Fact and Function in Architectural Criticism

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Abstract

Contemporary debates in architectural criticism often turn on the identification of a building's proper function. Thus a key step in resolving such debates would be to understand how buildings come to have their proper functions. In this essay, I argue that buildings, like other artefacts, obtain their proper functions, not in virtue of architects' intentions, but in virtue of their histories of selection in the marketplace. I show how this theory of architectural function can advance critical debates by discussing the case of Libeskind's controversial addition to Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum.

Fact and Function in Architectural Criticism

1. What are we building here?

According to Vitruvius, successful works of architecture are supposed to possess three virtues: durability, convenience and beauty.[1] Of these, one might expect the last, beauty, to be the most difficult to apply, and so to be the focus of disputes in architectural criticism. Beauty, after all, is widely believed to be "in the eye of the beholder," and many different judgments about whether something is beautiful cannot be resolved through empirical study or rational debate. Whether something is durable, in contrast, seems to be clearly a matter of fact; something that can be assessed empirically, for example, by measuring the ability of a structure to withstand stress or not to deteriorate when exposed to the elements. Convenience—which today we might call "utility"—is more complex, but seems similarly based in fact. For example, to assess the utility of a hospital we could measure the speed with which personnel and supplies may be moved through it. For these reasons, we might well expect beauty to be the real sticking point of disputes within architectural criticism.

However, many interesting cases in contemporary architectural criticism seem not to meet this expectation. Here it is the issue of utility, or functionality, that has emerged as the nub of some important disagreements, though not in quite the way one might expect.[2] Consider, as an example, Daniel Libeskind's 2007 extension of Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). Libeskind's construction, now known (after one of its philanthropic patrons) as the Lee-Chin Crystal, was a renovation of the entrance to the previously existing museum complex. A dramatic structure composed of sloping walls that meet at sharp angles, the Crystal appears to

erupt from the space between the two older and much more architecturally reserved wings of the museum. The original design, which Libeskind famously produced on the back of some napkins after lunch at the ROM restaurant, called for a completely glass exterior, producing a transparent 'crystal'.[3] Practical considerations, including the severity of the local climate, required abandoning this aspect of the design, and the exterior was covered with aluminum, although long windows overlooking the street remain.

Critics of the design complained about a number of its features, including its lack of site-specificity and its obvious similarities to some of Libeskind's other commissions, particularly the Denver art museum and his well-known design for the Jewish museum in Berlin. But its lack of functionality was a particular target. ROM staff and patrons complained about the space's unsuitability for exhibitions, citing the absence of vertical walls. The *Washington Post*'s Philip Kennicott declared it a "useless" building, writing that, despite its impressive appearance from the street, once inside "you need a map to move around its irrational and baffling dead spaces".[5] Another critic described it as "an ill-conceived funhouse".[6]

The Lee-Chin Crystal may seem to be an odd example for me to choose to illustrate the idea that function is a source of controversy in recent architectural criticism. It might seem that these criticisms of the building's lack of functionality are not controversial at all, but rather beyond dispute: if the curators can't mount the displays, then the building simply doesn't work—end of story. Indeed, the controversy over the ROM renovation is sometimes glossed in a way that suggests that its lack of functionality *is* uncontroversial, and that this point is conceded even by its defenders. According to this view, the building's defenders have a rather non-traditional view of architecture, on which one simply dismisses the importance of

functionality, placing the emphasis on beauty instead. This view sees the architect, not as someone attempting to fulfill utilitarian needs, but rather as an artist, concerned only with the appearance of the structure he is creating, or perhaps just with the idea behind the structure, as an end in itself. Thus Mark Kingwell, in a recent discussion of the Crystal, draws an analogy between architects of Libeskind's ilk and certain decadent conceptual artists, both of whom produce work that, in its detachment from reality, is ultimately empty and uninteresting.[7]

