

Provoking the ‘Thingness’ of History: The Anti-Teleological Hermeneutics of Steen Eiler Rasmussen

“It is not enough to see architecture; you must experience it. You must observe how it was designed for a special purpose and how it was attuned to the entire concept and rhythm of a specific era. You must dwell in the rooms, feel how they close about you, observe how you are naturally led from one to the other.”

—Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1959), p. 33

ANTHONY RAYNSFORD
San Jose State University

Steen Eiler Rasmussen’s now classic treatise of 1959, *Experiencing Architecture*, repeatedly turns to the question of historical imagination as a phenomenological tool for engaging with the architectural present. The point of history was no longer to give triumphalist, teleological accounts of modernism’s seemingly inevitable rise. Rather, it was to reconnect the increasingly abstract and technocratic discipline of architecture back into the intuitions of the senses and of the body. In the quote above, Rasmussen assumes the possibility of a hermeneutic leap, in other words, that someone in the 1950s could enter into a historical-material experience of the past, of rhythms and ways of life that had, in fact, disappeared and were no longer even relevant for modern architects. This hermeneutic exercise presumes, moreover, not a primarily intellectual experience of reading about history but a more especially sensory experience of deep engagement with historical architecture. It was not just a visual, spatial experience, but equally a tactile, prosthetic experience of feeling one’s way into the very thingness of historical buildings. In addition to the philosophical question as to whether such a hermeneutic leap is, in fact, possible, there are, perhaps, even more interesting questions concerning history’s relevance for contemporary architectural practice. Why would an avowedly modernist architect and city planner, with a predilection for functionalist simplicity, feel it necessary that architectural students should develop this historical sensibility? Given that *Experiencing Architecture* is still in print, does its invocation of history-as-embodied-experience still have relevance for architectural practice in a dematerializing age of digital technocracy?

Historians may, of course, object that *Experiencing Architecture* is not history at all, but constitutes instead an elementary introduction to architectural form, abstractly and ahistorically conceived. While the book is replete with examples of medieval, renaissance and baroque architecture, these examples do not seem to have been placed any kind of chronological order. Moreover, they are often promiscuously mingled with contemporary examples from the mid-twentieth century, so that the buildings appear to have been radically decontextualized. *Experiencing Architecture* lacks then what a reader might most expect from a work of history, a continuous narrative. Finally, the chapters are organized around what seem to be entirely abstract issues of architectural form: solids, cavities, scale, proportion; textural

effects, etc. Historical examples would then seem to have been reduced to a series of modernist, formal abstractions. While these initial impressions are not entirely incorrect, they miss, in fact, Rasmussen's deeper pedagogical purpose, which had everything to do with developing a more intimate, more detailed sense of historical architecture, indeed of its intense historicity, in order to renew and reform the practices of modernist architecture.

Whereas the dominant discourses on architectural history, notably Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* of 1943 had recounted a more or less linear sequence of architectural styles and technological developments, leading to the seemingly inevitable triumph of a certain modernist aesthetic, *Experiencing Architecture* renounced teleological narrative in favor of experiential hermeneutics. Far from minimizing or reducing the fullness of history, I would argue, Rasmussen intended to invoke its multiplicity, its variability and its unexpected shifts or reversals. This essay then specifically traces the way in which Rasmussen transformed art historical methods of narrating successive stylistic changes into a more open-ended pedagogy for using the architectural past within the present. It was only in transforming architectural history from a unified line of development into a simultaneous field of opposing choices that the modern architect could consciously choose the appropriate tools for the present, without falling victim to the illusion that the dominant practices were inevitably the correct ones. History, liberated from linear narrative, permitted free aesthetic choice in the present. At the same time, however, the rigor of experiential hermeneutics was meant to ensure that the free choices would not become arbitrary but would bear some concrete relationship to the total pattern of the present, to its various spaces, things and activities.

