

The Philosophy of Architecture/The Architecture of Philosophy

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The Construction of Architecture

Abstract (a parerga)

This paper will proceed, via a brief discussion of Hans-Georg Gadamer's anti-aesthetics of architecture, to outline why the architectural metaphor in philosophy is never simply a metaphor, using as a guide the critique of origins and sources contained in Jacques Derrida's essay *Qual Quelle*. The question will be raised as to whether the tools and structures of philosophy, such as the difference between materiality and non-materiality, abstract thought and practice, are entirely adequate to architectural debate; and whether, in questioning these structures, it is possible to address Bataille's critique of architecture (as interpreted in Denis Hollier's *Against Architecture*) as the expression of pre-existing social order and power.

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The Paper Itself

What is going to happen between us? Is this paper – which has just begun – a textual object to be communicated to you, a receptive subject? Is this "textual object" an expression of the thoughts of another "subject", namely the one who reads it to you now? Is the receptive subject one, or are they many; and if the latter, what of the communication between *them*?

Or shall we regard what happens between us in a different light – taking a different tack? Could we say instead that the avowedly metaphysical presupposition of subject and object, communication and expression, are simply abstractions from a primary reality – a reality which has an entirely different character? Accepting that the conceptual apparatus of subject and object has its place and use, we would nonetheless question – indeed challenge – a philosophy or theory which would give it pride of place or – what's worse – leave it unquestioned.

One such questioning exists around Gadamer's anti-aesthetics. In his *magnum opus Truth and Method*, Gadamer famously responds to the post-18th century discipline of aesthetics not by means of a critique which remains limited by that discipline's presuppositions, but instead – and taking his teacher Heidegger's notion of "situation" as a clue – takes to pieces these presuppositions and thus recasts how we are to think of the work of art. In short, he discards "aesthetics" *per se*, or at least reforms it in such a way that its reductive analysis of art and beauty is revealed as precisely that – reductive.

If we take, for brevity's sake, Kant's third critique of the possibility of judgement as exemplary of aesthetic thought, it is clear that it establishes itself on the basis of the metaphysical and philosophical distinction between subject and object, the subjective and the objective. This is well known. The basis of aesthetic judgement is an *a priori* of subjectivity, as Gadamer says (p51), a judgement standing, for Kant, halfway between a "mere sensuous and empirical agreement in matters of taste [eg food] and a rationalistic universal observance of a rule [ie science]". Whilst in respect of sensuous judgement there is no *a priori* rule, and whilst in respect of matters of science there are objective a priori rules, aesthetic judgements are peculiar (strange – *befremdlich*, says Kant) for having their basis in a subjective a priori rule. This *a priori* rule reveals a "universality to be found in judgements of taste", and is thus a concern for the transcendental philosopher, whose task is to discover what enables us to make *a priori* (rather than simply empirical) judgements.

What is this aesthetic rule, for Kant? It goes like this: *even though* in our experience people do not actually agree about matters of beauty, what is remarkable/strange/*befremdlich*/odd is that the judgement that each subject makes does, as part of its character, in fact *require* this agreement from everyone. There are not and cannot be – for Kant – objective rules that all agree on or which are established in advance in order to allow aesthetic judgements to occur. Rather, in each *subjective* judgement that is made *aesthetically* (and aesthetic judgements can *only* be subjective, here) there comes inevitably and as part of the very possibility of that judgement the self-assurance that all others are to regard the matter in the same way and will make the same aesthetic judgement. This judgement that *goes with* the aesthetic judgement is the co-judgement which marks out the aesthetic judgement as aesthetic; it is the co-judgement that gives the inherent feeling that others must, perforce, agree with one's own aesthetic judgement even though in each particular instance of aesthetic judgement disagreement does in fact occur. This empirical non-co-incidence does not negate Kant's aesthetic philosophy, because it is the *possibility* of this type of judgement which concerns him.

Contrast a universally valid *objective* judgement. Such a judgement is *also* valid subjectively, since all subjects will appreciate the universal rule which will be valid for them as for others. In the case of a *subjective a priori* judgement, there can be no rule to follow, save that which operates at a different level to the judgement itself and which determines the very possibility of demanding a universal agreement on matters of beauty. The thought of the possibility of a universal acceptance of a subject's judgement of taste - whatever the empirical evidence against such universality - has to be taken into account and a critique of it provided. A sort of "ontological argument" for aesthetic judgement, if you will; since it can be conceived of, it must exist and be accounted for.

