

Jörg H. Gleiter

The Status of an Object

Philosophy of Architecture and the Overcoming of Presence

This lecture will address the question of the object as central to the question of philosophy of architecture. Though it is often held that the overcoming of the object is the objective of philosophy of architecture, it will be argued here that the object is actually its precondition. Drawing from epistemology, anthropology, and aesthetic pragmatics, this lecture will highlight the three theoretical positions upon which - in regard to the question of the object - any philosophy of architecture must be based.

Dynamic Objects In the long tradition of philosophy, architecture's objecthood kept and continues to keep architecture and philosophy separate and in notable distance. The reason behind this is that philosophy is based in language and deals with ideas and abstract concepts, while architecture is a material practice that is physically bound to a certain place.

The mediality of philosophy and architecture couldn't be more divergent. In the case of philosophy, signs and symbols refer to absent things. In the case of architecture, concrete objects are bound to presence. It is architecture's objecthood – its three-dimensionality, presence and materiality – that gets in the way of philosophy. More than any other artistic practice – such as painting or music – architecture is obstinate and bulky; its earthbound pragmatism interferes with the pristine systems of philosophical thought.

And yet, philosophy and architecture are closely intertwined and cannot exist without each other, as architecture shapes our daily routines and provides the necessary background for everyday practices that in turn are the subject of philosophical reasoning. As human life seems inconceivable without architecture, so does philosophy without architecture. Yet, historically, we can distinguish between two classes of philosophy: Those that ignore architecture altogether and those that only deal with architecture as a metaphor for construction, shelter, or stability, stripping off its inherent social, ethical, and eventually philosophical content.

Let us take the philosopher Immanuel Kant as a first example. In his *Critique of The Power of Judgement* he writes: "In painting, sculpture, and in all the formative arts – in architecture, and horticulture, so far as they are beautiful arts – the delineation is the essential thing; and here it is not what gratifies in sensation but what pleases by means of its form that is fundamental for taste." (§ 14, Elucidation by means of examples) He continues: „[...] but the delineation in the first case and the composition in the second constitute the proper object of the pure judgement of taste.“ (§ 14, Elucidation by Means of Examples) Certainly, Kant's ideas about architecture are more complex than this, which I will get back to in a moment. Yet, In regard to philosophical

aesthetics, architecture matters to Kant only as drawings – bodiless and stripped of its materiality. Kant writes: “Yet in all beautiful art the essential thing is the form.” (§ 52, Of the Combination of Beautiful Arts in One and the Same Product) This is because it can be judged; it is what “disposes the spirit to Ideas.” (§ 52, Of the Combination of Beautiful Arts in One and the Same Product) Color, surfaces, materiality only trigger stimuli or sensations, and only lead to enjoyment, because they are not free and do not set the „imagination at liberty“ (§ 53, Comparison of the Respective Aesthetical Worth of the Beautiful Arts). Only when architecture is reduced to de-materialized and two-dimensional signs, lines, and forms is it considered worthy of a philosopher’s attention.

Now, let us take Nietzsche as an example. In his seminal essay “*On Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense*” he also refers to architecture not only as a metaphor of construction, but even as a metaphor of deconstruction. He was the first to consider architecture as a practice of both constructivist and deconstructivist nature. But also Nietzsche extensively uses architectural metaphors such as the “great columbarium of concepts”, the “tower of science”, and the “infinitely complicated dome of concepts [piled up] upon an unstable foundation”. Here he uses architecture in a conventional sense, as a metaphor of construction.

In the second half of his essay, architecture is used by Nietzsche for the opposite as a metaphor of deconstruction. He maintains that man has to tear down the “dome of concepts”, and continues: “That immense framework and planking of concepts to which the needy man clings his whole life [...] is nothing but a scaffolding and toy for the most audacious feats of the liberated intellect. And when it [the liberated intellect = artist] smashes this framework to pieces, throws it into confusion, and puts it back together in an ironic fashion, pairing the most alien things and separating the closest”.

This can be called the first manifesto of deconstruction. It is interesting that in this passage we witness notions of time and process entering the philosopher’s concept of architecture. Nevertheless, architecture is still treated more as a scaffold, a structure, and a system of stable relations than a truly dynamic experience. Hence, the idea of architecture remains abstract and metaphorical. Only in his last months in Torino, does Nietzsche become aware of the sensual dimension of architecture. It was in Torino that Nietzsche’s phenomenological turn took place. But this is not the topic of today.

Let me, instead, follow the deconstructivist line and make a last example by addressing Jacques Derrida and his short venture into the realm of architecture. In the late 1980s, Derrida let himself be lured into a dispute with Peter Eisenman. Though he began optimistically, Derrida eventually withdrew from the endeavor in frustration. In his attempt to deconstruct architecture, Derrida experienced such resistance that its failure jeopardized the whole of philosophical deconstruction.

