

Objects Unknown Against Buildings Well-Known: Notes on a Pedestrian Knowledge of Architecture

In architectural history and theory, the occupants of buildings are continuously and profoundly unformulated. This omission, however, is not particular to architectural discourse. It is rooted within a productive insecurity that pervades the humanities as a whole. The things one can certainly say of the subject, let alone of the subject that inhabits architecture, seem exasperatingly skeletal. This goes hand in hand with a hesitance to speculate on how “we humans” experience anything as ubiquitous and varied as Architecture (capital A). If indeed we can’t quite say *how* we are, then maybe our buildings can assist in holding up a mirror.

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Architecture, capital A, is the way in which architects and laymen refer to all things built, interior and exterior. It usually has to do with an overall aesthetic experience of the built, as expressed, for instance, in the exclamation “I loved Havana’s architecture.” This loose definition of things built, I think, ties in with the wonderfully broad theoretical and technical education enjoyed by architects themselves. It is only apt that Architecture’s scope should extend far beyond the horizon of the practitioner and the particular work he or she performs: firstly, because it equips the architect with a broad outlook and responsibility; secondly, because Architecture does not belong solely to architects, urban planners or engineers, surveyors and construction workers. It also belongs, and maybe most significantly so, to those who walk in and around it, that is, to pedestrians.

The world we live in is architecturally clad. Architecture is the way in which we arrange the world for ourselves. However, the more time I spend among buildings, the less time I seem to spend *with* the built, noticing, examining, and judging its appearance. Indeed, during my everyday pursuits, I am more likely to pay attention to architecture when my expectations are disappointed. The rest of the time I simply expect it to function; and that, usually, it does. While that is a somewhat unfortunate state of affairs—one might, after all, wish for an altogether less instrumental attitude towards our immediate environment—professionals can surely not be held responsible for Architecture.¹ That is to say that individual professional accomplishments cannot fully account for the built.

An account of the pedestrian can add to architects’ practical and theoretical contributions to the built. As I intend to show, the pedestrian’s relationship to architecture is by far more passive than active. However, to inhabit architecture passively requires a form of knowledge acquired through habituation. In my view, such knowledge must form part of the history and theory of Architecture. The built, the material of Architecture, in turn can shed light on the nature of such knowledge. The relationship between the pedestrian and Architecture is dialectical.

I will begin with a brief, Husserlian account of the manner in which things in general appear to us. Thereupon, I shall describe how things more specific appear against the background of Architecture.

OBJECTS (AS YET) UNKNOWN

For Edmund Husserl, our basic situation in the world is one of relative yet sufficient certainty. This fundamental stance, which allows me to take a thing to be one way rather than another, is a given. In practice, I do not doubt my situation in the world simply because my expectations are disappointed. Instead, I simply modify my take on a particular object or appearance.²

Beyond such a very basic faith in the world, we further acquaint ourselves with things' mode of appearance by typifying them. This lends additional texture to our environment, contributing a more definite level of expectation to our experience of the world. Over time, with the repeated and habitual experience of things, we sort or judge objects, for instance, according to type, thereby further acquainting ourselves with these.

Things are constantly appearing and thus passively present, remaining undefined in terms of their meaning and properties. That is, they remain in the background. How then does an object "stand out," how does it jut out from an otherwise flowing and coherent background and how does it affect us out of the midst of its surroundings?³ How, in Husserl's words, does it become "thematically given"?⁴

"All prominences in [an object field], the articulation of the field according to likenesses and differences and the group-formation arising from it, the coming-to-prominence of particular members from a homogenous background: all this is the product of associative syntheses of a manifold kind. But these are not simply passive occurrences in consciousness; rather, these syntheses of coincidence have their own affective power. We say, for example, of that which, in its nonsimilarity, stands out from a homogenous background and comes to prominence that it "strikes" us, and this means that it displays an affective tendency toward the ego. The syntheses of [congruence], whether it is a matter of [congruence] in undifferentiated [fusion] or of [congruence] together with the opposition of the unlike, have their own affective power; they exert a stimulus on the ego which makes it turn toward [the datum], whether it obeys the stimulus or not. ... Through its intensity, the datum stands out from a multiplicity of coaffecting data."⁵

This takes us straight to the similarity of objects. A finding of similitude relies on a previous, passive accomplishment of consciousness. As just stated by Husserl, there are various ways in which objects are synthesized or put together, each of which demands our attention with more or less intensity. For instance, an object can stand out because of its similarity to another object or, maybe more obviously, because it differs from its surroundings.

