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Architecture and sites: a lesson from the categorisation of artworks

Croatian Journal of Philosophy, 21(1), 2021

[This is the last draft of the paper. Please only quote from the published version]

Many contemporary architects have designed architectural objects that are closely linked to their particular sites. An in-depth study of the relevant relationship holding between those objects and their sites is, however, missing. This paper addresses the issue, arguing that those architectural objects are akin to works of site-specific art. In section (1), I introduce the topic of the paper. In section (2), I critically analyse the debate on the categorisation of artworks as site-specific. In section (3), I apply to architecture the lesson learned from the analysis of the art debate.

1. A look at contemporary architecture

In current architectural practice, there is growing interest in designing architectural objects – a term that I use to refer to all sorts of built structures (see Fisher 2015) – that are closely site-linked, as testified by the work of, e.g., Peter Zumthor, Róisín Heneghan (co-founder of Heneghan Peng Architects along with Shi-Fu Peng), and Kjetil Thorsen and Craig Dykers (founders of the architectural practice Snøhetta).¹ Moreover, the design of public spaces and landscapes is gaining importance, as recent projects by Bernard Lassus, Kathryn Gustafson, and Neil Porter show. Kjetil Thorsen declared in a 2015 interview: “...in the next 20 years, we’ll see more of a shift towards public

¹ The kinds of relationships between architectural objects and their sites that I shall take into consideration in what follows by no means exhaust the realm of the relationships that can obtain between an architectural object and its site. As it shall emerge throughout the paper, my interest lies exclusively in a feature of architectural objects – the fact that their spatial extension encompasses their sites, in a way – and, more specifically, in architectural objects that articulate some content about their context of production through the sites they encompass. It is this latter, peculiar kind of relationship that I have in mind when I write of architectural objects that are *closely linked* to their particular sites. I shall not concern myself with, e.g., architectural objects built with construction techniques and/or with materials that are specific to their sites.

spaces which are between [...] built objects and lesser focus on the *iconic building*” (Forbes 2015: 126, my italics; see also Spens 2007).²

Leslie Sklair (2006: 25-33) explains that a building is usually labelled ‘iconic’ when it is famous as well as symbolically and aesthetically relevant – St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, for instance, is world-famous, and charged with symbolic meaning (it is the most prominent building in the Vatican City and that most often used by the pope, thus being a symbol of Roman Catholicism itself), and a masterpiece of Renaissance art. As Sklair argues (33-43), a number of contemporary buildings described as iconic are aesthetically remarkable, have been created by famous architects and/or made famous through images in the media, and have been financed by global corporations, rather than by state and/or religious bodies, with the goal of making cities “easily recognizable for purposes of commerce and civic pride. [...] Those driving urban boosterism deliberately attempt to create urban architectural icons in order to draw tourists, convention and mega-event attendees with money to spend and the images they project are directed to this end” (38). Buildings of this kind, Sklair suggests, function as symbols of globalized capitalism itself (33). An example is Frank Gehry’s Disney Concert Hall (2003), which contributed to changing the image of downtown Los Angeles, inserting into an unremarkable area usually shared between office workers and homeless people a monumental, asymmetrical building, with curved, stainless steel façades, for concertgoers and tourists (34). Interestingly, a consequence of the contemporary trend in iconic architecture-making is that in cities as diverse as, for example, Los Angeles, Bilbao, and Dubai we can find buildings that serve the same chief interest (i.e., to change a city’s image in order to boost its economy) and that, in order to attract consumers, use the same strategy, which consists in creating mega-structures with unprecedented shapes that stand out against their background – in addition to Gehry’s Disney Concert Hall, for example, consider also his Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (1997) and Dubai’s Burj Khalifa (2009)

² In what follows, my analysis shall focus only on buildings, rather than, more generally, on all sorts of architectural objects, merely for the sake of simplicity. I assume that the claims I shall make with reference to buildings can be applied to all sorts of architectural objects. Whether my claims also apply to non-built objects, such as public spaces and landscapes, is a separate question, which I shall not address here.

by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill. A number of contemporary iconic buildings, then, seems to be have been produced mainly with the goal of changing cities' images in order to "commodify the urban experience" (Sklair 2012: 352), to the detriment of their fitting into their natural, architectural, social and cultural contexts – which is instead the focus of the practice of building architectural objects that are closely linked to their particular sites.³

An example of the latter approach is the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet (2008) in Oslo, by Snøhetta. The building, which hosts three state-of-the-art theatres of different sizes and provides work-space for around 600 employees, has monumental proportions, but merges harmonically with its surroundings thanks to "a 'carpet' of horizontal and sloping surfaces" (Snøhetta 2008: n. p.) laid out on top of it, whose form relates to the cityscape. In particular, "Viewed from the Akershus castle and from the grid city the building creates a relationship between the fjord and the Ekerberg hill to the east. Seen from the central station and Chr. Fredriks square the opera catches the attention with a falling which frames the eastern edge of the view of the fjord and its islands. The building connects city and fjord, urbanity and landscape" (Snøhetta 2008: n. p.). The Opera House establishes connections not only at landscape level, but also at social level: it provides a public plaza and a foyer that are freely accessible to the public, as well as shops and restaurants. Numerous people spend time in those areas, which have effectively provided accessible, well-designed public spaces to Osloites, in a previously neglected part of the city.