Yet, it failed not because of architecture’s resistance, but due to the philosopher’s distance from architecture and lack of architectural understanding. As the young Italian scholar Marcello Barison pointed out: “In his discourse on architecture, Derrida avoided a too direct and immediate confrontation with the specificities of the architectural practice.”¹ As a matter of fact, in his few texts on architecture, one notices that Derrida remained on a linguistic and metaphorical level without touching the question of objecthood of architecture as such.²

This shall suffice, for now, to illustrate philosophy’s problems in dealing with architecture and its objecthood. As it became clear, in order to open philosophy to architecture, one needs to look into the specificities and workings of architecture and its status as an object. As will be argued,

architecture's objecthood is not at all limited to its pure materiality and presence. Instead, it is characterized by an inherently dynamic and fluid condition. It is characterized less by an ontological than by an epistemological conception. As we will come to understand, philosophically, architecture is more about time than space.

The following remarks will highlight **three basic theoretical concepts** that architecture philosophy must be based upon: (1) Architecture as creation (epistemological level), (2) architecture as a process in time (anthropological level), and (3) architecture as interpretation (semio-aesthetic level).

Architecture as Creation Let me start with an observation. The prerequisite for any philosophy of architecture is the notion of architecture as creation. It is important to understand that unlike the arts – such as painting, dance, and sculpture – architecture is not imitating nature. As Kant states: "Art is distinguished from nature [...]" (§45, Critique of the Power of Judgement) It is the "production through freedom" that differentiates it from nature. The activity of art is not instinctive, like that of the bee, but one whose actions are "based on reason". (§43, Critique of the Power of Judgement) Art rises above nature through free play. What particularly concerns architecture here is that it is by no means modeled after nature. It can only be understood as a genuine creation of humans.

Let me make some examples. First, let us look at foundations. Without foundations, there is no architecture. Foundations are basic building elements, without any counterpart in nature. Or, let us take those opaque vertical surfaces that separate "in front of" from "behind" that we call walls. Like foundations, walls have no equivalent in nature.

The notion that architectural elements are not modeled after nature holds true even in rare cases in which one finds architectural elements in nature, such as the right angle. For example, the right angle can be found in nature when two perpendicular lines cross each other, such as a tree at the horizon. But a system of right angles that allows different materials to be systematically combined with the potential of creating a third thing does not exist in nature. As a system, the right angle exists only as human creation.

Or, we can take the trabeation, the system of posts and beams as exemplified by the column and the architrave or epistyle in a Greek temple. Even if every so often in a forest a tree falls into the branch fork of another tree, thereby forming a column-beam connection, it normally remains a local and singular event. But as a system expandable in all three spatial dimensions, it can only result from the creative power of humans.

Thus, in order to do justice to architecture, we must take into account that architecture's principles are not modeled after nature. With Kant, one can maintain that architecture is not of "foreign reason". (Kant 1996a, A836) For this, Kant introduces in *Transcendental Methodology* the term architectonics: "Under architectonics I understand the art of systems." (Kant 1996a, A832) He continues that architectonics is the activity that "from a mere aggregate [of different materials and forms] makes a system." (Kant 1996a, A832) Hence, according to Kant, a system is characterized by the "unity of manifold knowledge". (Kant 1996a, A833) A system means combining various elements under one guiding idea, as architectonics means the art of systems.

The simple brick can be used to illustrate how system making is a process of creation. As a rectangular, easy-to-handle cuboid, the brick is less an object than a system – expandable in all

three dimensions. For example, it can be joined together to form a wall, and walls can be systematically joined together to create a unit. Many units, in turn, can be combined in such a way as to create larger units that we call a building. Thus, inherent in the single, right-angled brick is a multitude of possibilities for the creation and invention of larger entities eventually resulting in a building.

Aristotle's term for this is hylomorphism. Hylomorphism describes the fact that all things can be described in matter-form relations. There is no matter without form. Matter must come with a certain shape, be it amorphous, organic, or geometric. Aristotle defines matter as "that which, without being a certain something in reality, is nevertheless, as far as possible, a definite something". (Aristotle 1995b, Book VIII, 1042a)

To make an example, let me again return to the brick: Originally, clay is an amorphously shaped matter. By creation, it can be given a certain form, for instance a rectangular, cubic form, such as a brick. In this case, the clay is the matter, the brick is the form, just like iron is the matter out of which beams are formed.

But, likewise, the brick can also be considered matter. The brick is matter in regard to the wall as a form made out of many bricks. And the wall is matter in regard to the space unit. And the space unit is matter in regard to the building that consists of many space units. It is noteworthy that hylomorphism describes a dynamic principle characterized by a continuous transformation of the matter-form relationship. What is considered form in one sense can become matter in regard to the next larger unit.