It is interesting to probe the middle ground, in between these two poles. The range between striking similarity and stark contrast arguably belongs to gradients of inconspicuousness or homogeneity. To be sure, Husserl is operating at a level of passivity that does not yet allow for situational particularity—as of yet, the object remains undefined. But moving to a higher level of specificity and definition, the range of the inconspicuous must surely be variable: depending on the stability or constancy of a habitual environment, objects are more or less likely to strike us.⁶

Aided by our previous experience and typification of other objects, our embodied and therefore perspectival view of a particular thing leads us to anticipate some of its aspects, which might otherwise not immediately be apparent or in view. Such anticipation also extends to the objects surrounding that object which has drawn my attention.⁷ Although, in order to make sense of things, I am necessarily prejudiced in favor of the homogeneity of this "field"

or expanse of objects, it is worthwhile to consider whether a well-known environment might strengthen the inclination towards coherence.⁸ In other words, am I more likely to infer homogeneity (in lieu of difference) when in habitual surroundings?

The question can be extended to our experience of the individual object: once I have become familiar with one of its aspects, I expect the remainder to be regular, that is, a continuation of the aspect already apparent. A set of features lets us infer their continuation beyond the facets already known (e.g., through repetition or symmetry),⁹ especially where we have seen more than just one side of an object (which optically tends to be the case). Arguably, such a tendency—akin to what Husserl terms “protention”—is reinforced when we make use of things, when they are conceived of in functional terms. This is analogous to a prejudice in favor of the object’s wholeness, that is, we take it to be complete even if it is before us only in part. What protrudes or juts out from the background is, after all, only a facet of the whole,¹⁰ which, consequent to our prejudice, is made up of coherent parts or components. Where this expectation is disappointed, we may infer that the object is missing a part or simply broken.

Independently of an object’s parts, there are its “moments,” which delimit it from the next thing.¹¹ They are logically necessary—without these moments there would be no particular object to speak of and no division or gap between objects, which allows us to associate and group these according to relationships of similarity or sameness.¹² Elmar Holenstein suggests that our experience of a sensuous quantity includes immediately graspable signs, “quasi qualities,” that point from the particular thing to the group, of which it is a part.¹³ The sensuous similarity or sameness of an object is such a quasi quality, which allows one object to fuse into the unity of a group of objects.¹⁴

Returning now to Architecture, I will further put to the test the claim that such passive prejudices and assumptions are accentuated in everyday environments, which we tend to enter with certain functional expectations. Until now, we have only considered how abstract material comes to our attention. In the following section, we shall see how Architecture, the way material is arranged to create a hospitable environment, comes to bear on this.

OBJECTS (OH SO) WELL-KNOWN

What makes an environment habitual? For instance (and rather straightforwardly), that I know it well enough to be able to move purposefully without previous planning or mapping.¹⁵ Such a casual approach to my environment relies on a time-tested faith in its stability. On the way to work, at work, or when returning home from work, I adopt an everyday attitude—my environment has served me well and I expect it to carry on doing so. This attitude also extends to the private space I call home, notwithstanding the fact that it is mine to arrange. The flipside of familiarity is a form of inattention: I find some things or topics to be deserving of my concentration while other, less pressing aspects are glossed over and remain in the background. To be sure, this ought not to be understood as a shortcoming. Rather, it is an inattention regarding my immediate environment, allowing me to see to matters elsewhere, for example, to determine what’s for dinner tonight.

The fact that those living in urban areas tend to commute to and from a place of work surely conditions the experience of Architecture, as do the various modes of transportation available to the commuter (e.g., car, train, bike, etc.). Each of these takes some form of physical or mental toll and thus determines the sort of attention I pay to my immediate surroundings. If commuting by subway, where the journey often consists only of a sequence of dark tunnels and bright stations, there is little to see out in the dark beyond the confines of my carriage—I might as well read a book or watch my fellow commuters. When riding a bike or driving a car, I follow a combination of lanes to my place of work. I do this at variable speeds, in fits and starts, keeping a lookout for the unexpected. Standing at a traffic light, I have time to look up at the building on the opposite corner, and notice the odd way in which what once was surely a storefront is now bricked up. Meanwhile, the driver behind me may be concentrating on a

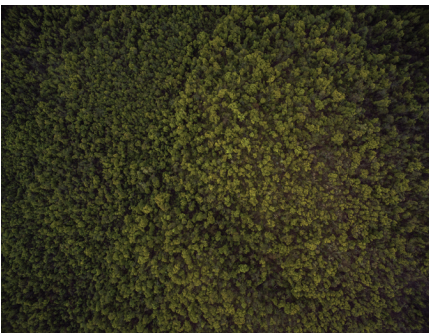


Figure 1: Tim Keiser, *Aimes, Iowa, Main Street*.

Figure 2: *Rainforest*.

particular aspect of the work awaiting him. Maybe he had already been thinking about that very problem while moving (but in a more general, superficial way because, for goodness' sake, he's driving a car).