This way of phrasing the debate, however, is not entirely fair. For defenders of what Kingwell calls 'idea-buildings', such as the Lee-Chin Crystal, do not concede that these structures are useless. Perhaps the Crystal's most vigorous defender, the *Toronto Star's* architecture critic Christopher Hume, argues that the Crystal's interior design has brought a much needed "sense of urbanity" to the experience of the museum.[8] He lauds the Crystal's 'Spirit House', a central open space running from the base to the ceiling of the structure, for providing a welcome space for contemplation and reflection, "a reminder that the new museum is not a glorified daycare centre". He also praises the structure's long windows, which connect the ROM's displays to the streetscape outside, and the expanded sidewalk space created by the Crystal. The latter, he argues, creates an important public space that represents an extension of the museum into its urban environment.[9]

Hume's praise is clearly not praise of the building as an 'end in itself': rather, it is praise of the building for the things it does. Hume's appraisal is based on a conception of the ROM's function articulated by the museum's director (and the chief proponent of the Libeskind renovation), William Thorsell. In a 2007 speech entitled "The Museum as the New Agora", Thorsell wrote that

> In Europe and North America, the museum's functions are expanding from those of collection, research, conservation, exhibition and education to those as instruments of urban renewal and social integration…. Museums are no longer saviours of cities because of their isolation—if that was ever one of the their purposes—but because of the engagement of museums with cities—their function as common ground and agents of provocative conversation.[10]

According to Thorsell, the ROM's primary role is as a 'cosmopolitan community centre' in which the diverse communities of the city can meet and learn about one another. In light of the ROM's function as Toronto's 'new agora', Thorsell defended the Crystal's structure as exactly appropriate and functional. For instance, commenting on the new street space created by the design, Thorsell said

> I see the plaza as a stage set. We've discovered that the Crystal is a very good screen. So, for example, every evening during the Toronto Film Festival, we'll be projecting a film about Darfur. For Nuit Blanche [an annual Arts festival], at the end of September, we're bringing in the biggest video DJ from the U.K., who'll do work across the whole front of the Crystal. I can also see special lighting for special events and days – the equinox, Christmas, New Year's Eve.... We would like to see street performers – jugglers, hypnotists, clowns...."[11]

In short, a sympathetic look at defences of the Lee-Chin Crystal serves to demonstrate that the controversy over the building is not a battle between two conceptions of good architecture: one practical and the other artistic. Clearly, the Crystal's defenders do not see it as useless, or merely as an 'end in itself', but as performing important social functions.

In our example, then, the dispute about functionality is very much alive. The dispute, however, is not primarily over whether the crystal serves the functions of the traditional museum. Rather the dispute concerns a more fundamental issue: what *is* the function of this building in the first place? The critics insist that the ROM's function is to facilitate exhibitions, allow storage of the collection, and so on: its defenders insist that the structure is there to connect the institution to the surrounding cityscape, to provide a much more wide-ranging experience of community for its patrons. Thus the dispute boils down to a disagreement over who or what determines the 'true' function of a building: is it tradition that lays down the purpose of what we build, or is it the vision of its architect and builders? Or, alternatively, is it the needs and wants of those who will use the building that decide what it really is for?

This sort of dispute is not novel: similar philosophical debates surrounded some key works of International Modernism in the early twentieth-century.[12] The fact that these same debates are still being played out, rather inconclusively, in contemporary architecture makes it tempting to conclude that, argue as we will, we will discover here no truth, but only politics. That is, we might conclude that the question as to which function of the ROM is the 'real' or 'true' one is only a 'pseudo-question', there being no fact of the matter one way or the other. On this way of thinking, claims that this or that function of a building is the 'true' one are what the philosopher Charles Stevenson called "persuasive definitions": disguised pleas that we use the building to do this or that.[13] If some such claim ultimately wins out, it is not because that function was the *real* function of the building; it is because, through power or persuasiveness, one of the pleaders eventually got others to do things his way.

This conclusion, though rather deflating, could be seen as an important discovery about architectural criticism. It would show that the traditional triad of architectural virtues is rather more 'subjective' than one might have thought, with the criterion of functionality turning out to be every bit as subjective as beauty.[14] But while this is a tempting conclusion, we should not give in to it too quickly. On this issue hinges a good deal of valuable ground in architectural criticism: if we could make sense of the notion of the 'true' function of a building, we might do better in shedding light on the success or failure of some of our most important contemporary buildings. In this essay, then, I will try to make some progress in this direction. My approach will be to draw on some insights from recent philosophical work on the functions of everyday artifacts, applying them to the case of architecture.

