The Architecture of the Illusive Distance

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Introduction

In the abstract, architecture is an insuperable task. Faced with multiple possibilities, the architect has no ground for the delimitation of his or her many options to the ultimate one.[1] Broadly, the functions of an edifice suggest no one form and much less a direction. In deference to biological needs, function is nebulous and multi-directional. However, function assumes a trajectory and becomes highly prescriptive once it is appropriated by culture and transformed into a ritual. Sleeping for instance suggests little by way of an appropriate setting. Appropriated, however, as an instrument for the communication and enforcement of, for instance, a culture's sexual mores and taboos, and transformed into a ritual, it becomes highly prescriptive. Though by no means singular, a ritual is distinct and unidirectional. It has unique spatial requirements. It demands a specific setting. It is this and similar prescriptive cultural appropriations that make architecture possible.

In relating the advent of architecture to culture, we may appear to be traversing a well-trodden path. At least since the early 1960s, scholars of architecture have assumed the connection between architecture and culture as often as they have envisaged and presented it as a monologic relationship.[2] Architecture is recurrently purveyed to embody, represent, mirror and/or reflect a culture, its values, and ideals. In this pervasive vision, culture is assumed to precede the architecture that follows and re-present it. The relationship between culture and architecture is, however, considerably more complex. The assumed contingency of architecture on culture is at best a restrictive and partial view. If architecture represents culture, that is, if architecture is a cultural statement or utterance, it is not merely a constative, but as well a performative utterance in the sense first introduced by Austin and specifically as the concept is deployed in Cultural Studies (*How to Do Things*).[3]

Whereas a constative statement is meant, Austin tells us, "to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely," a performative statement is one "in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something" (*How to Do Things* 1–2).[4] For instance, "as official acts, a judge's ruling makes law; a jury's finding

makes a convicted felon," and so on (154). In each of these and other performative utterances, the described condition does not precede nor does it exist independent of the utterance. To the contrary, the utterance creates the very condition it depicts. As a variation on the theme, Judith Butler describes the performative with a nuance that shall prove important to our understanding of architecture as a performative act.

"Performative acts are," Butler tells us, "forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse" (171). For instance, "the judge who authorizes and installs the situation he names invariably cites the law that he applies, and it is the power of this citation that gives the performative its binding or conferring power" (171).

For a simple example of the "binding or conferring power" of architecture as a performative act, we may turn to Paul Radin's account of Oglala Indians as retold by Clifford Geertz: "The Oglala believe the circle to be sacred because the great spirit caused everything in nature to be round except stone. Stone is the implement of destruction. The sun and the sky, the earth and the moon are round like a shield, though the sky is deep like a bowl. Everything that breathes is round like the stem of a plant" (128). The circle is "also the symbol of the year. The day, the night, and the moon go in a circle above the sky. Therefore the circle is a symbol of these divisions of time and hence the symbol of all time" (128). It follows that "for these reasons the Oglala make their tipis circular, their camp-circle circular, and sit in a circle at all ceremonies. The circle is also the symbol of the tipi and of shelter" (128).

One may readily assume, following a familiar trajectory, the circular Oglala tipi to be a constative statement that effectively describes and/or references the presumed circularity of "all things in nature" and of all time. However, the circular tipi, placed as it is in a circular camp, "by saying or in saying," that the tipi is round like all else in the world other than stone, that is, by citing the presumed roundness of all things, also, along with all other circular Oglala artifacts quite powerfully render the Oglala world both experientially, and in a sense literally, circular. The Oglala don't simply believe and say all things are round, they render their world visibly round through the agency of, among others, the circular tipis, set in circular camps, and so on.

It may well be in tacit recognition of this link between saying and doing characteristic of performative acts that for the Oglala the circle is interchangeably the "symbol of the world and of time" and the "symbol of the tipi and of shelter." The circle unites and confounds them into one. Thereby, the power and authority of each "symbol" is conferred by the evidential citation of the other. Much as the tipi is shaped in the round like the world and time, it also confers its shape on the world and time.[5] The Oglala tipi is as much an inaugural event as it is a citation.

