF).

Supporting architecture’s signature pedagogy of studio-based courses is a range of other courses that deliver knowledge and develop the knowledge required for architectural practice. Written with particular concern for the development of courses in architectural history and theory, this article once again raises a question of epistemological positioning: how can we teach architectural history not as the sequential progression of styles but as shifting structures of knowing? How can we explore different periods in human civilisation to validate architectural knowledge? It is not enough to diversify or decolonise curricula by including examples of buildings from the Global South. Students need to be supported in understanding the contradictory ways of knowing that different peoples, societies and civilisations have developed through and within their built environments.

A legitimate concern emerges here: if architectural education cultivates metamodern epistemological capacity (i.e. the ability to work within productive impossibility), how will graduates navigate professional practices still largely organised around modernist structures? Building codes generally presume singular correct solutions or quantitative measures of performance; fee structures and procurement frameworks commodify design as a discrete activity, limited to certain phases of projects; client expectations are shaped by technological solutionism; and project timelines demand certainty where uncertainty persists. The transition from metamodern education to persistent modernist structures of practice will inevitably create friction. This friction is not a failure of pedagogy but a demonstration of its necessity: metamodern thinking is precisely about navigating incompatible frameworks, and about holding contradictory epistemologies in productive tension without resolution. Architects educated to articulate what knowledge claims buildings make, which validation criteria apply and why contradictions cannot be resolved are better equipped for practice’s actual complexity than those trained to seek definitive answers. The question is not how to eliminate this friction but how to prepare students to work productively within it: precisely what a Metamodern epistemology cultivates.

Above all else, the unfolding climate crisis presents a crisis of greater scale and impact than any previously faced by human civilisation. We will not be able to meet the challenges of the Anthropocene if we produce future architects who simply *believe* they can solve the climate crisis (a characteristic of modern epistemology) or who simply *critique* all solutions as compromised (a postmodern epistemological stance). It demands architects who can proceed

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as-if solutions were possible while maintaining epistemological awareness of their impossibility. This is the Metamodern practitioner.

### Conclusion: architecture's epistemological necessity

This article has argued that architecture demonstrates metamodernism's epistemological rather than aesthetic dimensions because architectural practice cannot avoid the question of *how it knows*. Where cultural studies can discuss metamodernism as an oscillating sensibility, and where art criticism can identify metamodern affects, architecture must *build* from metamodern knowing. To build demands an epistemological commitment.

Pursuing hybrid constructions that are suitable to the unfolding crises of the 21st century, this work draws us deeper into theoretical terrain than methodological pluralism. It points towards architecture's capacity to demonstrate new epistemological structures adequate to the complexity of the Anthropocene, structures that neither retreat to disciplinary certainty nor dissolve into relativist scepticism, but that work productively in their tension. Metamodernism offers the theoretical framework for this demonstration, and architecture offers a unique material ground for its validation. Together, they suggest not a new style of building but a new structure of architectural knowing: hybrid, oscillating, impossible and necessary.

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The right of James Benedict Brown to be identified as the author of this work is asserted. At various stages of writing, drafts or passages of drafts were shared with a large language model AI, including the desktop plug-in Grammarly, to improve clarity and text readability.

### Note

1. See also Vermeulen and van den Akker's blog (2009–16) of the same name, *Notes on Metamodernism* <https://www.metamodernism.com/> and the edited volume (Van den Akker *et al.*, 2017).

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### Corresponding author

James Benedict Brown can be contacted at: [james.brown@umu.se](mailto:james.brown@umu.se)