

# Appreciation and Appropriation, Art and Architecture

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## INTRODUCTION

Architecture differentiates itself from other forms of art by demanding a different sort of attention. Rapt concentration does not reveal it. Appreciation is not enough. Architecture demands appropriation.

In this essay I demonstrate that art and architecture distinguish themselves not in their physical constitutions, but according to the relationships they form with those who observe them. In making a work of architecture, it is crucial first to understand these relationships, and then to create a field that is capable of sustaining them.

## VISUAL EXPERIENCE

In his well-known essay, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Walter Benjamin disparages "the attentive concentration of the tourist before a famous building."<sup>1</sup> He implies by this that there is something almost ludicrous about examining a building in this way, as if it were a work of art hung on a gallery wall—for he goes on to say that this is how one looks at art. His contention opens a fundamental insight into the nature of architecture and of art: they must be experienced in radically different ways. While one can, with suitable knowledge and concentration, appreciate art, architecture yields itself only to a deeper kind of experience. Unlike art, architecture must be appropriated.

For Benjamin the tourist's appreciation of the world can only be a limited 'seeing', a vision that is only capable of grasping part of reality, no matter how attentive it might be. Recognizing this fact, tourists today place increasing demands on themselves in an attempt to 'get a feel' for places, to experience 'local flavor'. As Italo Calvino says, "the true journey, as the introjection of an 'outside' different from our normal one, implies a complete change of nutrition, a digesting of the visited country. This is the only kind of travel that has meaning nowadays, when everything visible you can see from your easy chair."<sup>2</sup> Such efforts, though certainly rewarding, are not sufficient to fully experience a place. In the end the tourist is only by great effort extending simple seeing into the realms of the other senses. Tourists who

journey in this enlightened way must satisfy themselves with 'nutrition' and 'digesting,' the rationalized and limited forms of tasting, savoring and incorporation of food. It is difficult for tourists to fully experience the places they visit because they cannot *live* with them.

This becomes particularly evident when we consider the difference between tourist's experience of a building and a lived experience of it. "Buildings," according to Benjamin, "are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and perception—or rather by touch and by sight."<sup>3</sup> The tourist's experience of a building is limited because the inevitable brevity of 'touring' precludes tactile appropriation, which, Benjamin asserts, "is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit."<sup>4</sup> The true experience of a building involves a gradual incorporation—not the "introjection of an 'outside'" that Calvino's sophisticated tourist experiences, but an extended temporal involvement. Buildings are fully experienced by living with them, not by merely looking at them.

This assumption, though now widely held, fundamentally rejects tenets that drove architecture from the Renaissance to the middle of the nineteenth century. Much of the architecture of that period assumed that linear perspective could precisely represent architectural works, and that, in turn, their configuration could be fully resolved from particular points of view. Erwin Panofsky notes that this faith in perspective demonstrates an understanding of the world very different from our own, "for," he says, "the structure of an infinite, unchanging and homogenous space [which perspective assumes to exist] is quite unlike the structure of psychophysiological space [as we understand it in the twentieth century]."<sup>5</sup> As this understanding began to emerge, it became clear that traditional, perspectival seeing could not fully apprehend the world. Indeed, architectural theorists of the late nineteenth century (e.g. Semper, Ruskin, Morris and Viollet-le-duc) asserted that architecture had to present much more than a visual aspect, because no matter how elegantly and precisely construed, a work of architecture held within it fundamental but ephemeral truths about the nature of its physical constitution, the culture that engen-

people that lived with it.<sup>6</sup> By the early twentieth century this notion had helped to drastically alter architecture's scope. For example, in 1912 Robert Mallet-Stevens declared, "If a fastidiously drawn scale drawing, of a temple overloaded with useless columns can be mounted on a chassis and served up to the public classified as 'architecture', then a living room or kitchen, displayed as they really are, complete with furniture and utensils, which they can move around in, can also be classified as architecture, and as living, animated architecture, which will captivate and interest the visitor in another way."<sup>7</sup> Modern architecture had to be perceived in action, not merely from a limited point of view. This remains true of architecture today. Perspectival seeing, like 'the attentive concentration of the tourist,' cannot wholly appropriate, nor can it adequately represent a building because it presupposes a strictly limited experience of the world and thus dispenses with the complexities of tactility and the other senses.