It is important to note here that the constative and the performative aspects of cultural utterances and/or acts are not mutually exclusive. As Austin noted and Jacques Derrida has critically argued, there is no pure constative or performative utterance as such (Austin. *Performative Utterances*; Derrida, *University without Condition*).[6] There is a performative aspect to every constative statement, much as there is a constative aspect to every performative statement. To a degree, the "binding or conferring power" of performative acts, inclusive of architecture, is tied to their constative (reiterative) aspect/function. However, for reasons that we shall discuss in the next chapter, the discourse of architecture has long disregarded the performative aspect of architecture in favor of its constative aspect, to the point of the former's invisibility.

The constative/performative distinction is entwined with the distinction between culture and architecture, which as the Oglala tipi and numerous other examples one may readily cite indicate is also complex and nuanced. In their perpetual interplay, neither culture nor architecture could be readily posited as a non-contingent prior term. As a performative act, architecture does not merely re-present culture; it constructs and reifies culture as the unalterable shape of reality. Insofar as culture is not reducible to a set of beliefs or ideas that come to be of their own volition, apart from a collection of authoritative and exclusionary practices, culture is always inevitably and already implicated in the performative function of, among others, architecture. The power and authority of culture as a "control mechanism," in the sense Clifford Geertz explicates the term, is lodged in this implication (45). To better envisage the interplay between culture and architecture we may turn to Clifford Geertz's description of "sacred symbols" which he tells us:

> … *function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their worldview— the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order. In religious belief and practices a group's ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the worldview describes, while the worldview is rendered emotionally convincing by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs peculiarly well-arranged to accommodate such a way of life. (89–90)*

Although Geertz's description pertains to "religion as a cultural system," we can readily read into his account a compelling description of the role of ecclesiastical buildings as "sacred symbols" within their broader cultural context and by extension, of architecture as another "cultural system." We can remind ourselves of the pivotal role architecture plays in shaping a people's ethos and trace an interminable link from their ethos to their worldview. This is a link without which architecture would be hopelessly lost in having too great a choice of action and not sufficient grounds for the delimitation of its choices. We can go on to read the evidence of the "confrontation and mutual confirmation" between the dominant worldview and ethos of, for instance, the Gothic, the Renaissance, or the Baroque period, respectively, in the translucent world of a Gothic Cathedral, the proportional

harmonies of a Renaissance Chapel, or the unfolding, infinite universe of a Baroque Church. In each instance, we can detail how the specifics of each design objectified "moral and aesthetic preferences by depicting them as the imposed conditions of life implicit in a world with a particular structure, as mere common sense given the unalterable shape of reality," and how the experience of each building served to support "received beliefs about the world's body by invoking deeply felt moral and aesthetic sentiments as experiential evidence for their truth" (89–90).

For an example of the invocation of deeply felt moral and aesthetic sentiments we may recall Abbot Suger's well-known account of his experience at the remodeled Carolingian church of St. Denis (1135–1144) at the onset of the Gothic period.

> When out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many-coloured gems has called me away from all external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling as it were in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven, and that by the grace of God I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manners. (Panofsky 61)

What this faith affirming anagogical transportation attests is the "binding or conferring power" of architecture as a performative act. It is architecture's capacity to synthesize faith and experience, worldview and ethos, and "in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other" (Geertz 90). Crossing the monumental threshold of St. Denis' front portal, leaving the profane world to one side and entering the sacred realm thus constituted on the other side, to then traverse the nave or the analogical path to Christian redemption, to arrive at the altar and the choir surrounded by the translucent stained-glass walls of the ambulatory that are brought to life by the light that passes through them—like Jesus shinning through the world as the new light (*Lux Nova*)—the faithful might well have come to share Suger's exuberance in a transformative experience that reified the tenants of Christian faith in the twelfth century. The "beauty" of this house, that is, its aesthetic value to Suger and his contemporaries, is effectively lodged in a performative synthesis that renders God, salvation, and heavenly reward tangible and experiential. As such, St. Denis cannot effectively be said to reflect or *represent* anything other than what it makes emotionally tangible and evidentially *real*. In other words, St. Denis does not *reiterate* mid twelfth century Christianity per se, it inexorably constitutes it.