As we know, Kant does discuss architecture in the third critique. He states (#14) that *design* is essential to architecture - that is, its *form*. Colours and "charms" (as he calls them) shall only be admitted to architecture to make the form more vivid. Likewise ornament (*paregia*) - ie things extrinsic to the *form*, the design - impair genuine beauty and, for Kant, remains mere *schmuck* - costume jewellery - again unless it pleases solely by its form and not by being - for instance - gilded or otherwise made to appeal to the sensuous faculties.

We see here, in this brief digression on architecture, four salient features of this philosophical structure:

1. in respect of architecture, the important of *design* as the activity of the architect; the almost immediate and inevitable appeal to questions of form, opposed both to content and to sensuousness; and thus the tight interplay between a self-evidently subjective aesthetics predicated on the metaphysically derived subject-object dichotomy, and *formalism* in architecture. Can an aesthetic debate about architecture be anything other than a debate about form?
2. in respect of more general issues, the speed with which what initially appears to be an instance or characteristic of judgement turns around and becomes a compositional or supposedly creative tool. Kant's proposed enterprise is an explication of a type of judgement on objects; but having explicated certain structural and formal characteristics of it the text moves from analysis of judgements to analysis of objects and thence onto a critique of the production of those objects. This is problematic to a thought which is suspicious of reductive theorising. All analysis requires reduction; to speak is immediately to simplify. It is another matter - and without intrinsic justification - to base a critique or theory of production on such reduction; or rather, perhaps all *production* is *per se* based on a reductive analysis turned back upon the object; and therefore it is the term production itself which is to be questioned
3. In turn, the rebound back on the specifics of architecture would impose "design" upon architects as what they *do*, essentially - the word "design" designating the manipulation of "form" and the subjecting of the sensuous to this end. Thus if we wish to question the aesthetics of architecture, this may involve going so far as to reject "design" as the essence of what architects do
4. and, to generalise again and to anticipate the second half of this paper, if aesthetics is created within the horizon of a philosophical structure, as we intimated above, the philosopher becomes an architect of this structure and himself will adhere to the formality of the design discipline; that is, philosophy itself, that which is pronouncing upon architecture and aesthetic judgement, itself must adhere to the very same rules and will thus, essentially, be a matter of *form*. That is why the aesthetic judgement is characterised by Kant as a matter of the form of the judgement, not as a matter of its empirical content

Gadamer asks, "is the aesthetic attitude to a work of art the appropriate one?" In separating off the aesthetic from the practical on the one hand and the sensuous on the other, art becomes, according to him, abstracted - it becomes the "pure work of art". This abstraction is what Gadamer wishes to avoid, and his strategy for achieving this answers the question of the appropriateness of the aesthetic attitude not by proposing another subjective attitude which would replace that of the aesthetic, but rather by reframing the whole debate regarding the notion of "attitude". "Attitude" *already* implies the position of the subject set over against a distinct object. To frame the question in terms of "attitude" would leave us within the subjective realm and a subject-object framework. There could not be an "attitude" to art which is *not* aesthetic; to debate in these terms would bring us back to an aesthetic, and in that sense Kant cannot be gotten around - hence the strength of his transcendental analysis and the inevitability of his "ontological argument" for the aesthetic judgement.

Gadamer's tactic is instead to successfully bracket out aesthetics by defining the art work *ontologically*. He avoids the *ontological argument* (which has a formal, abstract necessity to it) in favour of an ontology of the art work; he asks what is the nature of its *being*. Its being is shown to be that of *play*. Play was already vital for aesthetics, but was interpreted and used subjectively (#9 "this subjective universal communicability can be nothing but that of the mental state in which we are when imagination and understanding are in free play"). Gadamer takes play differently; he takes it as the play *between* "subject" and "object", and this play becomes for him the very "mode of being of the work of art itself".

There is for Gadamer in the experience of the work of art no "aesthetic consciousness" confronting an "art object"; what there *is*, which exists there for him and for us is rather the interplay between the two. The figures of subject and object have no reality, here; they are mere tools of analysis within the discipline of metaphysics; useful tools, for sure, but stripped of their authority as arbiters of access to the nature of the work of art. Their analysis will always be a reduction, an abstraction, an impoverishment of the true reality of the work. It is the game itself, the play back-and-

forth in an essentially eventful and dynamic interweaving which constitutes the reality of art and which instigates an anti-aesthetics of art and of architecture.