The main goal of this paper is to look deeper into architectural objects that are closely linked to their particular sites. To my knowledge, literature on this topic is rather limited and polarized: on the architectural theory side, there are volumes which are less preoccupied with providing a general understanding of those objects than with investigating the views of particular architects engaged in the practice of producing them (e.g., Spens 2007, Forbes 2015, Aldallal et al. 2016), while on the philosophy side Fabio Bacchini (2017) has provided an insightful, although ultimately inadequate

³ Closely site-linked architecture and landscaping can of course be tools for urban boosterism too, as shown by projects like West 8 and DTAH's Toronto Waterfront Revitalisation Initiative (2006) and The High Line, Manhattan (2009) by James Corner Field Operations, Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Piet Oudolf.

account, as I shall argue in section (3). Debate on artworks that are closely linked to their particular sites is, instead, more developed (see, e.g., Crimp 1986, Crow 1996; Coles 2000; Kaye 2000; Suderburg 2000; Kwon 2002; Gaiger 2009; Rugg 2010): this suggests the strategy of looking into art-theoretical discussions first, and then attempting to make analogies between artworks, in general, on the one hand, and architectural objects, on the other – this strategy has already been pursued by Bacchini (2017) but, as I shall show in section (3), his reading of the debate on closely site-linked art lacks critical insight. An intuitive reason supporting this strategy is that various architectural objects are usually considered artworks: an analysis of architectural objects that are closely linked to their particular sites could thus simply consist in the application to the particular case of artistic architecture of a more general view concerning all artworks. One, however, might object that it would be preferable to have an account not just of *artistic* architectural objects that are closely linked to their particular sites, but of *all* architectural objects that are closely linked to their particular sites. As I shall explain in section (3), however, this problem does not arise, because my claims concerning the relationship between art- and architectural objects and their particular sites can be applied also to non-artistic artifacts, in general, and non-artistic architectural objects, in particular. In the rest of the paper, I shall proceed as follows: in section (2), I shall look into the debate on how artworks relate to their particular sites, and I shall dispel a confusion emerging from it, putting forward an argument for distinguishing between the macro-category of *sited* artworks and the sub-category of *site-specific* artworks. In section (3), I shall apply to architecture the lessons drawn from the scrutiny of artworks, thereby providing an original account of how architectural objects closely relate to their particular sites and underlining the points of contact and the divergences between Bacchini's (2017) account and mine.

2. Sited art and site-specific art⁴

⁴ This section partially relies on arguments put forward in Caldarola 2020: ch. 3.

All particular artworks and all instantiations of multiply instantiable artworks are *physically located* somewhere. For instance, the *Mona Lisa* is displayed in the Louvre and any execution of the *Ninth Symphony* happens at a specific time and place. The physical location of any artwork or artwork-instantiation is relevant to one's experience of it in so far as it allows for making the artwork, or artwork-instantiation, perceivable in a way that respects its author's "sanctions" i.e. "publicly accessible actions and communications" (Irvin 2005: 315) – such as presenting a work within a certain context, giving the work a certain title, offering an artist's statement about the work, instructing curators on how, for example, to display the work (Irvin 2005: 319-320) – concerning how the boundaries of a given artwork are to be fixed, what features of the work are relevant to interpreting it, what genre the work belongs to, and whether the work has a particular feature as an artwork or not (Irvin 2005: 315-316).⁵ For instance, for a proper experience of the *Mona Lisa*, the Louvre room where the painting hangs must be sufficiently illuminated, because, by producing a painting within the Western tradition of picture-making, Leonardo sanctioned that in order to experience the *Mona Lisa* we need to be able to perceive what the painting itself depicts.

On the other hand, only some artworks and artwork-instantiations are such that their *media* are constituted by certain physical objects or events *plus* portions of the physical environments where they are located or take place – as can be inferred from their makers' sanctions.⁶ I shall call those artworks and artwork-instantiations 'sited'. A sited artwork-instantiation is, for instance, the instantiation of Auguste Rodin's *Les Bourgeois de Calais* (1889) which is installed in a square in Calais – there are eleven more instantiations of the statue, some shown in museums and others installed in public spaces. The Calais instantiation of the statue celebrates six fourteenth century citizens of Calais and, thanks to its public location in Calais, it manifests the city's pride for its past. Understanding that it manifests the city's pride for its past is integral to one's complete appreciation of it, which is why it

⁵ As Irvin explains (2005: 221-222), sanctions are not necessarily explicitly spelled out, or even established, by artists: they can also result from an artist's subscription to conventions that are established in the community where there is a tradition which grounds the artist's practice.