2. Proper Functions in Everyday Artifacts

Perhaps we can shed some light on the functions of architectural works by considering the simpler case of 'everyday' utilitarian artifacts, such as tools, furniture and appliances. Hammers, chairs and blenders are obviously things with functions. Furthermore, it seems beyond all reasonable dispute that certain functions that we typically attribute to these items—applying concentrated force, allowing human beings to sit down, mixing—are the true, or, as I will say, *proper* functions of these items. Someone who said that the function of a hammer is mixing would be making a simple factual mistake, no different in kind from that of someone who said that Paris is the capital of the United Kingdom. Even if someone might (bizarrely) use, or try to use, a hammer to mix his cake batter, that simply isn't the hammer's proper function.

But what is this notion of 'true' or 'proper' function? The idea is that a proper function is not any old function, but a function that, as it is sometimes put, 'belongs to the object itself'.[15]

Proper functions are thus contrasted with accidental functions, which do not belong to the object itself, but are somehow imposed on it by happenstance. In the example just mentioned, we can say that the hammer functions as a mixer (or perhaps as a stir stick), but this is an accidental function. The proper function of that artifact is applying concentrated force.

But what does it mean to say that the function of applying concentrated force 'really belongs' to the hammer whereas the function of mixing ingredients together does not? I'm unsure how to further clarify this notion of 'belonging to the object itself' in any ontological or metaphysical way. But on the other hand, this seems unnecessary: the phrase is a way of characterizing a real distinction that we do draw, regularly and easily, between the various functions of artifacts. We can further characterize this distinction in two ways.

First, as many have noted, the distinction between proper and accidental functions maps onto a distinction between two ways of talking about artifacts: 'having the function of' and 'functioning as'. When we speak of proper functions, it is natural to talk of 'having the function of': thus my previous statement that a hammer *has the function of* applying concentrated force. When we refer to accidental functions, it feels more natural to use 'function as': thus I said that hammer *functions as* a mixer or stir stick. Second, the distinction between proper and accidental functions is manifested in our tendency to classify objects into functional categories. Things fall into functional categories, or kinds, on the basis of their proper functions. Thus the thing in my example is naturally referred to as a hammer, not a mixer. So we can think of proper functions, then, as those functions that are not naturally describable by the phrase 'function as', and which ground classification into functional categories.

So it seems that, for everyday artifacts such as tools and appliances, at least, there *is* a matter of fact concerning true or proper function. Next we may ask: How do such artifacts acquire the proper functions that they have?

3. Artifact Functions and Intentions

Perhaps the most intuitive answer to this question is that these everyday artifacts acquire their proper functions in virtue of certain intentions about how they are to be used. Artifacts are human creations, after all, by definition. Their existence springs from human thought and, we might well reason, so must their functionality. We may go further and take there to be a logical connection between intention and function. To say that something has the function X , we might reason, is just another way of saying that it is supposed to do X. But then there must be something doing the supposing: someone who intends that the object perform X.

Yet despite its initial plausibility, the idea that human intentions determine the proper functions of artifacts faces serious problems. In a recent critical appraisal of this idea, Beth Preston argues that the inadequacy of the intentionalist account becomes evident when we ask just *whose* intentions are responsible for determining an artifact's function.[16]

Consider your telephone, or the light bulb in your lamp. Why does one have the proper function of transmitting verbal communication and the other the proper function of emitting light? A very plausible answer is that Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison, when they designed the prototypes of these items, intended them to perform these particular tasks. In other words, it is the designer of the item whose intentions seem to determine its proper function.

However, not all artifact proper functions are determined in this way: some have proper functions that don't line up with designer intentions. Consider cellophane, which was invented in 1908 by a man who was trying to make a waterproof tablecloth. It wasn't so great as a table covering, but it turned out to be marvellous as a food wrap, and the rest, as they say, is history. Now if designer's intentions determined proper function, then one of cellophane's proper functions would be serving as a table covering. But it would be bizarre to say that the cellophane in your kitchen drawer is a table cloth. No one would categorize it that way, even if they learned that this was its designer's soleintentionin creating it. Or consider Viagra: today we don't classify Viagra as an angina drug, in spite of the fact that it was designed to treat that condition. These examples (and others like them) show that the designer's intention that an artifact do X is not sufficient to give it the proper function of doing X.