GERMAN ART HISTORY AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF 'EXPERIENCE'

In an unpublished essay entitled "On the Teaching of Historic Styles in Architecture," written in 1927 while he was teaching at the Architectural Association School in London, Rasmussen began to investigate the problem of deriving abstract principles from history, such that it could engage contemporary practices. In the essay he warned, that, with students increasingly concerned with following the latest trends in modern architecture, there was now a danger in knowing too little about history. In order to be conceptually useful, he continued, the analysis of historical styles could not be a comparison of isolated motifs, but rather had to show how different styles emerged from entirely different problems and perceptions within some larger historical framework: "So the aim of teaching of architectural styles should be on the one hand to show the general principles common to all architecture and on the other, how different forms are intimately connected with different nations, epochs, techniques, forms of society, etc."¹ To teach about styles, such as Gothic and Baroque, then, meant to demonstrate in the first place how such styles accorded with certain laws of perception that worked across many historical periods; how for example the Baroque produced spatial effects that could be abstractly imitated. In the second place, teaching styles meant showing how a style emerged as a consequence of particular building tasks and ways of conceiving those tasks.

In order to make hermeneutic claims on the basis of pure sensory perception, Rasmussen needed to assert that architectural experience, in some respects at least, was hard wired into human perception, hence universal, while at the same time that such experience was historically and culturally contingent, hence relative. Without some universal psychological 'laws' of perception, there would be no basis for jumping out of one's particular modern viewpoint and experiencing historical architecture from the intentions of the past. However, the very act of jumping out of one's culturally contingent perceptions meant actively changing one's experiential wiring, becoming sympathetic to otherwise invisible or incoherent modes of experience. It is this ambiguity between the universally human and the culturally relative that lies at the heart Rasmussen's explanation of experience in the realm of historical architecture and its fluctuating sensory values. In his own explanation for the genesis of

his ideas, Rasmussen claimed that he had borrowed the term “experience,” specifically from the writings of Danish gestalt psychologist, Edgar Rubin, the author in 1917 of the theory of figure and ground.² The experience (*Wahrnehmung*) of a “figure” in this theory emerged in conscious perception, according to the formal qualities of shapes or lines. This theory thus counted for Rasmussen as part of a universal basis for perception, and already in the early 1920s, he suggested that architecture from widely different periods and cultures could, by analogy with figure-ground perception, be divided into spatial (*rumelig*) and figural (*legeomelig*) forms, more precisely buildings perceived as the sum of hollowed out, or negative spaces versus buildings perceived as the sum of additive structural or sculptural elements.

The abstract formalism invoked by Rasmussen’s early adaptation of Gestalt psychology to historical architecture coincided with the crisis of ornament and of historical eclecticism that had swept through European architectural practices in the early 20th century and which resulted in Denmark in the eclipse of the arts-and-crafts-based Romantic Nationalism in favor of a stripped-down, highly formalist New Classicism [*Nyklassicisme*] by the 1920s. Rejecting what they saw as the fussy detail and literary allusions of the arts and crafts romantics, the architects of the New Classicism had sought to return to what they saw as a more purely architectural form of aesthetic expression—generating the sublime effects of mass and shadow, using dramatic plays of light and contrast, etc. Recalling this period in 1939, Rasmussen wrote: “In the years around 1920, the Danish architects studied all the means which the classicists knew to express spaces and masses. The instrument was determined from which a pure architectural music could be played.”³ For Rasmussen, however, merely mastering the ability to create such architectural effects was an insufficient condition for generating a convincing modern architecture. One had to ask to what ends and for whom such effects had once been produced in the past, or were being produced now. Such questions could not be answered by universalizing generalizations about perceptions of form as such, but only by the historically and subjectively contingent perceptions of form through the lens of functional use, social meaning, and what might be called the programmatic content of architecture.

Exactly such a hermeneutic method, under the general term empathy or *Einfühlung*, had already been well developed by German art historians when Rasmussen began lecturing at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in the early 1920s, and the discourses of empathy are, in fact, scattered throughout the pages of *Experiencing Architecture*. Empathy theory offered one way of bridging between present and past modes of perception by assuming a common neuro-physiological basis for aesthetic pleasure. As initially formulated by Robert Vischer in 1873, empathy theory assumed that aesthetic pleasure derived from a successive series of optical movements and imaginary responses by which the internal sensations of the body might harmonize, even merge with the aesthetic object. For an art historian, such as Heinrich Wölfflin writing in the following decade, empathy theory presented both a method of access to historical perception and a method of historicizing successive epochs of empathetic responses. In this way, empathy presented a rigorous exercise in visual contemplation, of entering empathetically into the historical object, as well as a mode of explanation for historical commonalities of subjective experience. The most decisive art historical figure for the empathetic interpretation of architecture, however, was August Schmarsow, whose famous 1893 declaration that space was the ‘essence’ of architecture, derived from the idea that the body itself had a spatial sense, which it could then empathetically project in three dimensions.

