

Public Exposure: Architecture and Interpretation

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Buildings would seem to be easier to interpret than other art works. Architecture stands distinctively exposed to the community. Buildings are unavoidable and they enter into many different activities. Larger architectural works obtrude into the public context with an intensity and physical stubbornness that few art works accomplish. Also, architectural works seem more open about themselves than other art works. In planning and constructing architecture many people and groups cooperate, and during that cooperative process intentions get made explicit; programs get written; functions get defined and evaluated. Compared to the other arts, there is more available evidence about the intentions and program behind the works and the choices made in their design. Interpretation and criticism of these intentions and choices seems more possible. Public reaction can range from public debate about the functional appropriateness of a new town hall, to learned professional critical discussion of the success of a new building in fulfilling its program, to people saying after a party that they would never live in That house.

Yet for all this exposure, architecture maintains a distinctive resistance to interpretation. Although statements of intention and program exist, they are themselves texts that need interpretation. Perhaps the parties understood the terms differently, perhaps the language has changed, perhaps there were unspoken private intentions, perhaps there were unwritten agreements. No text is self-interpreting. Also, though architectural works intrude into the public context, a context itself is not fully definite; it too needs interpretation. A building can change a context as well as fit into it, and the new whole can be reinterpreted in unexpected ways.

Then there are the many dimensions that enter into interpretation and criticism: function, appearance, immediate reactions, community standards, previous experiences, notions of function, rules of design, bodily experience, philosophies of art, and so on. It is not automatically clear whether and how these are to be prioritized, nor what aspects of the context are relevant, nor what previous works should be taken as precedents, since there are many possible relations of similarity.

Finally, although buildings have more flanks exposed to criticism, they often outlive their critics and the climate of opinion that judged them. Functions and modes of life change. Judgments and meanings that once seemed firm lose their hold as time goes on. Grand old buildings once publicly approved become an embarrassment and no suitable use can be found for them. "That house" becomes something to be preserved for its unique quirks. The once inappropriate town hall becomes a symbol of our city. The work that

violated the rules of a style becomes emblematic of a new style.

In response to such considerations, it is easy to suggest that interpretation should be more flexible, responsive, and the like, and to worry how that flexibility might lead to arbitrariness. But there is a deeper issue with the way the problem of interpretation often gets posed. It treats buildings according to a scheme of passive text and active interpreters, where the building is a particular thing, describable by such and such measurements and materials, waiting to be read by the interpreter/critic and assigned its meaning and value.

But a building does not sit quietly, or rather, its sitting quietly is not the whole of its being-there. Abstracted from ongoing community talk and use the building becomes a pile of stuff with no clear boundaries. Insertion into forms of life makes the building meaningful. But the relation of the pile to the building is not the relation of a totally definite particular thing to a more fully categorized thing. A building, as well as its built and social context, is not a totally definite particular thing or assembly of things passively waiting to receive a general categorization by active subjects or communities who are themselves already totally definite. The interpreter, the community, the building, its norms, and the contexts are all involved together, but not as pre-defined items. In this mutual involvement, buildings act too; they can change their users, often beyond the intentions and choices in their original design. The work is always in progress. We are always on the way to finding definite meaning anew together.

It would seem, though, that emphasizing this larger context and process does little to help with the problems about interpreting architecture. Indeed it seems to push further in the direction of a facile relativism. This is because today the assemblages within which interpretation occurs, what Hegel might call "shapes of spirit," are multiple and intersecting, not the large epochal unities that Hegel analyzed and academic culture likes to periodize. We live in many places at once that are not concentric. They intersect at angles and lie together at foldings and are open and closed to one another in complex ways without exclusive or concentric borders. Our inhabitation is multiple, and that multiplicity is not just an additive series of smaller seamless inhabitations. Even single places are fractured. Places, persons, and communities do not now and may never have had such simple identities as our concepts made them out to have. But our places and identities become complexly multiplied, interpenetrating, and the electronic no-place-all-place opens before us.

But this multiplicity does not imply that buildings can be interpreted arbitrarily. That would presume the same detached interpreter and passive isolated building.

In his *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (III-26, 49, V-51), Wittgenstein writes about the way we interpret diagrams of mechanisms. We can just see that if the lever is moved, the wheel will turn counterclockwise. The machine is clear and we have a habit of reading. But in real life perhaps the lever will break, perhaps the wheel is stuck, perhaps there is a piece of the machine that we can't see because it is under the wheel in the diagram. We can read the diagram because we abstract the machine from a real context. Something similar can happen with architectural plans, models, and even photographs, especially photographs that ignore context. The unbuilt or isolated building or plan seems clear, easy to understand, obvious in its function. It represents itself as fitting perfectly into its projected uses. But in real life the building is exposed to unexpected pressures and to changes that are less than ideal and far from clear, while the building itself exerts pressures upon its users to change their expectations and habits.

That is, in the assemblage that includes interpreter and building, there are constraints that stem precisely from the way buildings and interpreters are out in public. These constraints do not mandate one particular interpretation but they do restrict possible interpretations by increasing the salience of some criteria and horizons of meaning over others.

Architects have always had to work at the intersections of meaning and causality. Buildings are more tied to natural and causal connections than are most works of art. Multiple sub-communities in an area may have differing practices and values, but when people share a geographical area, they share its infrastructure: roads and highways, water, power grids, waste systems, product distribution networks, and so on. Even while living by varying social norms in different spatial patterns they act together as drivers, passengers, shoppers, efficient users of resources. As a result, the meaning of a building can be affected by new causal patterns in the infrastructure shared by all the sub-communities in a given area.

Consider bicycle sheds. In general, not all buildings are equally prominent or meaningful in a given cultural context and set of practices. (See, for example, Karsten Harries' discussion of Ruskin in chapter 3 of Harries 1997.) Strictly speaking it is true that one could trace the whole context starting out from the practices around the most humble building or tool, but some buildings are lived as more prominent and central than others. In a traditional town, a bicycle shed is not so important as a large civic building. The shed could be demolished or replaced without many ripple effects, but a cathedral or a courthouse has a more central place in the culture and context.

Yet on the other hand, it is not purely a matter of architectural

prominence or detail that determines which buildings assume influential roles in an assemblage of customs, cultural values and practices. In a more secular world the cathedral becomes less central to actual practice. Also, causal effects impinge on all shapes of spirit. At a time of peak oil and rising concern with global warming, a bicycle shed might indeed become a more central symbol and more prominent meeting place than a cathedral or a civic building. Changes in the causal availability of natural resources would have increased the salience of environmental values and meanings, changing shared practices so that the built landscape would center itself in new ways and demanding that interpretations not ignore this dimension of the context. There are always public exposures and causal constraints. Interpretations of architecture happen at these intersections, and interpretations need to be responsive within dimensions of meaning that are not under the control of either the architect or the interpreter.

References:

Harries, Karsten. 1997. *The Ethical Function of Architecture*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1967. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. London: Blackwell.