Perhaps we should look instead to the intentions of *users* as determining the proper function of artifacts. Perhaps it is the fact that we intend our cellophane to seal food and our Viagra to produce erections that gives them these proper functions. Yet, this cannot be right either, for it is even more clear that the users of an artifact lack the power to alter its proper function by virtue of their intentions. For instance, being deprived of a hammer I might intend my shoe to apply concentrated force to a nail, but this doesn't make its proper function applying concentrated force. This desperate act of will simply cannot turn my shoe into a hammer: the most I can succeed in doing is using the shoe *as* a hammer. It remains a shoe, with the proper function of protecting the foot during walking (or whatever the proper function of a shoe is).

This prompts us to consider a third candidate: the maker or manufacturer of the particular artifacts in question. Perhaps it is her intention that determines proper function. Thus it would be the fact that contemporary manufacturers of cellophane, Viagra and hammers intend their products to be used in certain ways (as food wrap, as erection stimulators, as concentrated force appliers) that gives them the proper functions that they possess.

But while it is generally true that the intentions of manufacturers line up very often with proper function, in some cases they do not. Imagine a man who, for some idiosyncratic reason, makes a lamp with the intention that it mark the location of his favourite tulip bulb. He buys plans for a lamp, gets the right materials, and so on. On our current approach, marking the location of his favourite tulip bulb would be a proper function of the artifact he creates, rather than an accidental one. But this seems wrong: marking a tulip bulb is a paradigm case of an accidental function of a lamp—it falls into the same category as opening cans with your screwdriver or driving in a nail with your shoe. Another way to see this point is to note that the natural way to describe this situation is to say that this man, for some strange reason, has a lamp *functioning as* a garden marker in his yard. That it would feel natural to say this indicates that, despite its maker's intentions, marking bulb locations is not the thing's proper function.

The upshot of the foregoing examples is that there appears to be no agent whose intention that an artifact do X is sufficient for bestowing the proper function of doing X on that artifact. At this point, the defender of an intentionalist approach to proper function might reply by saying that we ought not to cast an intentionalist theory in terms of the intentions of a particular *person*, but rather in terms of a particular *kind of intention*. Perhaps there is a special

sort of intention that is capable of bestowing a proper function on an artifact, regardless of whether the intention is had by its designer, maker or user.

However, as Preston again has argued, it is hard to see how there could be a special intention of this kind. We might suggest, for instance, that intentions that determine proper function are creative. This would explain why Bell's intention concerning the use of the telephone was able to determine its proper function. But creative intentions do not always have this power: witness the case of the eccentric man and his very creative intentions toward his lamp. Of course, we should remain open to the possibility of another, more satisfactory, characterization of this special sort of intention.[17] But in the absence of one, it seems reasonable to conclude that human intentions for the use of an artifact, regardless of who has them, or their particular character, are simply insufficient for bestowing proper functions on everyday artifacts.

4. An Alternative Account: Proper Functions as Selected Effects

The failure of intentionalist approaches to the proper function of artifacts suggests that proper function is determined by something beyond individual human plans and intentions. If this is right, then we must break the apparent conceptual connection between function and intention. But how might this be done? Here we may look to the history of biology for inspiration.

In the biological world, we find it irresistible to describe the parts and traits of animals in explicitly functional terms: wings are for flying, teeth are supposed to grind food, the purpose of the eye is to allow visual perception of the environment, and so on. It is hard to conceive of practicing biology without these familiar and informative ways of talking. And yet, modern

biology explicitly rejects the idea that a designing intellect concocted these various traits in living organisms. A fundamental principle of modern biology—Evolution—tells us that all natural species originated through completely non-intentional processes, such as natural selection. Thus biologists face a philosophical dilemma: give up their functional descriptions of living organisms, or else break the conceptual connection between function and intention.[18]

Pursuit of the latter option by biologists and philosophers has given us a different way of understanding function. The key idea here is that to describe the function of something is to identify an effect or capacity of the thing that explains why it is there.[19] Thus, to say that the function of wings is flight is to say that wings are present in birds today because of their capacity to allow flight. This conception of function fits nicely with biological cases in two ways. First, this conception of function is naturalistic, eliminating any reference to intention: it is not required that any conscious being plan or intend that wings facilitate flight in order for wings to take on that function. All that is required is that wings actually do facilitate flight, and in so doing, bring about the existence of wings in future generations of organisms. In other words, on this conception, function is no longer a matter of intention, but of causal history.