⁶ A medium is any resource manipulated in some way in order to convey content and/or make salient some properties of an object (see Lopes 2014: ch. 7).

is reasonable to claim that the Calais square where the statue is installed is part of the medium of this artwork-instantiation.⁷

The term ‘site-specific’ first appeared in the art-jargon in the late 1970s/early 1980s⁸ and art-theoretical literature usually considers site-specific art as a contemporary phenomenon that emerged in the 1960s (see, e.g., Crimp 1986; Foster 1996; Meyer 2000; Coles 2000; Kaye 2000; Kwon 2002). According to the literature, the goal of most site-specific artworks and artwork-instantiations is either to make the spectator aware of her presence in the physical space and of aspects of her experience of it, or to criticize certain institutions by re-configuring their physical sites through actions and installations (see especially Kwon 2002 and, for an amendment to her view, Gaiger 2009). I shall clarify this with two examples. A 1970s work that invites spectators to focus on their experience of the physical space is, for instance, Nancy Holt’s *Sun Tunnels* (1976). This sculptural installation located in the Great Basin Desert in Utah consists of four concrete cylinders arranged in an open cross format and aligned to frame the sun on the horizon during the summer and winter solstices. The work can be described as a device for experiencing the sun’s light at certain times of the year in a particular way and, given how the cylinders are positioned, it can only function in the very site where it is installed. On the other hand, a work that criticizes an institution by occupying its site is Mierle Laderman Ukele’s *Hartford Wash* (1973): in her performance at the Wadsworth Atheneum – a museum in Hartford, CT – the artist engaged in ordinary house-maintenance tasks, such as washing the floors, the goal being to raise awareness of the under-representation and marginalization of female artists in museums like the Wadsworth Atheneum (see Steinhauer 2017).

As the above examples show, site-specific artworks and artwork-instantiations are, certainly, sited artworks and artwork-instantiations: their *media* consist of particular material objects or events *plus* portions of the environments in which they are located or take place. But are they *just* sited

⁷ While the property of being physically located somewhere is an *extrinsic* property of all particular artworks and artwork-instantiations, the property of being sited is an *intrinsic* property of only some particular artworks and artwork-instantiations (see Marshall and Weatherston 2018).

⁸ See Robert Irwin’s *Being and Circumstance* (1985) and the debate on Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981- 1989).

artworks and artwork-instantiations? This open question has generated some confusion. On the one hand, literature on site-specificity has focussed on the *reasons* prompting contemporary artists to produce sited artworks and artwork-instantiations – mainly, their interest in having the public actively explore portions of the physical space and in criticizing institutions by re-configuring their physical sites, as I have mentioned above. This might support the hypothesis that what distinguishes contemporary site-specific art from the broader category of sited art is simply the particular motives of contemporary artists engaged in the production of sited works and works-instantiations, rather than aspects of the works and works-instantiations themselves (to my knowledge, however, this view has, as yet, not been explicitly defended). On the other hand, some art theorists and historians have focussed on ‘siting’ when considering, for example, some Renaissance and Baroque artworks, establishing links with literature on contemporary site-specific art and exploring the hypothesis that the realm of site-specific art might extend well beyond contemporary art production (see, e.g., Gillgren 2011 and 2017, as well as some essays contained in Gillgren and Snickare 2012). My view is that a more careful analysis of works and work-instantiations usually described as cases of site-specific art allows us to understand that it is appropriate to distinguish the sub-category of site-specific art from the macro-category of sited art, but for reasons other than those that might be inferred from the literature on contemporary site-specific art: site-specific artworks and artwork-instantiations should be distinguished from sited artworks and artwork-instantiations not merely in virtue of the motives that guided their production, but also in virtue of the fact that their sites are *essential* for them to convey content that concerns the historical and/or social and/or cultural context of their production. In the following paragraphs, I shall support this view with the analysis of three widely recognized examples of site-specific art and three examples of sited art that isn’t usually considered site-specific.

Let us first consider paradigmatic cases of site-specific art. I believe that *Sun Tunnels* is not just a work that uses its site to produce an intense experience of physical space in the spectator, but also a work that uses its site, crucially, to articulate content about the cultural context of its production: through its collocation in the desert and significant size, it antagonizes the art-gallery system of the

1970s, which promoted the commercialization of artworks, understood as easily movable commodities. The work distances itself from the prevailing attitude in its cultural context of production, thereby implying a critical commentary about it (see Williams 2011).

Let's now go back to *Hartford Wash*. It is an instantiation of a work of performance, whose art medium incorporates the Wadsworth Atheneum's site: if the artist had been asked to wash the floors of Hartford's railway station, instead of those of the museum, our experience of her actions wouldn't have qualified as the experience of her performance work. The performance was, in part, about the historical and cultural context of its production: namely, it criticized views about women artists held in the art-world in the 1970s. Furthermore, the fact that the performance was situated in a museum was crucial for it to convey its context-related content: in order to criticize the museum's marginalization of women artists, the performance had to show a woman artist washing the floors of *a museum* – it couldn't show a woman artist washing, say, the floors of a railway station.

