

SPACE IN ARCHITECTURE

There is a review in progress at a school of architecture. A succession of students have been describing the spatial properties of their schemes. Positive space...negative space...layered space...flowing space...virtual space...and (because this a thoroughly modern school) folded space. In response to this last, a voice intervenes. It is the Critic From Hell. 'How do you fold space? Like a shirt?'

The language used by architects to describe space reveals an attitude that has run through the heart of architecture since the Enlightenment.

LISTEN.¹

'Architecture is the thoughtful making of spaces.'

- Louis Kahn

'We separate, limit and bring into a human scale a part of unlimited space.'

- Gerrit Rietveld

'I AM SPACE'

- the wonderfully immodest Theo van Doesburg

'Boundaries become fluid; space is conceived as flowing.'

- Laszlo Moholy-Nagy

'A boundless depth opens up, effaces the walls, drives away contingent presences, accomplishes the miracle of ineffable space.'

Le Corbusier

¹ All these quotes are from Cornelis van de Ven, *Space in Architecture* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum Assen, 1978). The title of the book alone raises the problem I am addressing in this first section.

Holding together these voices (and many others) is a common belief that architecture *produces* space - space as an abstracted form of matter, a strange kind of matter that can flow one minute and be folded the next. There is something absurd in this notion (the Critic From Hell spotlights it), but given the route by which the notion has been reached, this absurdity is not so surprising. Space is first conceived of as a property of the mind and then realised as physical matter. In the move from the metaphysical concept to the physical reality, the word 'space' has to cover a whole variety of conditions, and it is here that a confusion arises between concept and reality.

In the first instance space is considered in a very Kantian manner as something which exists as a 'mental construction...a property of our mind...a pure form of intuition.'² That space can be considered a property of the mind (and a pure one at that) appeals to the notorious vanity of architects, because we are not talking any old mind here, but the mind of genius. It is, so the Myth of Architect as creator goes, a defining feature of the profession that they alone can take this stuff called space and then form it, shape it, mould it. It is this mental dexterity that sets the Architect apart. However, in the use of language alone (to form, to shape...), we are moving away from Kantian idealism of space as a pure form of intuition. This is because the production of architectural space is necessarily informed by the material and formal parameters that will eventually define it; architects cannot remain in the realm of the mental construct alone. Space can only accomplish the difficult journey from metaphysical ideal to physical 'reality' by being emptied of anything beyond a limited set of criteria, and it is clear that these are not enough to describe the full experience of space. (Ab)Using Kant again, the transcendental ideality of space (the starting point of the journey) is defined through the 'representation of things when they are considered in themselves, through reason.'³ *In themselves.... Through reason....* Immediately, limits are set, and it is within these terms that space is introduced to architecture. To effect the translation from the metaphysical to the physical, the language of space is subjected to

² The quotes are from the 'Transcendental Aesthetic,' in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Macmillan, 1929), 68–72.

³ *Ibid.*, 72.

rational and formal criteria (positive, negative, layered..). This is an act of terminological policing, by which architecture has the affront to subsume and emasculate the wider condition of space through linguistic subjugation. The varied descriptions of architectural space are typified by the move to autonomy, the banishment of contingency and the expert recourse to rationality - all means of achieving professional closure.

In its final 'form,' architectural space is objectified, subject to quantification and measurement. This is most clearly manifested and enabled in the use of perspective as the prime mode of spatial representation. Stripped of its original symbolic and cultural content, perspective is appropriated as a technical device to control, order and quantify the evasive matter of space. Space is only allowed to enter the gates of architecture on the condition that it is subjected to the self-referential, autonomous, rational terms with which the profession protects itself from the world beyond. Space IN architecture, not architecture in space. As we shall see, the latter proposition challenges the presumed authority of the profession.