### VISION AND ACTION

Henri Bergson provides the basic framework for a modern assertion that architecture must be appropriated, not merely observed, to be adequately understood. In *Matter and Memory* he demonstrates that no representational system can adequately describe reality; no individual sense can fully perceive it, because "there is in matter something more than what is actually given."<sup>8</sup> Contrary to what traditional perspective assumes, perception happens not in ourselves, not in our eyes, but in a reciprocal relationship that our body maintains with the world.<sup>9</sup> "The objects which surround [one's] body" he says, "reflect its possible action on them."<sup>10</sup> Seeing and physical action become part of the same system of appropriation. Thus a point of view and the "the distance which separates [one's] body from an object perceived really measures the greater or less imminence of danger, the nearer or more remote fulfillment of a promise."<sup>11</sup> Perspectival seeing cannot fully appropriate the world because it fails to accommodate both vision and action, because it assumes, according to Panofsky, "that we see with a single immobile eye."<sup>12</sup>

Maurice Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the limitations of this kind of seeing even more emphatically in his posthumously published work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. In it he declares:

"[as] every experience of the visible has always been given to me within the context of the movements of the look, the visible spectacle belongs to the touch neither more nor less than do the 'tactile qualities.' We must habituate ourselves to **think** that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without

visual existence. Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world."<sup>13</sup>

Bergson and Merleau-Ponty demonstrated that perspectival seeing can no longer be considered an adequate means of understanding the world. Because modern architecture insinuates itself into the world of our experience, perspectival seeing cannot form the basis of our experience of it.

In his essay of 1910, "Architecture," Adolf Loos asserted as much: "the mark," he says, "of a building which is truly established is that it remains ineffective in two dimensions."<sup>14</sup> Perspective and photography<sup>15</sup> are incapable of adequately representing Loos' work because, to be understood, it must be appropriated, as Benjamin might say, by both "perception and use." According to Loos, an architect must supply much more than visual effects in a built work. "The room has to be comfortable," he says, "the house has to look habitable."<sup>16</sup> Imbedded in these notions of comfort and habitability is the same principle that underlies the 'tactile appropriation' that Benjamin believes tourists are incapable of experiencing. Indeed what is 'habitability' but, quoting Benjamin, "appropriation accomplished not so much by attention as by habit"? If a work of architecture is to be habitable it must satisfy vision, but it must also involve itself fully with human actions

### APPRECIATING ART

**Art**, on the other hand, requires a fundamentally different kind of understanding. It remains separate from human action and, unlike architecture, resists appropriation. According to Loos:

"The work of art wants to draw people out of their state of comfort. The house has to serve comfort. Man loves everything that satisfies his comfort. He hates everything that wants to draw him out of this acquired and secured position and that disturbs him. Thus he loves the house and hates art. Only a small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument."<sup>17</sup>

That people hate art may be questionable, but it is clear that art and architecture place fundamentally different demands on people, that they require different sorts of attention to comprehend them.

According to Benjamin, a traditional work of art maintains an aura about it—a "unique phenomenon of a distance."<sup>18</sup> This distance, for painting at least, enforces purely visual appropriation. Indeed Benjamin asserts that the aura of art can be destroyed by tactile appropriation.<sup>19</sup> To handle a work of visual art is to do it violence. This is a lesson that every child understands on a first visit to the art museum: works of art may be scrutinized, but they must not be touched.

Such prohibitions appear difficult to sustain as artists attempt to draw even the most mundane objects into their gamut; nevertheless, the relationship between people and art has not changed substantially. This is because, **accord-**

ing to Arthur Danto, "what is interesting and essential in art is the spontaneous ability the artist has of enabling us to see his way of seeing the world—not just the world as if the painting were like a window, but the world as given by him."<sup>20</sup> This seeing of someone else's vision enforces my distance from the art object because, no matter what my level of empathy with the artist, I am incapable of encroaching on what is essential to the work. I can destroy the thing by handling it, but I cannot destroy the artist's vision of the thing. Though this explanation is somewhat facile, it has become clear that the limits of an art work lie not so much in its physical constitution as in one's perception of it. This is why, even though twentieth century artists have often introduced ordinary objects into artistic consideration—scraps of newspaper in the collages by Picasso and Braque,<sup>21</sup> unaltered tools in the ready-mades of Duchamp, Brillo boxes and Campbell's soup cans in Andy Warhol's work<sup>22</sup>—the notion of 'distance' that establishes the limits of art is sustained. One appreciates these admittedly challenging works according to the same rules that people have always appreciated art. While a snow shovel or a can of Campbell's soup would typically assume an unobtrusive position in the array of things with which we become habituated in everyday existence, a certain inviolability and distance is conferred upon them when they are placed within art's traditional milieu. In these works, as in all works of art, an aura separates the art object from the individual. A limit of appropriation sustains the thing as art. This is what separates art from modern architecture.

### APPROPRIATING ARCHITECTURE

Indeed one of the great innovations of modern architecture was that it extended itself beyond the 'aura' of art, beyond the limits of perspective and insinuated itself into ordinary human habits and experience. This entirely changed the scope of architecture, making it something different from art. Certainly one can examine works of modern architecture attentively and from a distance—as art; however, to do so to the exclusion of more visceral and temporal forms of appropriation severely limits their potential value as architecture.<sup>23</sup> In *The Decorative Art of Today* Le Corbusier makes a crucial point about modern architecture that is often overlooked in more recent works: architecture's "objective," he says "is to create relationships."<sup>24</sup> It sets in motion the complementary play of art and the ordinary equipment that makes life's tasks easier; in so doing it acts as a field for meaningful human interaction with the world.