Second, this account meshes nicely with the theory of natural selection, which identifies certain fitness-enhancing effects of biological traits and parts as causal factors explaining their existence. Thus, natural selection tell us that wings are supposed to have evolved for their capacity to allow flight: this is what wings did that explains why organisms with them were naturally selected and passed on their genes to their descendents. Facilitating flight is thus the reason that animals now have wings—and this gives wings the proper function of flight. In other words, the proper functions of animal parts and traits, on the present account, are none

other than their selected effects. For this reason, the account is often called the selected effects theory of biological function.[20]

The virtues of this naturalized conception of function in the biological case make it appealing to try applying it to artifacts as well. But artifacts are, in many respects, obviously unlike living things. Can the conception be adapted to fit? The most developed attempt to do so is again from Preston. She draws the analogy as follows:

> Artifacts get ... proper functions by a process analogous in basic respects to the natural-selection process by which biological traits get theirs. The first step in the biological process is that a new trait arises by mutation or as the by-product of other traits. Alternatively, an existing trait may be used for a new operation. Similarly with artifacts, the first step is the production of a prototype by an inventor or designer, or someone puts an existing artifact to a new use. In biology, if the new trait or use of a trait is successful in its performance, and its success contributes to the reproductive success of its possessor, it thereby ensures its own reproduction as well. Similarly with artifacts, if the new artifact is successful it will be reproduced, initially, perhaps, for use by the inventor or designer, but later for use by other people. In the cultural milieu, this history of reproduction contingent upon success shows up as a history of manufacture and distribution by trade or sale. In the case of new uses of existing artifacts, they begin to be manufactured in whole or in part for the new market.[21]

The idea, then, is this: when an artifact is manufactured in many copies or instances because its appealing use F has made it wanted in the marketplace, then (and only then) does it take on F

as a proper function. For instance, the shovel has the proper function of moving loose material because that is the effect which, by satisfying some demand or need in the marketplace, has caused shovels to be mass produced. It is the reason that the shovels around us exist today.

We can gloss this idea a bit more precisely as follows: "X has a *proper function* F if and only if Xs currently exist because ancestors of X were successful in meeting some need or want in the marketplace because they performed F, leading to the manufacture and distribution of Xs". This is a selected effects theory of the proper function of artifacts.[22]

The key idea in Preston's adaptation of the selected effects theory for the realm of artifacts is her replacement of the process of natural selection with the analogous process of marketplace selection. In natural selection, successful creatures reproduce more often, producing greater numbers of descendents, through biological processes (sex, for example). In marketplace selection, successful artifacts are reproduced, giving rise to greater numbers of artifacts of the same type through the physical processes of craftsmanship and manufacturing. There are important differences in these processes: obviously, marketplace selection, unlike natural selection, is a process that involves the actions of human beings. Furthermore, these actions are intentional: people choose to buy certain products over others, and manufacturers choose to produce certain products over others in response. Thus, human intentions do play a part in the process of marketplace selection. But crucially, no individual human intention is sufficient to bestow proper function on an artifact: rather, proper functions emerge from collective, social behaviour over time.[23] In this way, the selected-effects theory of artifact proper function differs fundamentally from intentionalist approaches.

5. Selected Effects in Architecture

If a selected effects theory explicates the concept of proper function for everyday artifact, such as tools and furniture, might it not also apply to larger and more complex artifacts, such as works of architecture? If it did, there would, after all, be a substantive answer to the vexed question of the 'true', or 'real', function of buildings. We might then say that churches have the proper function of facilitating religious worship, for instance, because, of all the various capacities that this kind of structure has, this particular one is the reason that contemporary buildings with that structure exist today. It is the structure's ability to facilitate (certain) religious feelings that caused it to 'catch on' and be reproduced at various places over time. All of this, importantly, is a matter of fact: to determine the proper function of a building, we need only look back to the causal history of the sort of structure in question, just as we might look back to the causal history of feathers or shovels, to determine their proper functions.