TIME IN ARCHITECTURE

*Wary of falling into spatial traps, the next student reverts to a temporal metaphor. 'Architecture is like frozen music ...', he begins, only to be rudely interrupted by the CFH. 'Well, then. Your building is a Robson and Jerome song.'*⁴

The terms on which time can enter architecture are still more limited than those set for space. It is apparent that the full dynamic implications of time represent an immediate threat to the prevailing paradigms of architecture. Temporal conditions

4 For those uninitiated into the British pop charts, Robson and Jerome are two television actors who cover old ballads. Whilst some see their work as musical genocide, the public dismissed such elitism and made Robson and Jerome's album the fastest selling of all time.

such as weathering⁵, programmatic change, night and accidents challenge the immutable authority of architecture. It is against this threat that, as Karsten Harries argues, architecture organises 'a deep defence against the terror of time...to abolish time within time.'⁶ Time is defeated by removing from it the most dangerous (and of course most essential) element, that of flux. Architecture attempts in its conceptual genesis to freeze time, to hold onto that perfected moment of the completion of the building for as long as possible before and after the event. A strident manifestation of this denial of temporality is Le Corbusier's *Law of Ripolin*, in which the whiteness of Ripolin (a modern-day whitewash) is ascribed with both the moral values of purity and also the power to banish time. White walls would resist the accretion of 'dead things' and summon up a moment of purity in architecture.⁷ This use of Ripolin is indicative of some architects' (most obviously the hi-tech architects') recourse to technology to order and control time. On the one hand, technology is used to banish the marks of time - shiny, hard, immutable surfaces shrugging off the effects of dirt, accident, and weather. On the other hand, technology is employed to represent the spirit of the age. Here, time is packaged into a historicist lineage of progress - the illusion of a determinist series of discrete moments, the next one of which architecture assumes the right to express in a gesture of technological and formal progression.

Such attitudes lead to the presumption that time can be held within architecture, either technically or representationally - that time is IN architecture. There is something impossible in Schiller's' statement that 'architecture is frozen music' (as if, just as if architecture could presume to statically stand for a medium which is mute when stripped of temporal memory), but it remains a commonplace sentiment. One only had to visit Paris in the 1980s to appreciate a problem. There lay the Centre Pompidou lovingly swathed in scaffold and shrouds, hung with a Ministry sign - '10th Anniversary Restoration of the West Facade'. A dignity accorded to a

5 See Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993) for an investigation of the temporal aspects of architecture as revealed through interpretations of weathering.

6 Karsten Harries, "Building and the Terror of Time," *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 63-65.

7 Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today* (London: Architectural Press, 1987), 189.

great building in the tradition of the great cathedrals - but the collapse of the restorative time scale to ten years is an acknowledgement of impossibility of holding time in architecture.

SPACE-TIME IN ARCHITECTURE

The next student feels confident that she will be able to deflect the attacks of the CFH, who by now has begun to control the direction of the review. She presents her project through computer animations, showing the building in stunning reality - saturated colours, undisturbed light, graduated shadows, and (best of all) people with legs and, even, hands. A perfected space-time simulacrum. The CFH digs deep into his stock of pat putdowns: "As Laurie Anderson (- she just about hip enough to quote, he thinks-) says, 'I will not believe in virtual reality until they learn how to put dirt into it.'"

The artificial separation of the terms space and time has served as a convenient abstraction, but one which denies the full potency of architectural experience. Because the reading of time through architecture is only possible spatially, and because our experience of space is conditioned through time and memory, space and time should be considered together as dependent categories in the discussion of architecture. In modernist thought, the conjoined terms are introduced to architecture on architecture's terms. On the one hand, in the guise of functionalism, they are subjected to the rule of quantity and measure; space and time are quantified and coded to represent movement and occupation. On the other hand, they are subjected to aesthetic criteria. This latter is made most explicit in Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*. The discussion of space and time is not introduced until over halfway through the book, by when Giedion's hectoring tone has dogmatically established a determinist and moralist argument in favour of the modern movement. Giedion looks to synthetic cubism as the first expression of a new space-time condition. However, for him cubism's

'symbols were not rational.'⁸ He then argues that architects have 'attempted to rationalise cubism or, as they felt was necessary, to correct its aberrations. The procedure was sometimes very different in different groups, but all moved towards rationalisation and into architecture.'⁹

Two main presumptions can be identified here. First that the move towards a 'correct' expression is achieved through recourse to rational technique. Second, that the operation is conducted purely on aesthetic and formal grounds. For Giedion, the introduction of space-time into architecture is achieved representationally. 'Productions of futurist painting, sculpture and architecture are based in *representations* of movement and its correlates - interpenetration and simultaneity,' so that Gropius' Werkbund Fabrik staircases 'seem like movement seized and immobilised in space.'¹⁰ Giedion's argument that architecture can represent, stand-for, a particular condition of space and time pervades architectural culture, whether it is Peter Eisenman relating folded space to contemporary arguments concerning space-time compression,¹¹ or the cyber-architects appropriation of the bloid as an expression of their virtual time-space. In all these cases, the emphasis is not on the particular experiential conditions that might arise out of the spatial-temporal continuum/compression/virtuality, but an aestheticisation of it, in the vain hope that this alone will re-form the fullness of each condition.