Finally, let us analyse another instantiation of a site-specific artwork: Katarina Fritsche's sculpture *Hahn/Cock*, installed in London's Trafalgar Square between 2013 and 2015. The statue, representing a blue cockerel (an ironic symbol of male power), was to be experienced as a critical commentary towards the numerous symbols of male, imperialistic power constituted by the other statues installed in the square (first of all, that of Admiral Nelson). Furthermore, the statue expressed contemporary discomfort towards the nineteenth century British Empire, qualifying as a work instantiation that was also about the historical and cultural context of its production (i.e., a work instantiation that conveyed a contemporary view on former European imperialism) (see Barnett 2013). Lastly, if the work instantiation had not been situated in Trafalgar Square it could not have conveyed its context-related content: if the cockerel had been installed in a square that hadn't presented statues that are powerful symbols of imperial power, it couldn't have expressed contemporary discomfort towards the British Empire of the nineteenth century.

So far, I have shown that the sites of site-specific artworks and artwork-instantiations are *essential* for them to convey content that is about the historical and/or social and/or cultural context

of their production. This observation allows us to draw a first distinction between site-specific art and some other cases of sited art. Consider, for instance, the Calais instantiation of *Les Bourgeois de Calais*: this work-instantiation testifies to the artistic style of Rodin, a late nineteenth century French sculptor, as well as to its age's technical achievements in bronze casting, although, to my knowledge, it is not about late nineteenth century French history, culture or society. More generally, while all artworks and artwork-instantiations, to some extent, *testify* to their respective historical and/or social and/or cultural contexts, not all artworks and artwork-instantiations are such that they have been sanctioned to convey a view about those contexts. Consequently, site-specific artworks and artwork-instantiations, qua objects that have been sanctioned to convey a view about their contexts of production, can be distinguished from those sited artworks and artwork-instantiations which, like the Calais instantiation of *Les Bourgeois de Calais*, have *not* been sanctioned to convey a view about their contexts of production.

The next step in my argument consists in showing that some sited artworks or artwork instantiations that *are* about the historical and/or social and/or cultural context of their production do not function like paradigmatic cases of site-specific artworks and artwork-instantiations such as *Sun Tunnels*, *Hartford Wash* and *Hahn/Cock*. To support this view, I shall give two examples. One, the *Ara Pacis Augustae* (9 BC), is an altar which was sited with respect to its original location, the Campo Marzio in Rome – an area dedicated to the celebration of the conquests of the Roman Empire (the work is now installed in a different area of Rome, by the bank of the Tiber). The altar – which, by depicting the Emperor, his family and other prominent figures officiating a procession to celebrate the *pax augustea*, pays tribute to the exceptional season of peace Emperor Augustus brought to the Roman Empire, and is therefore about the historical context of its production – had been sanctioned to be experienced among other monuments celebrating war victories in the Campo Marzio, which created an appropriate framework for stressing the uniqueness and relevance of Augustus' achievement. This might suggest that there is no difference between the *Ara Pacis* and, for example, Fritsche's *Hahn/Cock*: both are sited and about the historical/social context of their production. However, there is an

important difference between the two works: unlike the latter, the *Ara Pacis* conveys its context-related content even if it has been removed from its original location (as mentioned, the work, originally in the Campo Marzio, now stands by the bank of the Tiber). In particular, the work could convey its context-related content even if it were removed from the city of Rome and transported to, say, Beijing. This is because the part of its content that concerns the celebration of the Augustan Age is conveyed by the scenes depicted by the sculptural reliefs, and not by the original site of installation of the artwork (i.e., the Campo Marzio in Rome). The original location merely emphasized the unicity of August's achievement, contrasting the *Ara* – a monument celebrating peace – with other monuments celebrating conquests.

My second example of sited art that is about its context of production, although it differs from typical works of site-specific art, is Paolo Veronese's *Nozze di Cana* painting (1563), originally installed in the dining room of the San Giorgio Basil in Venice and now displayed in the Louvre. This work used to be situated in the basil's dining room, since it represents a scene that can be imagined as extending into the dining room's environment. Furthermore, the work is also, in part, about the social and cultural context of its production, since it represents a sixteenth century environment and several celebrities of the time (e.g., Titian and Veronese himself). Like the *Ara Pacis*, however, *Nozze di Cana* differs from *Sun Tunnels*, *Hartford Wash* and *Hahn/Cock* in that the site where it was once situated was not essential in conveying the part of the work's content that concerns the social and cultural context of its production. Indeed, the work is about sixteenth century Venetian society and culture, because it depicts a particular environment and particular individuals, and not because it incorporated the dining room within its artistic medium.