One may also move forward to a different place and time to imagine a person of faith at the turn of fifteenth century in front of the church of Sant'Andrea in Mantua, Italy, by Leone Battista Alberti (b. 1470s), about to embark on a journey that though sequentially similar to St. Denis', would have a different conclusion by design. This person too would marvel at "the beauty of the house of God" as had Suger, though for reasons that hadn't to do with light and translucency "transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial." Rather the reasons here would have to do with an unmistakable performative testimonial to a mathematical order that

pervades the building's design, as it pervades all of nature by divine ordinance. The reasons here would have to do with the meticulous symmetrical correspondence of parts and the harmonic proportions that pervade the parts as it does the whole of the church in "the imitation of nature, as the greatest artist at all manner of composition" (Alberti, *Ten Books* 195). At the conclusion of this faithful journey, the person may well be prepared to consent with Alberti that "nature is sure to act consistently, and with a constant analogy in all her operations: from whence I conclude that the same numbers, by which the agreement of sounds affects our ears with delight, are the very same which please our eyes and our mind" (196–7). Harmonic proportions unite nature and architecture, much as the circle did in the Oglala world.

Even though harmonic proportions may well supplant translucency as an evidence of God's existence, the role of architecture as a performative act remains constant. Yet, it is important to note that powerful as architecture's performative capacity is to synthesize a people's worldview and ethos, it also speaks to the volatility of culture and its inevitable susceptibility to change. The need for synthesis points to an inherent gap between the world as we imagine or wish it to be and the world as we experience it to be. This gap may be bridged, but never fully closed. The very gap that necessitates synthesis also sees to the perpetual transformation of culture as changes in one lead to changes in the other in perpetuity. As such, culture is never static. Much as total synthesis is desired and sought, it is never achieved.

Were we to further engage the exercise of tracing the "confrontation and mutual confirmation" between worldview and ethos in ecclesiastical edifices of different ages, we would have, as we did with the Oglala tipi, Suger's St. Denis or Alberti's S. Andrea, the advantage of temporal distance and a markedly different worldview. Both readily allow us to assume the probing role of the "mythologist," as Roland Barthes described it years ago (238–9). Focusing, as we may, on the "distortion," or the mechanics of universalizing the particular, it is not likely that we will experience the culture under study assume the guise of inevitability through the agency of its architecture. We will not experience the "confrontation and mutual confirmation" of the worldview and ethos that ecclesiastical edifices were erected to affect. Such a confirmation, when and if it occurs, largely goes unnoted. An edifice performs its cultural role effectively, when we do not see in it the passage of culture into objectivity. It succeeds when we do not take note of the edifice as an ideological construct, or the explicit embodiment of a metaphysics. It succeeds when we take its peculiarities either for granted, or else attribute them to pragmatic concerns, and proceed as though the latter were immune to ideological conditioning. This is to say, that those aspects of an edifice which appear to be the most objective, that is, impervious to ideological and metaphysical conditioning, are often the parts more thoroughly conditioned by such considerations, and as that the most successful from a culture's perspective.

Although it is not with great difficulty or much resistance that we may trace the "confrontation and mutual confirmation" of a culture's worldview and ethos in the design and experience of its ecclesiastical architecture, past or for that

matter present, the same does not hold for secular buildings. The latter are far more resistive to such explorations, particularly the closer they are to us in cultural space and time. The more immediately familiar the building type, the greater is the likelihood of its appearing as no more than a pragmatic response to very real, practical needs and requirements. The library as a secular building type does not readily appear to be much more than a response to the need for storage and dissemination of books, the school to the education of the novice, the museum to the preservation and public presentation of art, or the movie-theater to the specific environmental demands and requirements of the medium, and so on. It is not evident how the design and the experience of these buildings could lend themselves to a "confrontation and mutual confirmation" of a culture's worldview and ethos or to what specific cultural variables they tactfully give the guise of the objectively inevitable. Their performativity appears as mere performance, that is, effective/pragmatic disposition.