As well as denying the experiential aspects, such aestheticisation of space-time within architecture empties the categories of any political or cultural content. Space and time are treated as unproblematic universals, there to be introduced into the terms and methodology of architecture. The use of rationality to effect this introduction brings with it a further detachment. Underlying all rational ideologies in architecture (among them typology, functionalism and technological determinism) is a deluded

8 Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, vol. 4th (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1962), 360.

9 Ibid., my italics.

10 Ibid., 392.

11 Peter Eisenman, 'Unfolding Events', in Peter Eisenman, *Re: Working Eisenman*, First ed. (Academy Press, 1993), 61.

belief that the pursuit of universal truths has a pure logic which absolves the operator of confronting the cultural conditions which defined the rational terms in the first place. This leads to an architectural belief system far removed from the contingent world which the building will eventually occupy. A tragic gap thereby opens up between a conceptually purified genesis and an endpoint charged with all the spatial and temporal aspects of dirty reality. We are reminded of Rem Koolhaas' three stages of the architect (elation, suspense, disappointment), but realistically could probably dispense with the middle term. The recent use of computers has stretched this gap. We hear that representation is getting ever more 'realistic', when in fact it could be argued that the more crude a rendering is the more real it is. The computer's dangerous conflation of stupidity and power has the effect of further limiting the discussion of architecture to technical and aesthetic criteria alone, unable to accept the existence of dirt.

Because of the reductive terms of its spatial and temporal genesis, it is therefore no surprise that architecture cannot put up a resistance to the contingent forces which it will eventually face. At a political level, it means that architecture is unwittingly appropriated by relentless strength of capitalist exchange. The very abstraction of time and space as concepts removed from their cultural and lived realities allows them, and the architecture that has subsumed them, to be treated as pure commodities within an exchange structure.¹² We only have to look back to the Thatcherite boom of the late eighties to appreciate this in action. Caught up as part of a new economic value system, architects were unable to present any resistance. That architects were complicit in the expression and perpetuation of this corruption was a pitiful inevitability given the abstracted genesis of so much architectural production. As David Harvey argues in his seminal *Condition of Postmodernity*,¹³ architecture becomes one of the aestheticised products by which global capitalism and political regimes express themselves. It is with this realisation that we must reverse the equation. Not space and time in architecture, but architecture in space and time, in an

12 Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (London: Verso, 2010), 70.

13 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) Part 3.

acceptance of Harvey's conclusion that 'neither time or space can be assigned objective meanings independent of material processes, and that it is only through investigations of the latter that we can properly ground our concepts of the former'.¹⁴

ARCHITECTURE IN SPACE AND TIME

By the end of the day CFH is feeling pretty pleased with himself. He goes down to hear Ed Soja lecture on his new concept ThirdSpace. At the end of the lecture, CFH, always the clever one, is first to put up his hand. "Whilst geographers only speculate and comment on space, architects actually produce it...." he begins. At which Soja pulls himself up to his not inconsiderable full height: "WE ALL PRODUCE SPACE".

To say that architecture exists in space and time might appear alarmingly obvious, but it is nonetheless a factor that is all too often ignored in architectural production. One reason may be that it challenges the authority that architecture presumes itself to have. The recognition that architecture exists within a range of volatile forces beyond its direct hold is a recognition that architecture must relinquish its delusion of deterministic control and pure representation. Immediately this undermines the perfected autonomy by which the profession protects itself. However, the sight of the architects clinging to an outmoded and self-contained belief system, which is powerless in the face of the maelstrom beyond, demands a paradigm shift in which architecture opens up to a wider spatial-temporal condition.