The distinction that Le Corbusier makes here between art and equipment is an important one. Equipment, though it can appear beautiful because of its evident refinement, does not demand appreciation the way art does.<sup>25</sup> In a sense it attempts to accomplish a task precisely opposed to art: it insinuates itself unobtrusively into human activity. According to Le Corbusier, tools and other equipment act as extensions of our limbs and efface themselves, disappearing from view as they

fulfill their purpose.<sup>26</sup> They are fully absorbed in human action. For example, while a hammer concentrates muscular energy on the head of a nail it functions as an extension of the hand—thus its handle—rather than a discrete element in the process. It does not attempt to stand apart, distinct from human action, as a work of art does. But Le Corbusier notes that by alleviating an individual of irksome or time-consuming tasks, tools make available the time and energy necessary for attentive contemplation of art.<sup>27</sup> He believed that it is architecture's task to choreograph these actions.

In the contemporary world, however, these distinctions are often difficult to maintain, because the limits of art and of equipment are ill-defined. Modern equipment, or the technological *device* as Albert Borgmann calls it, has become so ubiquitous that virtually nothing demands our attentive concentration.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, as Benjamin shows, the mechanical reproduction of art has dulled our sensibility to it.<sup>29</sup> Contemporary critics of technology despair of reversing this trend without a serious reconsideration of our relationship with the world, with the equipment that we choose to assist in our interaction with it and with the things that make it meaningful.<sup>30</sup> As Borgmann notes, "the further technological liberation from the duress of daily life is only leading to more disengagement from skilled and bodily commerce with reality. [New technologies] will fail to center and illuminate our lives—their diversion will more and more lead to distraction, the scattering of our attention and the atrophy of our capacities." "What is required is not only a re-consideration of technology's role in modern life, but of the actions which constitute our existence and of the field upon which these actions take place.

For architects this means first of all defining the relationships that people form with architectural works. If, as Benjamin states, architecture is appropriated 'by use and perception'—that is, immediately or from a distance—when in a work of architecture are these best accommodated?

According to Le Corbusier, architecture must open itself to any number of human actions. In his scenario, a well designed room either disappears in human action or stands apart from it according one's immediate intentions: "We pick up a book or a pen. In this mechanical, discrete, silent, attentive comfort, there is a very fine painting on the wall. Or else: our movements take on a new assurance and precision among walls whose proportions make us happy, and whose colors stimulate us."<sup>32</sup> In Loos' view, architecture distances itself from human action, as art does, only in the tomb and the monument. Unlike other architectural types, these enforce a distance between themselves and people which *precludes* tactile or distracted appropriation. A house, on the other hand, in order to be comfortable, requires, and indeed *implies* habituation and tactile appropriation.