If our secular institutional buildings do not appear as patent ideological constructs, this is not, of course, for want of participation in the construction and objectification of culture. Michel Foucault, in his study of prisons, schools, and hospitals, outlined the modalities of this participation long ago. If, however, the link between the formal and spatial properties of secular institutional buildings and a particular view of the world, or a pervasive metaphysics is rarely, if ever, explicit, this may well be because these buildings manage all too well in formulating "a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysics, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other" (Geertz 90). Their opacity silently betrays their success.

Assuming that every building type, secular or ecclesiastical, is a purposed cultural construct, from its inception and through every stage of its permutation, and that each type serves, among other cultural mechanisms, to turn our assumptions about the world into an objective experience of it, this book critically examines the ideational and metaphysical imperatives that have seen to the formation, proliferation, and perpetuation of three institutions and their architecture across time: the library, the museum, and the movie-theater. Collectively these building types have been instituted as varying domiciles to representation. Each type differs from the others to the extent that each representational medium in residence (writing, art, film) differs from the others by a varying/differing formal proximity to its referent (writing being the farthest and film the closest).

The choice of these three institutions as domiciles to representation stem from a seemingly simple question. Given the inexorable link between the Oglala metaphysics and architecture, and for that matter Christian metaphysics and architecture, and assuming this link to be neither accidental nor unique to ecclesiastical buildings, what link may we be able to trace between Western metaphysics and secular architecture? In what way does secular architecture validate, safeguard, reify, and promulgate Western metaphysics?

Broad and daunting as the question may seem, it is possible to begin the query by focusing on one basic and pervasive aspect of Western metaphysics, namely, the metaphysics of presence as Jacques Derrida expounds the concept:

> *… the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as presence, with all the subdeterminations which depend on this general form and which organize within it their system and their historical sequence (presence of the thing to the sight as eidos, presence as substance/essence/existence [ousia], temporal presence as point [stigma] of the now or the moment [nun], the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, co-presence of the other and the self, intersubjectivity as an intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth). (Of Grammatology 12)[7]*

From Plato to Husserl and beyond, the hierarchic privileging of presence and the matted concepts of reality, authenticity, truth, originality, and so on, has been a ubiquitous practice in the history of Western metaphysics. Hence:

> *… the enterprise of returning "strategically," in idealization, to an origin or to a "priority" seen as simple, intact, normal, pure, self-identical, in order then to conceive of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent. (Derrida, Limited Inc. 93)*

Pervasive as the metaphysics of presence has been, it is, nevertheless, volatile and susceptible to the unsettling deconstructive effect of the very representation, iteration, imitation, duplication that is perpetually demoted and segregated, in words and deeds, as the derivative contingent Other of the real, the authentic, the original, and so on. As Derrida has extensively demonstrated, the condition of possibility of representation, iteration, imitation, duplication, and so on, is the impossibility of any rigorous, much less hierarchical distinction between the pure presence that reality, authenticity, truth, originality, and other related concepts are desired to be and the absence and deferral that is said to always designate the contingent Other. The aporia of any rigorous distinction between reality and representation always stands the chance of coming to surface by the unbridled cohabitation of the real and its contingent Other. The uncanny, as Freud expounds the concept, is an instance in point (19–60).

It is the intent of this book to point out that it is in no small measure against the dangers of unbridled cohabitation and the aporia of any rigorous distinction between reality and representation that the library, the museum, and the movie-theater have been instituted, among other measures, as safeguards. Each has historically accomplished its performative task by uniquely domesticating and curtailing the specific deconstructive effect of the contingent representation it is given to administer. This is through adoption of distinct formal and spatial strategies that in effect constitute and characterize each type. In its own unique way, each type has seen to the proper dispensation and consumption of representation in a uniquely segregated domain of each building's making where the reality outside

as self-presentation is made to retain its privilege and remain impervious to the challenges of the contingent representation, in no small measure because of these spatial constructs. The metaphysics of presence is reified and sustained through the performative function of these building types.