This approach might seem to vindicate the critics of Libeskind's ROM renovation, and their premise that the function of the ROM is its original, historical function of displaying collections of significant natural and cultural artifacts for the public. The ROM was originally constructed in 1912, and we can be assured that the structure's capacity to allow Torontonians to shop, dine and dance together was not what drove its difficult and expensive construction in what was still a very provincial town. If proper function is a matter of what explains the construction of a building, then perhaps the Crystal's critics are right to say that, despite what Thorsell says, the ROM is simply not an agora, any more than a shoe is a hammer, or a lamp is a garden stake.

However, the situation is not so simple. Up to now, I've been ignoring one important aspect of the selected effects theory of proper function: time. As I've glossed it, the theory holds that a thing's proper function is that effect which, through selective success, has led to its current existence. But there are two distinct ways in which an effect of something might be said to have led to its current existence. First, that effect might be the reason that that type of thing appeared in the first place: it might be the cause of the type's *original* existence at time T. Second, the effect might be the cause of the type's *continued* existence, at times subsequent to T. In many cases, the same effect plays both explanatory roles: consider, for instance, a biological trait like camouflage. The reason that this trait originally arose, millions of years ago, in ancestors of some of today's birds is that it enabled predator evasion; but this is the same reason that it persists in these bird populations today. In other cases, however, the two explanations involve distinct effects.

Consider another avian trait: feathers.[24] It is thought that bird feathers originally arose, in ancestors of today's birds, not for flight but for insulation. But it seems odd to say that the proper function of feathers in currently existing tropical birds is insulation. The reason is that in these contemporary birds, feathers have been kept around, not for their insulation value, but for their capacity to facilitate flight. What this example, and others like it, show is that proper functions correspond, not to all selected effects, but to *recently* selected effects. In other words, to determine the proper function of a kind of trait, it is not enough to look solely at the origin of the type. Rather, we must look at what has kept it in existence recently.

This complication of selected effects theories of proper function also applies to artifactual cases. Take the example of pipe cleaners.[25] If we ask what selected effect caused the

original appearance of this item, the answer is cleaning the stems of pipes. This is the reason that items of that sort originally thrived in the marketplace, being manufactured and distributed. But the proper function of most pipe cleaners made and sold today is something else: these are not smoking aids, but children's craft materials. As in the biological case, different selected effects explain the origin of the item and its continuing existence, and here too it is the latter effect which we take to decide the item's proper function. As with pipe cleaners, so with buildings: proper function is a matter of what explains existence in the recent past.

But the peculiar nature of buildings, as artifacts, produces a further complication here. In the case of everyday artifacts, such as pipe cleaners, we can usually identify the effects that explain the artifact's existence in the recent past by asking about the causal history of a current instance. For example, if we want to identify the effect responsible for the existence of pipe cleaners recently, we can simply ask why a particular contemporary pipe cleaner was made. The fact that it was produced because of its capacity to facilitate children's crafts tells us that this is what has been keeping pipe cleaners in production recently. Thus, questions about proper function can be addressed by asking about the origin of contemporary instances.

But this only works because of a peculiarity of everyday artifacts like pipe cleaners: their lack of longevity. The pipe cleaners on store shelves today were made recently. It is because of this that their origins reveal the forces responsible for maintaining pipe cleaners in existence in recent times. In contrast, many architectural works last for decades, and some last for generations. In this, buildings differ from both disposable artifacts, like pipe cleaners, and biological organisms. Because of this difference, we cannot always identify the effect

responsible for the ongoing existence of a sort of building simply by asking why a particular building of that sort was made. In the case of the ROM, for instance, the selected effect responsible for the building's original construction in 1912—displaying collections of significant natural and cultural artifacts—may not be the reason that it continues to exist today.