Ultimately, then, architecture begins to take shape out of a clear understanding of the human actions that join with it and in the understanding that one does not merely appreciate architecture, but that one must appropriate it in the fullness of lived experience.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 240.
- <sup>2</sup> Italo Calvino, "Under the Jaguar Sun," *Under the Jaguar Sun*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986) 12.
- <sup>3</sup> Benjamin 240.
- <sup>4</sup> Benjamin 240.
- <sup>5</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991) 30-31.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, in "The Lamp of Truth" Ruskin says, "architectural deceits can be broadly considered under three heads:— 1st. The suggestion of a mode of structure or support, other than the true one; as in pendants of late Gothic roofs. 2nd. The painting of surfaces to represent some other material than that of which it actually consists (as in the marbling of wood), or the deceptive representation of sculptured ornament upon them. 3rd. The use of cast or machine-made ornaments of any kind." John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1880 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1989) 35. Viollet-le-duc makes a similar point: "Once out of the way of truth, architecture has been more and more misled into degenerating paths. [it adopts] certain forms without analyzing them or recurring to their causes, seeing nothing but the effects, it has become *Neo-Greek, Neo-Roman, Neo-Gothic*" Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, Lecture X, *Lectures on Architecture*, Vol. I, 1877-1881, trans. Benjamin Bucknall (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1987) 447.
- <sup>7</sup> Yvonne Brunhammer, "Robert Mallet-Stevens as Interior Architect," *Rob Mallet-Stevens, Architecte*, ed. D. Deshoulières and J. Janneau, trans. Susan Day (Brussels: Editions des Archives d'Architecture Moderne, 1980) 111-112.
- <sup>8</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 1896, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991) 71.
- <sup>9</sup> Bergson 43.
- <sup>10</sup> Bergson 21.
- <sup>11</sup> Bergson 57.
- <sup>12</sup> Panofsky 29.
- <sup>13</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1964, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) 134.
- <sup>14</sup> Adolf Loos, "Architecture," 1910, 106.
- <sup>15</sup> Photography adheres to the same principles of experience as does perspective: the camera is the 'single eye' *par excellence*.
- <sup>16</sup> Loos 108.
- <sup>17</sup> Loos 108.
- <sup>18</sup> Benjamin 222.
- <sup>19</sup> "to pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction." Benjamin 223.
- <sup>20</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981) 207.
- <sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the invention of collage, see Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
- <sup>22</sup> Danto discusses Duchamp's and Warhol's contribution to debates about the nature of art. See especially Chapter 2, "Content and Causation."
- <sup>23</sup> Unfortunately designers have recently made this sort of appreciation a major, even a primary, motivation in their work. This was the case for many so-called post-modern works of architecture, which concentrated a tremendous amount of energy on their exterior aspect, with the result that physical relationships that lead to architectural appropriation were all but ignored (witness for example Venturi's decorated boxes). Other recent architectural works based on intellectual models derived from linguistics and literary criticism, though ostensibly critical of post modernism's stylistic pastiches in their outlook, also tend to concentrate their energies on the visual aspects of buildings or their representations, largely ignoring the notions of habituation and comfort that distinguish works of modern architecture from sculpture.
- <sup>24</sup> Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, 1925, trans. James Dunnett (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987) 126.
- <sup>25</sup> The *human-limb objects* that Le Corbusier describes in *The Decorative Art of Today* are generally products of refinements brought about by a culture or through processes of production—of "mechanical selection." See Le Corbusier, chapter 6 "Type-Needs Type-Furniture." This process is well-documented for a number of devices—locks, chairs, kitchens—in Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*, (New York: W W Norton & Company, 1948). See also Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986) 211.
- <sup>26</sup> Le Corbusier 72.
- <sup>27</sup> "Happiness lies in the creative faculty, in the most elevated possible activity. For our comfort, to facilitate our work, to avoid exhaustion, to refresh ourselves, in one word to *free our spirit* and distance us from the clutter that encumbers our life and threatens to *kill it*, we have equipped ourselves through our ingenuity with *human-limb objects*, extensions of our limbs; and by making use of these tools, we avoid unpleasant tasks, accidents, the sterile drudgery, we *organize our affairs* and, having won our freedom, we think about something — about art for example (for it is very comforting)." Le Corbusier 74-5.
- <sup>28</sup> Borgmann describes the devices that make such a situation possible, and the process that engenders them as follows: "A device such as the central heating plant procures mere warmth and disburdens us of all other elements. These are taken over by the machinery of the device. The machinery makes no demands on our skill, strength or attention, and it is less demanding the less it makes its presence felt. In the progress of technology, the machinery of a device has therefore a tendency to become concealed or to shrink. Of all the physical properties of a device, those alone are crucial and prominent which constitute the commodity that the device procures." Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) 42.
- <sup>29</sup> Reproduction destroys the 'aura' of an artwork as much as handling it does, because it makes appropriation by *habituation* virtually inevitable. To habituate one's self to a work of art is to appropriate it in a non-visual way, which does violence to the work of art as it is traditionally considered. Habituation becomes possible, even inevitable, in the age of mechanical reproduction, because a work of art can be widely disseminated, diminishing its uniqueness as well as its authority over particular circumstances. It can no longer command a particular point of view. "Even the most perfect reproduction of an object is lacking one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Benjamin 220.
- <sup>30</sup> As Calvino does above.
- <sup>31</sup> Borgmann 151. The promise of devices, for those who were experiencing them for the first time, was quite different because they made possible the attentive enjoyment of art *on one's own terms*. Paul Valéry emphasizes this point in "The Conquest of Ubiquity" (Paul Valéry, "The Conquest of Ubiquity")

uity", *Aesthetics*, Ralph Manheim, trans., (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964) 227-8): "[Formerly] we were dependent for our enjoyment on an occasion, a place, a date and a program. How many coincidences were needed! Today we are liberated from a servitude so contrary to pleasure and, by token, to the most sensitive appreciation of music. To be able to choose the moment of enjoyment, to savor the pleasure when not only our mind desires it, but our soul and whole being craves and as it were anticipates it, is to give fullest scope to the composer's intention. In recorded music the work of composer or performer

finds the conditions essential to the most perfect aesthetic returns." This is a true appreciation of equipment, but one which requires an equal appreciation of art. In order to clearly understand either art or equipment, we must recognize our relationship with each and recognize the sort of appropriation that it demands. In order to appreciate works of art in an age of mechanical reproduction, we must, like a tourist, sustain a level of attentive concentration toward things while maintaining our distance from them.

<sup>32</sup> Le Corbusier 77.