To demonstrate these points, the first part of this book provides an analysis of the role of architectural theory and criticism as instruments of cultural control in the production of architectural types. Chapters 1–2 offer a close critical reading of the aesthetic theories of Leone Battista Alberti and John Ruskin respectively, in order to demonstrate how architectural theories that have historically conditioned the formal production of the building types under study were themselves constituted as a form of resistance to contingency and representation. These chapters link the historically overarching preoccupation with aesthetics as a critical tool for the delimitation of practice in architecture to the metaphysics of presence and discuss the instrumentality of theory and criticism in safeguarding this metaphysics.

Chapter 3 provides an analytical outline of the history of the library as a building type. It points out that despite various manifestations and numerous stylistic discontinuities, the spatial characteristics and processional organization within the library have remained essentially the same. These characteristics are predicated on the logic of encampment whose manifestations can be as diverse as the Medieval book-press, the stall system, the wall system or the modern stack-system libraries. The persistent encampment of the book within the variously construed confines of the library is then linked to the historic ambivalence of Western culture toward writing. Referencing Jacques Derrida's essays on writing, the logic of encampment at work in the formation of the library is, this chapter argues, a humanist institutional response to the supplemental and paradoxical character of writing. It is a performative attempt at domesticating and curtailing the aporetic effects of writing.

The following chapter traces the history of the place and placement of art from the cabinet of curiosities to the modern art museum. It expounds on the historic link between the question of authenticity in art and the question of its place and the modalities of its placement. Between the public and the artwork, the museum in its various guises has persistently instituted an elaborate and deep threshold that mediates and oversees the passage to and from the seemingly infinite world that it fabricates to contain authentic art and the "real" world from which it is sequestered. The critical preoccupation with the disjoining of art and the museum from their context is, persistent as it has been, a perpetual substitute for what is fundamentally missing and missed: authenticity and unaporetic origins. As an institution and a building type, the art museum effectively substitutes a formal, spatial, and experiential clarity of place for the very spatial and temporal dimensions that painting and sculpture fundamentally put in question. Spacing is authenticity's indispensable alibi and the museum its performative institution.

The final chapter demonstrates how from inception, the movie-theatre has located cinema at an imaginary elsewhere by design. The modalities of this displacement have changed overtime in direct response to the changing relationship between the real and its imaginary Other. With every technological abridgement of the

imagined distance between reality and its imaginary double, that is, the addition of sound, color, stereoscopy, and so on, there have been corresponding changes in the design of the movie-theater aimed at re-establishing the abridged distance. The motivation behind each change, be it from the nickelodeon to the movie-palace, to the post-palace mall cinemas and multiplexes, has been a constant. To safeguard the aura of the real as the self-referential, non-representational Other of cinema, the movie-theater, as an institution and a building type, has systematically fabricated an outside to the real, if only to locate and safeguard it by an imaginary distance.

NOTES

1   An idea as simple as shelter can assume, as it has, many different forms under similar constraints—be these climatic, economic, and/or ecological in nature.

2   This extends from Amos Rapoport's pioneering House Form and Culture in the 1960s to many architectural history texts and surveys in the interim, to many current studies, including Emmons, Hendrix and Lomholt's *The Cultural Role of Architecture: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, and the more carefully nuanced Adam Sharr's *Reading Architecture and Culture: Researching Buildings, Spaces and Documents*.

3   Judith Butler's gender studies is a case in point.

4   Also see Culler and Miller.

5   From a different, though I believe related perspective, we may also refer to the round tipi as a "myth" in Roland Barthes' sense, that is, "a form of speech justified in excess" (*Mythologies* 240). This is a form of speech whose "very principle" is to "transform history into nature," the arbitrary into the inevitable, the presumed into the perceived.

6   See also Derrida. *Signature, Event, Context*.

7   Also: "It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence–*eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia* essence, existence, substance, subject *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth (Derrida. *Writing and Difference* 279–80).