To sum up and conclude this section, I argue that site-specific artworks and artwork-instantiations differ from other sited artworks and artwork-instantiations in that they use their sites, crucially, to convey content about their contexts of production. To my knowledge, the realm of site-specific art encompasses only some *contemporary* sited artworks and artwork-instantiations; however, it might emerge that some works and work-instantiations from previous epochs also qualify as site-

specific art. Art-theoretical literature on site-specific art *might* therefore be right in focusing exclusively on contemporary sited artworks, but, as I have shown, it is inadequate in that it has not thoroughly investigated the reasons underpinning the description of a work or work-instantiation as site-specific. My analysis unveils the peculiarities of site-specific art. In the next section, guided by my view on sited and site-specific art, I shall attempt to provide a deeper understanding of architectural objects that enjoy close relationships with their sites.

3. Sited architecture and site-specific architecture

Let us finally turn to architectural objects that are closely linked to their particular sites. In the previous section, I introduced the notion of *sited* artwork or artwork-instantiation, which is such that its medium is constituted by certain physical objects or events *plus* portions of the physical environment where it is located or takes place. All architectural objects, I submit, are *sited*. On this point, I agree with Bacchini, who argues that “buildings are constitutively located in a certain place” (2017: 86).⁹ Before summarizing and endorsing Bacchini’s arguments in support of this claim, I would like to set the ground for addressing a preliminary objection that might be raised against my approach towards architectural objects.

One might object that, since I shall argue for an analogy between artworks and artwork-instantiations, on the one hand, and architectural objects, on the other, my claims will apply exclusively to those architectural objects that qualify as art (if there are any). However, this is false. As we have seen in section (2), my view on sited and site-specific art revolves around a particular conception of their *medium*: sited artworks and artwork-instantiations are such that their medium is constituted by certain physical objects or events *plus* portions of the physical environment where they are located or take place (i.e., their sites), while site-specific artworks and artwork-instantiations are sited artworks and artwork-instantiations which use their sites, crucially, to convey content about their contexts of production. It is important to note that, as Dominic Lopes (2014: ch. 7) argues, it is not

⁹ See footnote 1 above.

just art objects that have media: all resources manipulated in some way in order to convey content and/or make salient some properties of an object qualify as media. Street signs, supermarket leaflets, and IKEA mugs all have media. I believe that all architectural objects, too, have media, because they are constituted by materials that make salient some of their properties (I shall develop on this below). What distinguishes an art-medium from a non-artistic medium, Lopes argues, is that only the former is the focus of an art-appreciative practice, but this issue shouldn't concern us here.

Let us now look at Bacchini's arguments. He begins with the observation that "we may doubt whether a specific building would still be the same if we moved it to another location" (2017: 88). For instance, we tend to think that changing Notre Dame's location from Paris to Las Vegas would imply altering one of the essential properties of the church (i.e., that of being located in Paris). On looking for an explanation for this kind of intuition, Bacchini discards various *prima facie* hypotheses: what grounds the intuition is not the fact that buildings are originally conceived by their makers as permanently located, because we can imagine that we would still hold the intuition about Notre Dame even if we knew for sure that its makers didn't conceive of it as permanently located (88); the fact that buildings have foundations doesn't ground the intuition either, because we hold it also for buildings that, like the Parthenon, don't have foundations, and because we don't hold similar views about trees, whose roots, however, play the same role that foundations play for buildings (91); finally, the intuition is not grounded in the mere fact that buildings are difficult to move because (a) that is an accidental property of buildings, while we think that their being located in a certain place is one of their essential properties, and (b) there are other objects that are difficult to move (e.g., rather big meteorites) about which, however, we don't hold the same intuition (90).

Bacchini's next step is to clarify that the essential property that we think is altered by changing the position of a building is not the property of being located at a particular latitude and longitude, but of being surrounded by a specific physical context. He supports this claim by observing, on the one hand, that we wouldn't think that, for instance, Notre Dame had changed one of its essential properties if it had been moved, along with the whole city of Paris, to Clark County, Nevada. In

particular, it is not relevant for us to know whether the relocated city is identical to Paris, while it is relevant to know that the outer context of the church is the same as in Paris (91-92). On the other hand, Bacchini observes that if the church of Notre Dame were left in its original location, but “the whole town of Paris around the Cathedral” (92) were replaced by the town of Las Vegas, we would hold that the church would have lost its essential property of being situated in a certain location.

Having made this further point, Bacchini claims that what explains the intuition that the property of being located in a certain physical context is an essential property of buildings is the fact that, for any given work of architecture, “usually there is no basis for ruling out any extrinsic contextual feature of the work as inessential” (95), since “it is manifest that we usually allow among the constitutive properties of edifices much more intrinsic properties than just those indicated in plans (for example, materials, interaction with sunlight, shadows)” (94).