This possibility becomes particularly important when we consider the cost of maintaining and running an institution of this kind (physically, as well as institutionally), and the value of the real estate on which the structure sits. At any point over the last seventy five years or so, these resources could have been withdrawn and the ROM removed and replaced with something else. The question to which we need to attend is: Why did that not happen? In other words, when determining the proper function of the ROM, the critical question is not "Why did it arise?", but rather "Why is it still here?"

6. Clarifying the Crystal

This shift in focus from origins to the recent past has important implications for how we think of the proper function of buildings. Earlier I suggested that a selected effects theory of proper function might seem to favour a traditionalist view of the ROM's function, and undermine the non-traditional account offered by defenders of the Libeskind renovation. But perhaps this is not, after all, how things will go.

I will not here try to settle the issue of the ROM's proper function: if the approach taken above is correct, then this is ultimately an empirical issue, requiring an empirical investigation rather than a philosophical one. This investigation would examine the recent history of the ROM, and more specifically, would identify those effects of the structure that explain the ongoing public support for its funding and maintenance. It would, presumably, need to draw on

several different disciplines, including economics, political science, and history. What I will do here is only offer a sketch of one direction in which such an investigation might go, as a way of illustrating the possibilities of the present approach to proper function in architecture.

Thorsell's idea of the ROM as a "new agora" may look, at first glance, like a utopian dream: a pure flight of fancy. But if we look at the factors actually responsible for keeping the ROM in existence, this 'vision' may have some grounding in reality. The contemporary museum faces increased competition for public attention, not only from the enormous and powerful entertainment industry, but also from other educational outlets, most notably the internet. In a world where one can instantaneously access a 'collection' of visual and textual information about other cultures and the natural world, the notion of actually going to see a set of physical objects displayed in a room may seem, to some, quaint and irrelevant. However we understand its causes, this shift in public demand is real, and suggests that public demand for the traditional services of the museum may no longer be strong enough to keep it in existence.

Yet museums have persisted. Why? In response to shifting sensibilities and a competitive marketplace, museums have had to alter the way that they operate in order to attract patrons, and to justify their continual requests for stronger government support. Thorsell argues that, over the last forty years, museums have gradually been shifting to this new model: becoming "multi-faceted, layered and complex places bound up with the community in a myriad of ways, accessible and transparent on the street – thus the new Agora, the new common space, the new city square".[26] In short, in recent times museums have survived by adapting, and this process of adaptation has turned them into something new. If an analysis along these lines—and again, the above is only a crude sketch of one—is correct, then

the defenders of the ROM renovation have been correct, after all, about the proper function of the museum: it *is* a new agora.[27]

Conclusions such as this one suggest an obvious criticism of the approach to proper function in architecture that I have defended in this essay. The criticism is that the approach is inherently biased against more traditionalist views of architecture: according to this approach, function is determined by recent market forces. In any discussion of architectural function, then, the noble visions of the past are bound to be swept away in favour of whatever happens to be popular today. This might be taken to amount to a kind of pandering in architectural criticism, an acquiescence in the lowering of our elite institutions to the level of market demand.

There is something right and important about this concern: it isn't inappropriate to worry about the 'dumbing down' of cultural institutions in our time. But, on the other hand, we must also acknowledge that, in a democratic society that funds them publicly, those institutions are precisely that—institutions belonging to, and produced by, the culture as a whole. To insist that their function can be determined, without reference to their causal history, by the visions of the past, or *a priori* speculation, is simply to deny the nature of what *we* have built. We should expect architectural criticism to challenge our preconceptions, question our values, and open up new possibilities for us. But we should also expect it to acknowledge and explore the social realities manifested in the built environment as it exists.[28]

Notes

[1] The classical source for this idea is Vitruvius' *Ten Books on Architecture,* M.H. Morgan trans. (New York: Dover, 1960), Book I, Chapter III, Section 2.

[2] In this essay I will discuss the functions of architectural works as a whole: the function of a school, the function of a bridge, and so forth. The concept of function also arises in other ways in relation to architecture (for example, one can consider the functions of particular parts within an architectural work), but I will not consider these here.

[3] The story behind Libeskind's design is told in Mark Kingwell, "Monumental/Conceptual Architecture: The Art of Being Too Clever by Half," *Harvard Design Magazine* 19 (2003/4): 1-7. Supposedly, the design was inspired by some crystals Libeskind saw in the ROM's natural history collection (the ROM contains both natural history and cultural history collections).