Now, let us combine Kant with Aristotle: Architectonics as the art of systems is equivalent to Aristotle's idea of hylomorphism. The cubic brick stands for the concept of architectonics. It is not yet architecture, but contains the potential for architecture. As the series of bricks, walls, units, and buildings shows. Architectural quality results from a process of hylomorphistic transformations; it is that which "is composed of both matter and form". (Aristotle 1995b, Book VIII, 1943b)

From this perspective, one better understands the obsession of architects with primitive huts. They are less fantasies about the very first house, than attempts to show architecture as an creation in the sense of Kant and Aristotle. The primitive hut deals with the transformation from architectonics as the art of systems toward architecture and architectural ideas: the Indian tent (Viollet-le-Duc) and the architectural idea of the one-room space, the Solomonic temple (Villalpandos) and the architectural potential of masonry, the Caribbean hut (Gottfried Semper) and Semper's clothing principle, and even the tree house (Laugier) and the system of post and beams. The list might even be extended to primitive huts of the recent past, such as the Maison Domino (Le Corbusier) and the free floor plan, the Barcelona Pavilion (Mies van der Rohe) and the freestanding wall, or the experimental pavilions by Achim Menges and digital fabrication.

Architecture as Process – Anthropology Now we can deduce from the given examples that the primitive hut is not about the ontology of architecture, but about its epistemological foundation. From the primitive hut, we understand that architectonics is not yet architecture, but holds the promise of it. Architectonics, as the art of systems, does not codify the building once and for all. On the contrary, it provides the space for free variation and combination of elements, out of which the architectural object eventually results.

This leads to the central thesis of my lecture: The architectural project is characterized by the transition from architectonics to architecture, which also marks the transition from theory to philosophy. In other words, theory turns into philosophy whenever the focus turns from mere systemic thinking to the reflection on architecture's appropriateness to human needs, wishes, and desires, be they individual or collective. At this moment the architectural project trespasses the line between theory and philosophy. Appropriateness is crucial; it comprises far more than the needs of man, but also the behavioral, psychological, and intellectual realms of human nature. As we also know, appropriateness is volatile and subject to change.

Architecture is more than just a means to satisfy the longing for shelter, safety, privacy, etc. More importantly, architecture is a device to awaken sentiments, feelings, and thoughts that may have remained unknown up until the point in which architecture reveals them. Architecture is an active agent, not only in the sense that it exercises power upon man, but also in the sense that it exposes the hidden, undisclosed nature of man.

Let us take the example of the invention of perspective in the 15th century. It is common knowledge that the invention of perspective refers to a true-to-life representation of real things on two-dimensional surfaces. But more importantly, this new tool enabled men to produce more nuanced spatial situations. The technique of perspective turned architecture into a means of evoking more subtle sentiments, feelings and thoughts, which until that point were unknown to the beholders. Architecture became a medium to discover unknown territories within the human psyche.

Doubtlessly, medieval cityscapes produce strong and bold sentiments that are less differentiated and, thus, harder to name. Perspectival street views of Renaissance architecture, on the other hand, became an instrument of awareness of the hidden expressive potential of man. Architecture turned into a process of knowledge production and an educator of men's sensitive and intellectual capacity. Hence, architecture is about a two-fold process of knowledge: it is based upon knowledge, but also holds the potential to produce knowledge.

Nonetheless, we must introduce one more distinction. Drawing from Aristotle, one should distinguish between two types of knowledge practices: The knowledge practice of science and the knowledge practice of art. As Aristotle held, both science and art are based on experience, but art is "where it concerns becoming, [...] science, where it concerns being." (Aristotle 1995a, 100a10)

Hence, science turns its interest to things that already exist, while architecture is concerned with the becoming of things. Architecture as an art is about poiesis, invention, production, creation. As a project, it is conceived in a process of creation. It is made in a material process of building and triggers processes in the beholder in terms of action, emotion, or thought.

Thus, as a manmade artefact (which already refers to the next paragraph), architecture follows two guiding rules: it must, on the one hand, show how it came into being, and on the other hand, it must show what purpose it serves.

Let me give another example. Architecture must indicate what possible uses one can make of it. A door, for example, invites people to touch the door handle, push it down, and push open the door. Stairs suggest climbing up or down or sitting or standing on them, perhaps in order to hold a speech. Objects always invite us to do something with them: the handle of a cup invites us to grab it, the window invites us to look outside. In behavioral psychology this is called **affordance**.

It is what architecture offers people, what it provides or furnishes, and how people react to it behaviorally, emotionally, or cognitively.