The latter is famously given a significant status within Gadamer's explication, as an art which aesthetics perform tends to leave out of the reckoning but which for an anti-aesthetics such as this becomes central. Architecture becomes less to do with the *design* of *objects* (which Kant has defined as the manipulation of *form*) and more to do with a consideration of the interplay between what we usually and crudely call the inhabitant or user (ie the subject) and the building (the object).

This is not to do with the attitude or experience of the subject. For Gadamer, "the original sense of play is the *mediate* one", that is, it is the relationship between the "participants" in this "game" which is critical, not the participants of and in themselves considered separate from each other. It is the interplay between audience and players in the theatre; between the dance and the dancers on the stage; between the festival and its setting in the city; between the pictorial work of art and the viewer; between the reader and the text; the game and interplay between us, here, now; all of these are, for Gadamer, the primary reality of the work.

For Gadamer, to start from subjectivity in order to try to comprehend this reality is, finally, "to miss the point" (p100), since even in the case of that most object-like of art works, the picture (as it has existed since Alberti), the interplay is critical and the picture has the ontology *not* of an object but of an *event*, a *play*, a happening, and "hence cannot be understood as the object of aesthetic consciousness" (p127).

Even more so, for architecture. The being of architecture as *interplay*; as essentially *situational*.

Now if the ontology of architecture, far from being a question of a *formal* design distinct from issues of sense and content – as defined by the philosophical tradition – is reconstructed as an event, an interplay, then what of philosophy itself? As Mark Wigley shows (p18, p92), the architectural metaphor is present throughout philosophy, structuring it and enabling it. It is not simply that philosophical systems and treatises are laid out as architectonic structures; nor simply that the architectural metaphors of ground, foundation, superstructure and construction are constant throughout philosophy; nor is it simply the empirical fact that it appears to have been impossible for philosophy to operate without recourse to a metaphoric of architecture. It is –as Wigley argues – more fundamental than this. Philosophy sets itself the task of describing the real, of explicating the ground of things, and it does so by distinguishing the "real" or the "ground" from that which is derived, essentially unreal, secondary. And metaphor is one such phenomenon of unreality and the secondary. The definition of metaphor is the transposing of a literal meaning into another field where its lack of literalness acts as a stimulus to thought. It operates on the basis of an original meaning for the word, which then comes to be used in a secondary manner to describe, say, a philosophical concept. But Wigley sees here an abyssal structure; it is only by means of deploying something like an architectural metaphor of "ground" or foundation that one can distinguish between the original meaning of a word and its metaphorical use. It is therefore only by means of metaphor that the notion of the "real" – the idea of the "ground" of things - can exist.

In short, the architectural metaphor in philosophy will never simply be an innocent metaphor. We could say that it is only by means of the other that each of these – philosophy and architecture (defined philosophically) could have come to be. A sort of intrinsic inter-twining, an intense to-and-for between them - an interplay, perhaps.

This phenomenon is almost the same as a point Gadamer makes about the nature of a picture; he states that "there must be an essential modification, almost a reversal of the ontological relationship of original and copy... for strictly speaking it is only through the picture that the original becomes the original picture. The picture has an independence that also affects the original."

Blanchot, in his essay *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, will put it more explicitly. It is the image which makes the notion of "original" possible, not the other way around as is commonly thought. We are accustomed to think of the image as coming second, *after* that which it is the image of. Not so, for Blanchot; the image gives us the possibility of the original, just as the architectural metaphor gives philosophy the possibility of the non-metaphorical, of the "real", thus allowing philosophy to do its work.

In Derrida's piece *Qual Quelle*, this overturning of the putative order of metaphysics is played out in respect of the very term "origin" or "source". These terms mean, "properly" and originally, the place of origin of water, the source of a river, a spring, water gushing forth, an intensely physical reality. And yet, this physical reality can only be experienced as such if the general concept of "origin" and "source" is already known; in other words, the "proper" meaning of the word depends on what would always be thought of (in the philosophical tradition) as the "derived" meaning.