All this to say that the demands of our intense and often quite abstract professional lives are such that we spend much time pre-visiting and re-visiting matters, while at the same time doing other, more practical stuff (e.g., walking to the store or riding the subway). Well-known are the cautionary tales involving daydreamers like Thales and the poor boy from Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter*, Johnny Head-in-Air (or Hans Guck-in-die-Luft), who had to be pulled out of a canal. How, if at all, is Architecture supportive of such aloofness?

Well, first of all, Architecture is quite predictable and trustworthy. It tends to accommodate a wide spectrum of upright human bodies. Where this is not the case, I am likely to notice how my environment resists me because I have, for example, banged my head against a door-frame. And if that should happen in a public space, it is often possible to obtain recognition for such a lack of Architectural foresight.¹⁶ It may come in the shape of a warning sign, of compensation, or the impediment may be removed altogether.

Architecture is also repetitious, though usually not to the extent that it becomes irritating, as a looped piece of music inevitably does. Architectural repetition has a lot to do with symmetries and standardized parts. The street depicted in Figure 1 is a typical American main street: brick buildings between 100 and 150 years old, there are parking meters for parking spaces, the sidewalk is reasonably well kept, and so forth. Interestingly in this case, the clearest path is set off against the rest of the sidewalk by a dark brown stone border within which lies a row of four lighter brown paving stones. The storefronts are composed of two large windowpanes either side of the door to the shop (with a further lateral door, which leads to the apartments above the store). There is a more or less equal spacing between parking meters and street lamps, interspersed with the odd trashcan or parking sign. It is possible to walk unharmed down Lincoln Way in Ames, Iowa, while revisiting Kant's synthetic a priori judgments, stopping only when the pattern of bricks before me has ceased to recur. This would be the case at a pedestrian crossing, where the dissimilarity of the ramp leading down to the road surface would also interrupt my train of thought, requiring my attention for just an instant.

The sort of inattention just described is generally frowned upon. But how does Architecture reveal such disapproval not only to be petty, but also wrong-headed? It is hard to tell what exactly the cautionary tales caution against; that is, should those engrossed in thought beware chiefly of physical injury or of ridicule (or both)? A textbook reply from a philosopher would be that attention withheld from the everyday world of appearances is attention paid to the realm of ideas (symbolized by the clouds).¹⁷ Nowadays at least, there is little reason to fear scorn or bodily harm for those who think while they walk, because Architecture, the way things surrounding us are composed, is the kindest, most generous setting there has ever been. It broadens the spectrum of inconspicuousness far beyond the levels of an organic background, allowing us to turn our attention elsewhere.

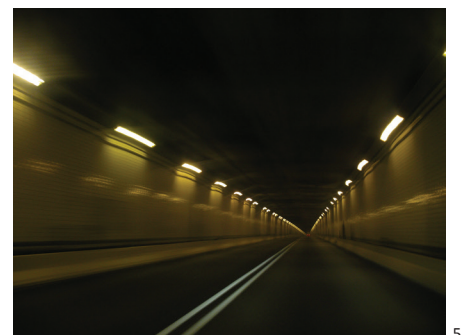
Figure 2 is an aerial rendition of an organic texture, a rainforest's canopy. Apart from a difference in color that seemingly sets off the left half of picture from the right, there are no formal elements to be seen. Compared to my lived experience of things, photographs and, more so, bird's-eye views tend to stabilize and flatten objects, stripping these of some specificity. Here, however, the interplay of parts and whole is far more instable than an aerial photograph of cleared agricultural land (Figure 3). In this image, the photographer's vantage point is easily identifiable, as is the angle of capture relative to the earth's surface, which itself is geometrically apportioned. Since the picture also reveals the land use, which is agricultural, it is quite clear that the land is not on a sharp incline. This is not true of the rainforest image, which, though it appears to show some relief, could just as well be taken from a position parallel to the ground as from a position more laterally inclined towards a mountainside, for example.



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Figure 3: John Kelly, *Center-Pivot Irrigation*.

Figure 4: Neil Howard, *St Olaf's Church, Tallinn, Estonia*.

Figure 5: Andrew Bossi, *Pennsylvania Turnpike Tunnel*.