If we think about a door that does not indicate what one can do with it, this kind of door is called a secret door. We do not know about its existence. We are unable to make any experience with it. It just does not exist. Affordance is a key notion of architecture.

As we have seen, a concept of process is always inherent to architecture. Architecture, in its objecthood, is generally open to two sides. It is open to the past in regard to the processes of designing and making, and to the future in regard to the processes that it possibly releases in the beholder. In regard to process, architecture can be conceptualized by a tri-partite schema: (1) The process of designing, in the sense of being conceived, (2) the process of building, in the sense of being physically built; (3) the process of affordance, in the sense of prompting action (movement), emotion (sentiment), and thought (intellect). With a concept of appropriateness to human needs, the focus in architecture shifts from the initial epistemological orientation to one of anthropology.

Architecture as Interpretation After architecture as creation and architecture as process, or rather, after the epistemological and the anthropological basis of the philosophy of architecture, please allow me to remark briefly on the third basic principle of philosophy of architecture: architecture as interpretation. This principle regards the aesthetic-semiotic condition of architecture.

This third principle addresses our perception and reaction to the objecthood of architecture. It is based on the simple fact that perception of architecture is always mediated by interpretation. We do not perceive things as they are, but perceive them as we interpret them. Objects are not only objects, but are also always meaningful objects through associations with ideas, possible actions, and emotions.

Let us take again the door handle. It already comes with certain associations like pushing or pulling open the door, which regards the possible handling of the handle. Often it also comes with an imagination of how it feels touching it. The same applies to walls and other surfaces. From afar, they often provoke tactile sentiments even though we have not yet touched them. Seeing and perceiving architecture is always an act of interpretation, in a cognitive and sensory way. It seems that sensations of things need to be integrated into a web of causal relations, how fictitious these causal relationships may be.

This leads me to my last point. Architecture is less about images than about causal relationships, even in our everyday perception. In other words: architecture is less about representation than about indication. It is less iconic than indexical. The reason for this is not that function in architecture necessarily requires a logical conception of a building. More importantly, it is the aspect that architecture results out of a process of creation, with creation characterized by a process of establishing logical relations between various things.

This results in the notion that architecture – as a manmade artefact – must show how it is conceptually conceived and materially built. One must look closely at architecture in order to find out that there are many hints about how it is conceptually conceived, how it is materially built, and what ends it serves. Architecture consists of myriads of relations. Philosophically, it is less composed of material, than it is composed of relations. It is composed of material signs that are less of an image, than of an indicator.

Let me give you some examples. Concrete walls show how they are made: the formwork leaves imprints on the finished wall, indicating how it came about. Rivets in steel girder constructions are indicators of the process of their making. The corner elements of a block house clearly tell something about its concept and process of making.

Thus, the ruling principle of architecture is indexicality, not iconicity. In this regard, it remains to briefly mention one thing: It is a fact that in architecture we find various gradations of indexicality, such as literal indexicality (triglyph and metope), weak or weakened indexicality, degenerate indexicality, imaginary, and fictitious indexicality.

As one last example, let us examine the entasis of a doric column. The entasis conveys the impression that the column is under pressure from the heavy weight it carries from above, while at the same time resisting with a counter force of equal strength. The forces from above and the counter forces from below are in balance and the building is prevented from collapsing. One can read the entasis of a doric column as an icon, but actually it is an index, a fictitious index. It is fictitious because the column is squeezed by the play of force and counter force only in the imagination. It is through this fictitious causality that architects make visible how buildings are structurally held up.

Perhaps some objections arise, arguing that there is architecture out there that does not exhibit the traces of its making. Yes, this exists. But this is neither a contradiction nor a counter argument to what I have presented, but, instead, supports the argument of the overcoming of the presence of the architectural object as a prerequisite for philosophy of architecture. But this is for another lecture.

Conclusion: The Theoretical Basis of Philosophy of Architecture The objecthood of architecture is not the obstacle to philosophy, but its foundation. One only has to understand that architecture as an artefact is based on creation, process, and interpretation. With creation, process, and interpretation architecture opens itself up to the philosophical discourse relative to three basic philosophical concepts: epistemology (creation and systemic logic), anthropology (process and appropriateness), and aesthetics (interpretation and indexicality). With creation, process, and interpretation there is a strong timely dimension to architecture and its objecthood. Philosophically, architecture is more about time than space.

¹ „Nel suo discorso sull'architettura Derrida evita quasi del tutto qualsiasi confront diretto con **lo specifico della pratica architettonica.**” Marcello Barison.

² Heidegger talks about clearing (Lichtung) und scaffold (Gerüst). Still, his concept of dwelling (Wohnen) remained unsatisfactorily distanced from its concrete real world articulations.