If architecture was the projected, spatial image of bodily sensations, then historical architecture needed to be reinterpreted in terms of the histories of bodies in space, of their motions, their constrictions, and their connections to ritualized events. In 1897, Schmarsow published *Barock und Rokoko*, in which he accounted for what he called the “painterly” experience of

the Rococo with flowing forms that mimicked and extended the bodily movements of the inhabitants of the Rococo palaces: “the image of a living organism as the expression of a system of functions (*Zwecken*), which here connect through one another into a unity.”⁴ It was not only that the aesthetic experience in arose out of the body’s own spatial feeling, but also that it depended experientially on a certain way of walking, behaving, dancing, moving from room to room, etc. In *Experiencing Architecture*, Rasmussen likewise alluded to collective bodily rhythms of earlier periods, rhythms that now seemed strange and artificial. Recalling the restrictive clothing, mannered gestures and elaborate courtly rituals of early eighteenth century Rome in his description of the Spanish Steps, Rasmussen remarked, “we can see the petrification of the dancing rhythm of a period of gallantry; it gives us an inkling of something that was, something our generation will never know.”⁵ (Figure 1.) Here the hermeneutic leap suggested both the possibility of an empathetic engagement with historical experience and the simultaneous unreachability of that experience. Nevertheless, having that flash or inkling of another bodily rhythm had become pedagogically significant for generating a more abstract understanding of the relationship of architecture to the body.



The Spanish Steps, Rome. Detail of an engraving by Piranesi

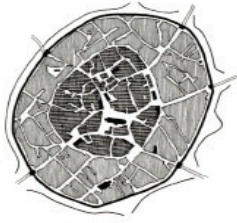
1

FROM TELEOLOGY OF STYLE TO FUNCTIONALISM OF THINGS

Rasmussen had been far from alone in believing history to be essential to the practices of modernist architecture. For many architects working in Central Europe in the early 20th century, history had become mainly useful to the extent that it set out principles of aesthetic coherence or order that could be projected into a hoped-for modernist coherence. Historians, for their part, criticized what they saw as the visual ‘chaos’ of 19th century historical eclecticism. August Schmarsow, for example, had derided in 1893 what he saw as “superficial composition of a purely technical and decorative kind, the pasting up of inherited styles on the framework of a functional construction,” which he contrasted with the true art of architecture-as-space.⁶ It became a commonplace of much art historical work in this period that the architectural principles discovering within the great styles of the historical past might provide a series of rules or principles by which discover a correspondingly authentic style for the 20th century. Rasmussen, like many architects of the time, had initially fallen under the spell of this type of art historical thinking, first through his reading of Heinrich Wölfflin’s *Principles of Art History* and then through his close connection with the writings and lectures of the art historian, Albert Erich Brinckmann, for whom the city became necessarily a work of spatial art, a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which all of the necessities of housing, transportation, and infrastructure, combined with the corporeal sensations of movement to serve the higher aesthetic end of an ‘organic’ urban space, a spiritual expression of the historical age and its cultural unity.

Already by the mid-1920s, however, Rasmussen had parted ways with the kinds of linear, reductivist and ultimately mystical narratives embedded within such teleological accounts. Whereas German historiography tended to ascribe historical change to invisible forces inside a culture, what Alois Riegl called *Kunstwollen*, or the will to art, or what others more loosely referred to as *Zeitgeist*, Rasmussen ascribed such changes to the material conditions, ranging from craft to technology to sports, through which people collectively extended their senses into the world of things. History, thus, did not follow a single line of development but varied according to the material conditions of each unique society and place. Reflecting on this position in 1957, Rasmussen wrote: “There is no time-spirit, no single being that expresses itself but a number of human beings with a common pattern of behaviour.”⁷ Whereas German historiography tended to isolate formal principles or essences by which architecture as a medium could be judged—the reduction of architectural experience to ‘space’ being a prime example—Rasmussen claimed that architecture resulted from an indivisible combination of sensory elements that could not be explained or reduced to any one set of principles. Thus, one of the central passages of *Experiencing Architecture* is a rebuttal of Brinckmann’s claim

Figure 1: Spanish Steps (Piranesi Etching) from *Experiencing Architecture*



Schiffersmarkt with St. George's Church, Nördlingen, from Brinckmann
Beloni, plan of Nördlingen. Scale 1:15000