We would *already* would have to understand the meaning of the word *origin* where it designates something totally other than the welling up of a body of water, in order to gain access to that which nevertheless was proposed as the proper meaning of the sourceProper meaning derives from derivation

The movement of the play between the "proper" and "improper" use of the word "origin", and the movement of interplay between philosophy and the architectural metaphor which it generates and which generates it, therefore has

no substrate. There is no *basis* upon which this philosophy or this architecture begins; we cannot say; *first* the reality of architecture, *then* philosophy's metaphorical use of its characteristics; neither can we invert this statement. We are left with something like the interplay which Gadamer has used to explicate the ontology of the work of art (p94) and indeed Gadamer himself says "it becomes finally impossible to distinguish...between literal and metaphorical usage".

The argument here is that Gadamer's notion of interplay as the ontology of the art work, and Derrida's overturning of origins in favour of an originary "difference", are intimately related. And it is of course clear from whence that relationship derives, namely Heidegger's *destruktion* of western metaphysics, to which both are indebted. But there exists a critical difference between these two thinkers. This difference depends less on where Gadamer and Derrida go with their thought, than the nature of the wager they each make at the outset. This wager, in Gadamer, is *for* meaning, *for presence* and *for completeness*. As he says, "only what really constitutes a *unity of meaning* is intelligible" (p261) and in the end, what Gadamer is searching for is "a discipline that guarantees truth", to quote the last words of *Truth and Method*. In other words, Gadamer wagers for a primary reality, a truth, to which the interplay of dialogue and art relates. And in this, Gadamer remains Heideggerian, in the sense that the latter's project in *Being and Time* is characterised as the destruction of western metaphysics back to "primary experiences" ("*ursprungliche erfahrungen*").

Insofar as we have already seen that Derrida wishes to question (that is: deconstruct) the very notion of the "ursprung" (the origin, the spring), it is clear that Heidegger's destruction would in at least a certain manner not be sufficient for him. A destruction of metaphysics that does not question the very notion of "origin" or "ground", and in particular the notion of "primary reality", does not achieve what it sets out to do; it remains caught in the metaphysical privileging of origins over derivations. As does any discourse which accepts unquestioningly the notion of "primary reality" back to which all interplay is to be related.

Why is this important for architecture? The answer is on the one hand political, and on the other to do with the possibility of creativity.

Denis Hollier, in his book *Against Architecture* (1974), explicates Bataille's thought by showing how the figure of architecture features regularly in it. For Bataille, architecture is essentially *repressive*. It "represents a religion that it brings alive, a political power that it manifests, an event that it commemorates" (p37), that is, it represents what Bataille would call the restrictive economy of society. "Architecture, formally the image of social order, now guarantees and even imposes this order". Furthermore, there is an explicit link with the repressive effects of philosophy:

The architecture of the Acropolis joins Platonic philosophy in the elaborating of this social as well as philosophical hierarchy, by means of which idealism paralyses existence in the conservative reproduction of its own structures

Architecture, philosophy and political control are revealed as being essential agents of the repression of the *polis*, of state control and order – in other words, essentially conservative in nature. And thus in need of radical undermining: in need of deconstruction.

To look at it the other way; if architecture is to be in any way emancipatory in tone, then it needs to address its own tendency to support the pre-existing social, political and philosophical hierarchies.

In other words, the interplay between architecture and its others (society, those in power, commerce) must retain that intensity which comes with a freeing from the notion of the origin, since these "others", by their very nature, wish to become or remain or be made into the "origin" from which architecture is derived and of which they wish it to be an expression.

In turn, and by contrast, this wager is for a radical creativity, for a future which is unprogrammed by the past and is thus inherently *futurial*, essentially creative, and therefore somewhat dangerous to the restrictive economies of the pre-existing social order. Platonism (I do not say Plato or Socrates) consigned essential creativity to a place *outside* the well-established city. The poets and artists were banished beyond the totalising reality of the city state outlined in *The Republic*. This is why any theory or praxis of architecture which attempts to base itself on a Platonism, including one taking Gadamer's interest in neo-platonic light as its clue, will remain conservative in nature. In establishing metaphysics and the ideal state, the radical interplay of creativity had, perforce, to be removed, ruled out, domesticated, controlled and restricted by philosophy. For, as the very possibility of the new, it will always remain essentially disrespectful of any pre-existing hierarchy or structure. We should expect nothing less from architecture – perhaps recast or renamed.

Signed: Tim Gough

Date: now

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