I endorse Bacchini’s arguments and shall try to clarify them with some examples. To begin with, let us look at Frank Lloyd Wright’s *Fallingwater* (1938) – a building that was famously conceived with the goal of fitting it to the natural environment where it is situated. Among the constitutive properties of this building there are, for instance, the property of looking as if it literally incorporated a waterfall (while it has actually been built *upon* one) and the property of being embedded among trees with particular shapes and colours. This is evident both from what we know about Lloyd Wright’s project for the building (see, e.g., Gibson 2017; PPG 2020) and from our experience of it: it is integral to our appreciation of the building’s structure that we focus on how masterfully it has been placed above the waterfall and that we notice, for instance, that the colour of its exterior is similar to the colour of the dying rhododendrons that can be seen around the house in the fall.

As a second example, let us consider a contemporary iconic work of architecture such as Rem Koolhaas’ CCTV tower (2013) in Beijing. Even though this is an extraordinary-looking building – a folded tower of huge proportions – which draws attention to itself more than to its surroundings, it would be mistaken to claim that we shouldn’t take into consideration some of its relationships with its location when experiencing it. For instance, the architecture of the building – which has been

described as “not phallic, but vaginal” (de Muynck 2004: n.p.) – is capable of attracting people around itself and is better appreciated when seen against the background of the many nondescript or whimsical high-rises and skyscrapers punctuating the landscape of contemporary Beijing, which are like “needles” that “collect their own little pathetic communities while breaking down the larger community around them” creating “isolation right in the center of the city” (Koolhaas 2004: 465).

Finally, let us focus on a kind of building that has had numerous instantiations in former East Germany, as well as in former West Germany and the Netherlands: the *Plattenbau*. *Plattenbauten* made of large, prefabricated concrete slabs were mainly employed for cheap, public housing projects, often occupying large portions of settlements on the outskirts of large cities. Consequently, some of those settlements look quite similar to each other and one might think that relocating a certain *Plattenbau* from, say, Lichtenberg (a Berlin neighbourhood) to, say, Marzahn (another Berlin neighbourhood) wouldn't alter any essential property of the building. Following Bacchini, however, it can be objected that, even in this case, in which a building is moved to a neighbourhood that is very similar to its original one, we cannot know for certain whether, in appreciating the building, it would be right to disregard, say, the particular way in which the light hits it at dusk in its Lichtenberg location, which is in no way equal to the light that hits it at dusk in its Marzahn location.

Bacchini concludes by addressing a problem raised by his view: it is not clear why, while the original physical context of a building tends to change, sometimes to a great extent, over time, we don't seem to hold the view that the building loses any of its essential properties as a consequence of those changes in its physical context. The portion of Paris around Notre Dame, for instance, has changed significantly since the thirteenth century, but this doesn't seem to concern us (95-98). To make sense of this phenomenon, Bacchini claims that although many contextual properties have changed in the portion of Paris around Notre Dame since it was built, such change doesn't qualify as a context change, which is why we are not concerned by the fact that it has occurred. There are several alternative explanations that can support the view that the change isn't a context change: “either physical identity, or physical continuity, or in certain cases even perceptual indistinguishability

or perceptual similarity seem perfectly sufficient to guarantee context identity over time”, Bacchini observes (99; n. 24 p. 103), making reference to Derek Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons* (1984: 207).

I agree with Bacchini’s arguments in support of the view that all architectural objects are sited. Our views diverge, however, when it comes to identifying what kind of architectural objects qualifies as site-specific. Bacchini develops his proposal by applying a general view of site-specific art to the architectural case. However, his conception of site-specific art is inadequate, and this impacts negatively on his view of site-specific architecture. According to Bacchini, site-specific artworks are merely all and only those artworks that are constitutively located in a certain place (2017: 90); it follows that all buildings are akin to site-specific artworks. This claim, however, is debatable. As can be anticipated from my discussion in section (2), Bacchini fails to distinguish between sited artworks and site-specific artworks and, consequently, between architecture and site-specific architecture. As I shall argue, site-specific architectural objects are not just sited: they also articulate content about the historical and/or social and/or cultural context of their production through the sites that they encompass within their medium.

Let us first look at buildings simply qua sited. As we have seen in section (2), sited artworks like Rodin’s *Les Bourgeois de Calais* do not articulate comments on the historical and/or social and/or cultural context of their production. Likewise, there are buildings that have clearly been designed to respond to their sites, but that don’t articulate comments on their contexts of production: consider, for instance, the numerous cave houses and churches in Matera, Italy. All the buildings carved out from the rocks are appropriately described as responding to their location: since the Paleolithic period, human beings have responded to the presence of calcareous, friable rocks in Matera by carving rooms out of them, adapting to the topography of the territory. Some of the houses were inhabited until the 1950s. We have no evidence, however, that the excavated houses and churches were intended to articulate any content concerning their historical, social and cultural circumstances of production.