2

to have found optical principles of scale, essentially perspectival scale, to explain the pleasing experience of the medieval Bavarian town of Nördlingen. (Figure 2.) In walking through Nördlingen, Rasmussen claimed, no single street picture ever entered the mind. Not only was there no single, privileged view of the town, but the visual impression of the town, built up out of multiple views, also worked together with kinesthetic and acoustic senses as one walked through the spaces and heard the reverberations on the pavement and against the surrounding buildings: "Ordinarily we do not see a picture of a thing but receive an impression of the thing itself, of the entire form including the sides we cannot see, and of all the space surrounding it."⁸ To encounter the town as a thing, for Rasmussen, was not to grasp its metaphysical essence, as if one could grasp the Kantian *Ding an sich*, but rather for a thing to gradually become manifest in successive acts observation and perception, in some sense to be perceived in its thing-ness, in the irreducibility of its material and formal specificity.

Rasmussen's effort to make art historical descriptions of experience useful in the present entailed not only disassembling them from such teleological abstractions as *Kunstwollen* and multiplying the combinations of possible sensory experience, but also connecting them to particular cultures, localities and building problems. Recounting decades later the impression made by this reading of Brinckmann's *Platz und Monument*, Rasmussen remembered having been impressed by one of Brinckmann's last sentences: "City building means: shaping space with the materials of housing!"⁹ In his studies of 17th century Dutch cities in the late 1940s and early 1950s, therefore, Rasmussen thought quite literally about the ways in which the Dutch had engaged with the available building materials and technologies. The consequence of the Dutch manner of building was not just a characteristic pattern of house and street, but a characteristic way of thinking about form. In his journal notes from August 1950, Rasmussen observed that, "While the Italians must have thought of their houses as massive blocks, through which one bored windows, for the Dutch it was a complete contrast, and windows were not holes in a mass; they themselves formed wall planes."¹⁰ Dutch cities flouted all of the compositional rules of the Italian Baroque, producing houses that appeared heavy above and light below, composed not of sculpted masses forming deep shadows, but series of flat wall planes, alternately transparent and opaque. It was not only that the Dutch built differently, they also experienced what they built differently.



3

CHILDHOOD PLAY AND THE THINGNESS OF HISTORY

If history was material for Rasmussen, it was also concretely embodied. Specifically, it was embodied in the ways the sense perceptions developed differently in each new generation in their connections or disconnections with material world. This view of history, then raises the final and perhaps most surprising twist in Rasmussen's pedagogical approach to historical experience. Whereas the academic discipline of art history had constructed the difficult hermeneutic exercise of imaginatively engaging with experiences of a disappeared past, children's play suggested ways of creatively reappropriating remnants of that past within the

Figure 2: Nördlingen (Bavaria) from
Experiencing Architecture

Figure 3: Playing ball on the steps of
Santa Maria Maggiore from *Experiencing Architecture*

present. In other words, historical buildings as found in the present by a new generation, did not necessarily always have to be mediated via access to complex historical knowledge about past societies, they could also be sensorily experienced as things, and in their thingness appropriated within a new set of modern experiences. By this period, Rasmussen had become interested in the Danish invention of what was called the ‘junk playground’ (*skrammellegeplads*), one of which he illustrated in *Experiencing Architecture*. Junk playgrounds were spaces, filled with rubble, old boards, pieces of sheet metal and other cast off building materials, with which children were expected to construct their own objects and small buildings, essentially learning by doing. From his observations of these junk playgrounds and other forms of play, Rasmussen claimed, it is as though the children’s “nerves, their entire feelings stretch themselves out into the dead things.”¹¹ Children riding bicycles seemed almost like centaurs.