[5] Kennicott declared it the worst building of the decade, and wrote that it "surpasses the ugliness of bland functional buildings by being both ugly and useless." Philip Kennicott, "Architecture: Best of the Decade", *Washington Post*, December 27, 2009), E4.

[6] Ian Chodikoff, "Viewpoint", *Canadian Architect*, July 2007, p.6.

[7] Kingwell presents this as a cautionary tale, warning that "when the excitement dies down, we still have to live and work in idea-buildings." Kingwell, "Monumental/Conceptual Architecture," p. 7.

[8] Christopher Hume, "Museum as Artifact," *Toronto Star*, 26 May 2007, B1.

[9] Christopher Hume, "ROM Plaza Will Bring Bloor St. New Life," *Toronto Star*, 25 August 2007, A9.

[10] William Thorsell, "The Museum as New Agora," an address to the Empire Club, Toronto, 3 May 2007. The text of Thorsell's address can be found on the ROM's website (www.rom.on.ca).

[11] Thorsell, quoted in Hume, "Rom Plaza Will bring Bloor St. New Life," A9.

[12] A useful overview is given in Gordon Graham, "Art and Architecture," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 29 (1989): 248-257.

[13] Charles Stevenson, "Persuasive Definitions," *Mind* 47 (1938): 331-350.

[14] Something like this conclusion is reached by Roger Scruton, who writes that the concept of function in architecture is "fundamentally, and perhaps irremediably, obscure", and the "function of [a] whole building…is something indeterminate"; see Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen and Company, 1979), p. 40.

[15] This basic articulation of the notion is the one used by Ruth Millikan, *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories: New Foundations for Realism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), p.2.

[16] Beth Preston, "Why is a Wing Like a Spoon? A Pluralist Theory of Function," *Journal of Philosophy* 115 (1998): 215-254, and also Beth Preston, "Of Marigold Beer: A Reply to Vermaas and Houkes," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 54 (2003): 601-612. My discussion here draws heavily on Preston's argument.

[17] For further discussion of intentionalist approaches, see Preston, "Of Marigold Beer," and also Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapter three.

[18] See Ernst Mayr, "The Multiple Meanings of Teleological," in Ernst Mayr, *Towards a New Philosophy of Biology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 41.

[19] The seminal presentation of this idea is Larry Wright, "Functions," *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973): 139-168. It has been further developed by many other theorists since: see, for example, Millikan, *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories* and Ruth Millikan, "In Defense of Proper Functions", *Philosophy of Science* 56 (1989): 288-302; Karen Neander, "Functions as Selected Effects: The Conceptual Analyst's Defence," *Philosophy of Science* 58 (1991): 168-184, and Karen Neander, "The Teleological Notion of 'Function'," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1991): 454-468; and Peter Godfrey-Smith, "A Modern History Theory of Functions," *Noûs* 28 (1994): 344-362.

[20] The term is due to Neander, "Functions as Selected Effects". It is also sometimes referred to as the historical theory, or the etiological theory of proper function.

[21] Preston, "Why is a Wing Like a Spoon?", pp.243-4.

[22] This formulation is based on Godfrey-Smith, "A Modern History Theory of Functions".

[23] This point is emphasized in Preston, "Of Marigold Beer", p. 611.

[24] The example, and the idea of emphasizing recent history, is due to Godfrey-Smith, "A Modern History Theory of Functions,"p.357-8.

[25] The example is from Preston, "Why is a Wing Like a Spoon?" p.241.

[26] Thorsell, "The Museum as New Agora."

[27] This conclusion is compatible with the ROM also having the more traditional proper function of displaying naturally or culturally significant materials: this would be the case if this displaying is still a significant part (though not the entirety) of the causal story explaining the current existence of museums. Indeed, Thorsell and other defenders of the ROM seem to hold this view, on which the building is multifunctional (on multifunctional artefacts, see Rafael De

Clercq, “The Aesthetic Peculiarity of Multifunctional Artefacts,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005): 412-425).

[28] Thanks to Roger Paden and David Goldblatt for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.