Now, one might ask whether buildings are capable of articulating content at all? More generally, recalling what I have said above about Lopes’ discussion of media, one might ask whether

buildings have media (i.e., whether they are partly constituted by materials manipulated to convey content and/or make salient some of their properties?). I think this question should be answered in the affirmative. Architecture, certainly, isn't customarily representational. Suzanne Langer (1953), Roger Scruton (1979), and Nelson Goodman (1985), however, argue that architectural objects can express or refer. Goodman, in particular, famously distinguishes between the less widespread sculpture-like modality of representation displayed by some buildings (1985: 644) – e.g., Jørn Utzon's Sidney Opera House, which looks like a giant sculpture of sailboats – and two more widespread meaning-conveying strategies adopted by buildings: exemplification and expression (645-647). According to Goodman, some buildings are designed to refer explicitly to some of the properties of their structures, which is why they *exemplify* those properties:

A commonplace case [of exemplification] is a swatch of yellow plaid woolen serving as a sample. The swatch refers not to anything it pictures or describes or otherwise denotes but to its properties of being yellow, plaid, and woolen, or to the words 'yellow', 'plaid', and 'woolen' that denote it. But it does not so exemplify all its properties nor all labels applying to it – not for instance its size or shape. The lady who ordered dress material 'exactly like the sample' did not want it in two-inch-square pieces with zigzag edges.

Exemplification is one of the major ways that architectural works mean. [...] For instance, according to William H. Jordy, "the Dutch architect Gerrit Rietveld [...] fragmented architecture into primal linear elements (columns, beams, and framing elements for openings) and planes (wall increments) in order to make visible the 'build' of the building". That is, the building is designed to refer explicitly to certain properties of its structure. In other buildings made of columns, beams, frames, and walls, the structure is not thus exemplified at all, serving only practical and perhaps also other symbolic functions (Goodman 1985: 645-646).¹⁰

Moreover, Goodman argues, in some cases we attribute metaphorical properties to buildings. Goodman calls "expression" the exemplification of metaphorically possessed properties:

¹⁰ See William H. Jordy (1983), "Aedicular Modern: The Architecture of Michael Graves", *New Criterion*, 2.

Not all the properties (or labels) that a building refers to are among those it literally possesses (or that literally apply to it). The vault in the Vierzehnheiligen church [near Bamberg, Germany] is not literally eaten away; the spaces do not actually move; and their organization is not literally but rather metaphorically dynamic.¹¹ Again, although literally a building blows no brass and beats no drums, some buildings are aptly described as ‘jazzy’. A building may express feelings it does not feel, ideas it cannot think or state, activities it cannot perform (Goodman 1985: 646).

Furthermore, as Saul Fisher observes, buildings can have a “narrative character” since “the design of circulatory pathways allows architectural objects to communicate a sequence of events through the movement of visitors or inhabitants” (Fisher 2015: n.p.). Finally, I argue that *all* buildings have a medium: the reason is that all buildings make salient certain properties. Berlin’s *Plattenbauten*, for instance, usually make salient their property of being symmetric structures and, as previously stressed, we cannot rule out that they also make salient properties such as being hit by light at dusk in a particular way at a specific Lichtenberg location. Likewise, Matera’s cave houses make salient their property of having been carved out of rocks.

Let’s now look at two examples of sited buildings that articulate content about their historical and/or social and/or cultural circumstances of production. On the one hand, there are buildings that, although sited, do not significantly recruit their sites to articulate content about their contexts of production; on the other hand, there are sited buildings whose sites are essential to articulating content about their contexts of production. An example of the former is the CCTV tower in Beijing, whose workings can be compared to those of, for example, the *Ara Pacis*, while an example of the latter is the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet, whose workings can be compared to those of, for example, *Hahn/Cock*.

As remarked above, The CCTV tower tends to attract the public around itself, because of its astonishing shape, thereby constituting an alternative to skyscrapers that, around Beijing, function as

¹¹ Goodman here refers to what Christian Norberg-Schulz writes about the church: “Over the crossing, where traditionally the centre of the church ought to be, the vault *is eaten away* by the four adjacent baldachins. The space defined by the groundplan is thereby *transposed* relative to space defined by the vault [...] This *dynamic* and ambiguous system of main spaces is surrounded by a secondary, outer zone [etc.]” (Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Meaning in Western Architecture*, London 1975, p. 311, quoted in Goodman 1985: 646, my italics).