ENDNOTES

1. However, such ambition is not unprecedented. Le Corbusier springs to mind.
2. Husserl, Edmund. *Experience and Judgment*. Translated by Spencer Churchill. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973. 36.
3. Ibid. 30.
4. Husserl, Edmund. *Die Lebenswelt: Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2008. 42–43.
5. Husserl, Edmund. *Experience and Judgment*. 76.
6. When I feel at risk of injury, inconspicuousness turns into near-constant difference.
7. This does not mean that we cannot stand incoherence, though eventually we do welcome the resumption of the style in which the world has habitually and coherently appeared to us.
8. Husserl, Edmund. *Experience and Judgment*. 76.
9. Husserl calls this a “pre-scription” (*Vorweisung or Vorzeichnung*).
10. Husserl, Edmund. *Experience and Judgment*. 142.
11. They are necessary dimensional features of bodies, which depend on the object as a whole, without, however, turning into one of the object’s characteristics (e.g., the edge of an object or its surface).
12. Husserl, Edmund. *Experience and Judgment*. 187.
13. Holenstein, Elmar. *Phänomenologie der Assoziation*. The Hague, Netherlands: Nijhoff, 1972. 44.
14. It is a fusion between the objects’ primary contents or relations, meaning that the objects composing, for instance, a row or chain need not be identical.
15. This presupposes adequate lighting. Unless I have ample experience of an environment in darkness, it will be unknown to me even if I am familiar with it when illuminated.
16. Of course, this is just as often not the case, even though public institutions are increasingly acknowledging a large variety of accessibility concerns.
17. Even for a philosopher, that is a peculiarly old-fashioned way of seeing things: as I am attempting to show and as others already have, there is much to be learnt from the ways in which things appear to us.
18. In no way is it my intention to set up a binary between nature and artifice. To my mind, the tension between the two concepts is to be negotiated on a spectrum.

Otherwise put, it is rather more difficult to find one’s bearings in a photograph of the rainforest than in one of land that carries a geometrical imprint.¹⁸ It is maybe no coincidence then that geometry, at least etymologically, denotes the practice of land measurement.

The parceling of land is, to be sure, not Architecture, but is intimately related to it. That is, buildings tend to stand in relation to such parceling. Like the more or less regular geometrical shapes and patterns in Figure 3, Architecture is rife with linearity and symmetry and it, too, provides additional stability to my practical endeavors (as described earlier). A more rapidly changing, organic environment is all too occlusive and thus unpredictable to sink into the background for any considerable stretch of time. I do not mean to paint the natural world as necessarily menacing—it isn’t—but I do take Architecture to be fundamentally linked to abstraction and, therewith, to the inattention described above. It is an asymmetrical relationship: we are not inattentive to our environs because of the way we build, even though, in building, we do accommodate our inattention in a variety of ways. That is to say, there are buildings whose task it is to be magnetic (Figure 4). On the other side of the spectrum, there are buildings that catch the eye notwithstanding the fact that they are manifestly not intended to make any claim on our attention (Figure 5). Long tunnels, which require anti-mesmeric features, are a good example of this. A church demands noticing by virtue of its facade, size, and position relative to the buildings surrounding it. In other words, it tends to be ornate, tall and is often the focal point of an entire settlement. Of course, this is due to the building’s importance to a community. On a hypothetical trip to Tallinn, Estonia, I may or may not have happened upon St Olaf’s Church (Figure 4). It lies on a curved, cobblestone street, lined with a motley collection of buildings. I am a tourist, unfamiliar with the city, walking slowly for fear of tripping on a protuberant cobblestone, endlessly looking downwards, upwards, and sideways, taking in the sights. Details carry me away, such as the state of disrepair of the lateral outer wall of the building opposite me, on the left—it’s sort of beautiful. As I progress along the street, the view of St Olaf’s unfolds in front of me, its dimensions almost comical in contrast to the modest three-story building beside it.

Were I at home in Tallinn, walking to my place of work, my stride might be more swift. I would probably not be as concerned about tripping over the irregular pavement. The look and feel of the town would be well known to me. My thoughts would lie with chores ahead. However, the eyesores, hazards, quirks, and wonders of the city’s Architecture would not therefore cease to jump out at me (and I haven’t yet begun to consider what people do in and around Architecture). Even in a town of more predictable, more even Architecture than Tallinn, this will continue to be the case. It does not necessarily follow, as I like to tell my architectural students, that the order of Le Corbusier’s “Ville Radieuse” should be oppressively repetitive and boring (though it may not be a pleasant place to live in). With *truly* extreme forms of repetition, as with the quick, prolonged recurrence of Architectural modules at the edge of our visual field, our bodies react strongly and adversely. This is the case in long tunnels (Figure 5), where the necessary repetition of signs and patterns, a hallmark of most road infrastructure, turns mesmerizing to the point of nausea or sleep, and has to be remedied by designers.

I hope to have shown that Architecture does indeed play a significant part in the way things appear to us (or fail to do so). Historically, given both its formality and its provision of shelter, Architecture has always carried the potential for a reduction to mere function. As I have attempted to show, our work and daily routines lead to a form of inattention, with which Architecture is complicit. If our expectations of Architecture largely consist of functional matters, this will result largely in functioning buildings, whose specificities I tend to ignore, until the building fails to perform. An instrumental relationship to the surrounding world based on exceptionality, be that the failure of a component or one day of the weekend, dedicated entirely to the enjoyment of the city, is not what I would call especially well balanced. How good our Architecture is depends also on the cultivation of our breadth of expectation.