In 1950, Rasmussen explained the pedagogical function of such play in starkly polemical terms: “Architecture is not created by knowledge, but by experience, and only by making the tones of this instrument familiar, hearing them within oneself, can one learn to play it.”¹² Previously at the Royal Academy, he explained, architecture students had been taught technical building knowledge, such as the knowledge of building materials and the building crafts. “Recently I have wondered if this is not entirely wrong,” Rasmussen wrote, “It is the elements of house-building that we give them, but not those of architecture. Maybe one should begin with trying to teaching them to sense (*fornekke*) everything that creates the experience of architecture.”¹³ It is this lesson of play that then explains one of the most paradigmatic descriptions in *Experiencing Architecture*. In this passage, Rasmussen thus presents the example Carlo Rainaldi’s seventeenth-century façade and piazza for Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, not through historical interpretation but through the medium of a group of school children playing a ball game against the massive curving wall of the stone-clad apse, perched over a set of semicircular travertine steps, leading down to the piazza below with its obelisk. (Figure 3.) The ball became a tactile prosthesis for discovering not only the shape but also the stoniness of the travertine mass. Through the instrument of the ball and the sensations of their own bodies, they extended themselves into the very material of the space, intuiting the hardness of the wall, and “quite unconsciously they experienced certain basic elements of architecture: the horizontal planes and the vertical walls above the slopes. And they learned to play on these elements.”¹⁴ In this strange reversal of his account of the Spanish Steps, the children have adapted the baroque monument to their own rhythms, setting up a new dialog between the historical intentions frozen into the stone and their own distinctive movements and perceptions. What they discover in the thingness of the monument is not total pattern of historical experience but a new experience carved out of a modern encounter with the historical past. This is perhaps the most significant hermeneutic lesson in *Experiencing Architecture*: the historic pliability of experience, between generations of human nerves and the silent stones of architectural history. Now that the materiality of architectural production is increasingly mediated by the virtual model and the digital fabricator, such a hermeneutic leap into the ‘thingness’ of history seems more urgent than ever.

ENDNOTES

1. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, lecture manuscript entitled, “On the Teaching of Historical Styles in Architecture,” Steen Eiler Rasmussen Papers, Royal Danish Library, #1991/41, IV. Manuskripter, folder 36.
2. Rasmussen explains this origin in a lengthy bibliographical essay entitled, “Nogle Personlige Noter,” (“Some Personal Notes”), which was published in the Danish, but not in the English edition of *Experiencing Architecture*.
3. “In den Jahren 1920 studierten die dänischen Architekten alle die Mittel, die die Klassizisten von 1800 zur Betonung von Räumen und Körpern kannten. Das Instrument war gestimmt, auf dem eine reine Architekturmusik gespielt werden konnte.” Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Nordische Baukunst* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1940) p. 112.
4. August Schmarsow, *Barock und Rokoko* (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1897) p. 336 “...das Bild eines lebendigen Organismus als Ausdruck des Systems von Zwecken, das sich hier zu einer Einheit ineinander schlingt.”
5. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1959), p. 136.
6. Schmarsow, August, „Das Wesen der Architektonischen Schöpfung,“ published as “The Essence of Architectural Creation,” in Mallgrave and Ikonomou trans., *Empathy, Form, and Space*, (Santa Monica: Getty Center, 1994) p. 282.
7. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, “The Architect and Society,” *RIBA Journal*, July 1957, p. 382.
8. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1959) p. 42.
9. “Städte bauen heißt: mit dem Hausmaterialem Raum gestalten!”—Brinckmann, A.E., *Platz und Monument* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1912) p. 170.
10. “Mens Italienerne maatte betragte huset som en stor massiv blok, man brød vinduer igennem, var det for hollænderne en hel kontrastning, og vinduerne var ikke huller i en masse, de dannede selve mur flader.”—Handwritten page on graph paper, dated 29.8.1950, Steen Eiler Rasmussen papers, Royal Danish Library, #1991/41 Tillæg Ks. 104 III. Manuskripter og Arbejdsnoter, Folder 36. “
11. Det er som dets nerver, dets hele følsomhed strækker sig ud i de døde ting.”—Rasmussen, Steen Eiler, “Om at Opleve Arkitektur,” *Prisma*, v. 3 (1950) p.15
12. “Arkitektur skabes ikke på viden, men på oplevelse, og kun ved at kende instrumentets toner, som noget der klanger i en selv, kan man lære at spille på det.” Steen Eiler Rasmussen, “Om at Opleve Arkitektur,” *Prisma*, v. 3 (1950) p.32.
13. “I den sidste tid har jeg tænkt på, om det ikke er ganske forkert. Det er husbygningens elementer vi giver dem, men ikke arkitektorens. Måske skulle man begynde med at prøve på at lære dem at fornemme alt det, der skaber arkitekturoplevelsen.” —Rasmussen, Steen Eiler, “Om at Opleve Arkitektur,” *Prisma*, v. 3 (1950) p.32.