gated communities. Thus, it can be claimed that this, too, is a building that has been designed to respond to a peculiar feature of its surroundings, providing an alternative to prevalent modes of habitation in contemporary Beijing. Unlike the houses and churches in Matera's Sassi, however, the CCTV tower can be described as articulating content about its context, by means of exemplifying properties it metaphorically possesses. This is how Koolhaas describes the tower: "It looks different from every angle, no matter where you stand. Foreground and background are constantly shifting. We didn't create a single identity, but 400 identities. That was what we wanted: To create ambiguity and complexity, so as to escape the constraints of the explicit" (Koolhaas 2008: n.p.). The CCTV tower thus literally possesses the property of being irregularly shaped, so that it looks very different from different viewpoints. This property of the tower is made salient by its huge dimensions, which make it visible from a great variety of viewpoints. Moreover, Koolhaas invites us to think of the tower as of an object that doesn't have "a single identity, but 400 identities". The tower, however, doesn't literally possess 400 identities: first, it seems mistaken to claim that buildings literally have identities like persons do and, second, even if buildings had identities, it wouldn't make sense to claim that, literally, they could have more than one – just like it wouldn't make sense to claim that persons can, literally, have multiple identities. Rather, that of having 400 identities is a property that the tower metaphorically possesses, in virtue of exemplifying its literal property of looking very different from different viewpoints. The tower, then, expresses multiple-identity character. In so doing, I submit, the tower articulates content about the historical, social and cultural context of its production: manifesting its expressive character is a way for it to allude to the complexity of contemporary Beijing, which can also be described as ambiguous, complex and multi-faceted. Indeed, the city straddles the 'developed' and 'developing' world as well as between historical sites and hyper-modern districts, embodying Koolhaas' view of the "city of the future": "So the city of the future, and in fact even the city of today, constitutes not a whole but an archipelago of different enclaves, where ideological values could be installed in limited, strong, and specific places, but with no pretence at being universal" (Koolhaas 1995: 121). Finally, the building displays its expressive character thanks to the structure of the tower:

it is the tower, then, that provides the means for articulating its context-related content, as opposed to particular aspects of the location recruited by the building. The workings of the CCTV tower, then, can be compared to those of the *Ara Pacis*, which, as we have seen, articulates content that is about the historical context of its production by depicting Emperor Augustus and his family officiating a procession, rather than by recruiting specific features of its physical setting. This doesn't mean that paying attention to some of the tower's relationships to its physical location isn't relevant to its appreciation: as mentioned above, the building's ability to attract people around itself is better appreciated when seen against the background of the many high-rises and skyscrapers of contemporary Beijing that shut the public out of their premises completely.

Let us now consider the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet. Clearly, the building has been designed to respond to its site: its structure accommodates the presence of the fjord by gently sloping into it and its shape, as remarked above, neatly fits into the city's broader landscape. Furthermore, this is a building that articulates content about its social context of production. First, it suggests a narrative of coming-together through the articulation of its spaces, which provide ample room for free gatherings of people, outside and inside, independently of the performances taking place in the theatres hosted by the building. Thus, the opera house alludes to a view for contemporary Oslo: a city where people are invited to share public spaces, rather than merely gather in commercial areas or spend time mainly in private premises. Its architects have claimed: "The competition brief stated that the opera house should be of high architectural quality and should be monumental in its expression. One idea stood out as a legitimation of this monumentality: the concept of togetherness, joint ownership, easy and open access for all" (Snøhetta 2008: n.p.). Second, thanks to its multi-layered horizontal shape, the building appears to bridge the fjord to the west, and the Ekerberg hill to the east, when seen from the Akershus castle. It can be described, then, as merging different parts of the city. Now, the building doesn't literally merge the fjord and the Ekerberg hill: the properties it literally possesses are that of having such-and-such a shape and being positioned in such-and-such a location, while the property it metaphorically possesses, in virtue of possessing those literal properties, is that of

merging different parts of the city. Since that is a salient property of the building, it is appropriate to claim that it is exemplified by it. The building, then, expresses the quality of bridging different parts of the city of Oslo. This is another strategy it employs to convey content about its social context: the opera house presents itself as a link between the richer West End and the poorer East End of Oslo, which are, traditionally, two economically and socially segregated areas of the city. Finally, for the present discussion it is important to stress that both the content-conveying strategies employed by the opera house I have described rely, crucially, on the recruitment of the building's site into its medium: on the one hand, for the opera house to convey a sense of open accessibility and the idea that it provides a natural space for people to gather, it is crucial that the building be seamlessly embedded into the fjord landscape; on the other hand, for the opera house to look like a bridge between the fjord and the Ekerberg hill, it is essential for it to be perceived in relation to those parts of the city of Oslo. I submit, then, that the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet works like site-specific works of art do: just like *Hahn/Cock*, for instance, it is an artefact that relies on its situated character in order to convey content about the social context of its production. I conclude that, for this reason, the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet qualifies as a genuine work of site-specific architecture.

With the analysis of the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet, I have illustrated my view of site-specific architecture, which relies on my understanding of site-specific art. I submit that the claims illustrated through the above case-study can be generalized to at least some of the buildings that contemporary architecture practitioners describe as closely related to their sites.

To conclude, I have presented a view of site-specific architecture, modelled on my understanding of site-specific art. My proposal has two attractive features: it provides a unified account of site-specific art and architecture and, more importantly, it illuminates what some contemporary architects mean when they describe their practice as closely site-focussed.

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