There is a feeling of intimidation for the architect faced with a broad cultural landscape, and so an understandable reaction is to look for stable elements. In this way architecture, fixed and permanent, shrugs off the ephemeral and the present, and enters into dialogue with the deeper structures which may condition culture. The language of traditional anthropology (mythic, ritual, cosmic, symbolic) is used as a vehicle for architectural exploration, with the intent that architectural will engage with

14 Ibid., 203.

enduring and stable cultural factors. The architect here reverses the role of the anthropologist. Where the latter may investigate and describe social practices through their inscription in space and time¹⁵, the architect describes temporal spaces in which to set those practices. There is an emphasis on architecture as a setting for ritual and as the embodiment of archetypal human situations, all constituted within cultural tradition.¹⁶ At its worst this approach reeks of conservative nostalgia, at its best it is a project of interpretative re-visioning of an active tradition in which to set human action. It is an architecture that is firmly rooted in space and time, but in very particular interpretations of them. The space is one of concrete representation, informed by the search for authentic meaning. The time is one which combines the cyclic movements of cosmology and nature with a backward-looking naturalisation of history, both characterised by the sense of reinterpreted repetition.¹⁷ The implication is that time and space should stand outside the contingent forces of the present, and that production must resist immanent distractions in an attempt to ground architecture in a more profound cultural horizon. It is this detachment that is both the real strength of this approach but also its weakness, because in looking for the truth it bypasses the real.

As I look out of my window and into a council estate (boarded windows, trees stunted by pollution, brackets for the repossessed satellite dish, teenagers snogging on the balcony, net curtains softening security bars) the restitutive promise of high architecture suddenly looks fragile. Out there the conditions of time and space are evolving in ways so powerful and dynamic that we ignore them at our peril. This is not to argue for the celebration of the instant; nor is it to suggest resigned defeat in the face of the maelstrom; nor is it to succumb to the myth of inevitable progress. Rather, it is call for a critical understanding of the present in all its complexity, conducting

15 See for example, Pierre Bourdieu et al, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, 1st ed. (Stanford University Press, 1992), esp. 200ff.

16 I am thinking in particular of the phenomenological approach to architecture, whether in the popular versions of Norberg-Schulz and Kostof or the more deeply considered version of the Cambridge School.

17 Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time* (London: Verso, 1995), 175..

what Marc Augé¹⁸ calls an anthropology of the here and now, so as to reveal the spatial and temporal inscriptions of present-day social practices. The aim is not to reproduce these inscriptions in architecture, but to know them so as to know how to operate within them.

I have argued elsewhere¹⁹ that for this to happen, architectural attention will have to shift from superior cultural narratives to the world of the everyday. It is in the everyday that the fullness of social life is encountered. As Peter Osborne notes: ‘Everyday life is lived in the medium of cultural form. Its phenomenological immediacy is the sedimented result of myriad repetitive practices, yet it is constantly open to the randomness of the chance occurrence, the unexpected encounter, the surprising event, as well as to the refiguration of its meanings by more explicit forms of social intervention.’²⁰ The everyday thus acknowledges the historical constitution of the now, but also its very incompleteness demands an active (political) response to what could happen, to the ‘social production of possibility’.²¹ It is through such temporalisation that one escapes a myopic entrapment in the present and moves into viewing the everyday as a site for transformative practice.

It is with this site that I believe architecture should engage, but in order to do so a shift in architectural paradigms will be required, in which architects relinquish their delusion of control and detached neutrality and face up to their political responsibility. Marx’s famous epigram ‘Men make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing’, forms the catalyst for a twofold revisioning of architectural practice. First, the architectural ‘production’ of space will have to be seen as part of a much wider condition of the social production of space (..‘WE ALL MAKE SPACE’..), with architects placing themselves within and acknowledging the full range of material forces which shape society, as well as recognising the repressive structures that these forces have previously developed. Second, the relationship

18 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe, 2nd ed. (Verso, 2009).

19 J. Till, “Angels with Dirty Faces,” *Scroope: Cambridge Architecture Journal* 7 (1995): 13–17.

20 Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 197.

21 Ibid., 198.

between space and the social practices within should not be seen as directly causal, with the architect acting in in the manner of a social determinist. Instead, a much more complex relationship opens up in which space is seen as simultaneously the product of social practice *and* the potential vessel, producer, of social activities.²² Two inseparable conditions arise in the present, one that gathers a critical awareness of the past, the other that projects to the future. That architectural practices always stand on the threshold of these two conditions is both sobering and empowering. Sobering because of the sense of fragility in the face of the dynamic aspects of space and time that have shaped a given condition. Empowering because, as in any act of refigurement, there is a redemptive potential, with the architect acting as a small part of the ‘social production of possibility’.

22 Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 129.

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