

## **The Architect's Paradox: Experience and the Creation of Space**

The architect's paradox is elementary in the very nature of architecture: a building must invite critical contemplation through aesthetic experience like a work of art, but it must also serve the needs of the people who inhabit the city building by inevitably fading into the background of experience. It arises out of the very nature of architecture as combining the functional and the aesthetic. One reason we may not contemplate buildings as we do artworks is that we are constantly engaged in using the city as a means to our ends of work, education, sustenance and leisure, for it is easy to forget the purely aesthetic qualities of a thing we use every day, like a coffee cup or a knife. But architecture demands that we are more like the Samurai who never once forgets the beauty and craftsmanship of his sword. Contemplating a building in something other than practical terms requires that we momentarily step aside from the reasons we are there in the first place and consider that place in itself rather than as something that is constructed to serve our purposes. The architect's challenge is to overcome this.

There is something further-reaching in the nature of architecture that crystallises the problem and, I contend, forms part of the solution. Architecture is saliently historical: every building in the city is testament to the intentions, desires and needs of a community living on a site at a particular point in history, such that track the history of civilisation. The buildings in the City of London, for example, track the development of a metropolis from a wooden township that was ravaged by fire to the construction of a powerful centre of social intuitions, where each building is the result of some historical state of affairs. It is analogous to the way layers of rock build up over millions of years, through which geologists can track the history of the Earth. Architecture embodies this history interminably, for we cannot avoid recording our history if we are to live functionally possible and aesthetically rich lives.

Jean Nouvel admits to the paradox when he says that ‘architecture must both exist and be quickly forgotten’: the lived space is experienced transiently, so the architect must deal with the fact that in order for us to achieve our goals in the urban environment we must be able to forget the architecture that serves our needs so effortlessly.<sup>1</sup> The architect does not want us to forget that their building was lovingly created in something like the way one makes a fine oil painting or an epic opera, with that special kudos of a work of art. But nor do they want us to forget why the building was commissioned, designed and built, for when we forget that architecture is functional we view it, at best, as sculpture and, at worst, as folly. The architect’s challenge is to make both of these concerns impinge upon our consciousness simultaneously.

The pyramids of Giza serve as a testcase for the architect’s paradox because, in lived experience, it seems impossible to see them as both functional and aesthetic. On the one hand, their functions beguile us as we hear tales of their genesis and survey the manifold artefacts recovered from them. When we learn the history of these ancient monuments to long-dead divine kinds, we can appreciate them as intrinsic, ritualised components of ancient cultures that have aesthetic value which is subordinate to their purposes. On the other hand, it is easy to regard the pyramids as little more than fantastical sculptures: from the Meridien Hotel, you have on three sides the sprawling metropolis of the city, but in front of you is the massive expanse of the desert, where the pyramids tower above Cairo on a hill, shrouded in thick smog, standing like sculptures that are only to be admired from the comfort of the hotel bar. Here the function of architecture, as goal-directed human artifice, has been forgotten, for it no longer matters whether there are or were any pharaohs or tombs, what matters is that these structures exist as integral parts of the city skyline. Either way, something about

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, translated by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) p.12.

architecture must be forgotten if we are to appreciate it as one of the aspects of its nature; failing the ability to see both at the same time, forgetting is necessary.

But what is it to *forget*? Nietzsche says that ‘it has not yet been proved that there is any such thing as forgetting; all we know is that the act of recollection is beyond our power. We have provisionally set into this gap in our power that word “forgetting”, as if it were one more addition to our faculties.’<sup>2</sup> By suggesting it is a faculty, in the Kantian sense like imagination and understanding, Nietzsche conveys that forgetting is necessary for making our experience of the world intelligible. This is how we should view Nouvel’s forgetting of architecture: it is the inability to recollect the history of civilisation on a site and a defence mechanism distracting aesthetics that allows us to continue unimpeded with our lives. The resolution to the architect’s paradox is exactly to develop the ability to recollect, or to learn anew, what came before.

Walter Benjamin stumbles upon the paradox when he observes that ‘our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and our furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have locked us up hopelessly.’<sup>3</sup> The idea is that we become trapped in the urban space by the very way in we inevitably must use it. But, ‘then came the film and burst this prison asunder...so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruin and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling.’<sup>4</sup> By isolating discrete parts of the urban space the camera allows us to explore the city without the usual sense of purpose with which we move through that space, thus elevating our experience of it to the level of art.

Benjamin became enamoured with Paris through studying early photographs which he saw as capturing distinct timeslices and isolating discrete spaces of the otherwise unstoppable unfolding of Paris through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He cites the

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2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, translated by RJ Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), section 126.

3 Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, translated and edited by Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p.236.

4 *Ibid.*

photographs taken by Atget of the arcades and streets, which, in the enchanting early black and white shades, make the highly ordinary sites of the city suddenly look like crimescenes that have been isolated to enable profound scrutiny. It is, for Benjamin, through the camera lens that Paris is viewed in distraction from ordinary purpose, the living city petrified in a work of art. Moreover, he thinks, it is by viewing the city from this perspective that we can learn to appreciate, understand and deal with the possibilities and constraints that normally dominate our experience of the city.

There is, however, always the danger that we will become so absorbed in the film as an artwork that we forget, or fail, to relate it to the real world, since we are appreciating a film – an artwork – rather than the city itself, so it is unlikely that film is the solution to the paradox. Benjamin captures the fact that architecture is something worthy of contemplation and admits that the contemplation is not possible whilst living in the functional space of the city. However, Benjamin places the burden of solving the paradox of aesthetic and function on the film-maker or photographer, but it is finally up to architects to make buildings that we find it impossible to simply use without contemplation and critical analysis, which depends on deploying two further assumptions about the nature of architecture. The first thing is that the architect has a considerable role in determining the kind of experience we have of the city. The second thing is that architects do not just make objects, but they create the space in which we play out our lives.

Jean Baudrillard describes Salt Lake City as having the ‘transparency and supernatural, otherworldly cleanliness of a thing from outer space’ as a result of its abundant marble buildings, making the experience one of ‘a symmetrical, luminous, overpowering abstraction.’<sup>5</sup> He explains the nihilistic charm of the cliffs in Trieste with reference to the sight of how ‘oil refineries blaze like the final solution’<sup>6</sup>. The chaotic experience of Paris is

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5 Jean Baudrillard, ‘Cool Cities’, in Francesco Proto (ed), *Mass. Identity. Architecture: The Architectural Writings of Jean Baudrillard* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2006), p.37.

6 Jean Baudrillard, ‘Cool Cities’, p.49.

explained by the presence of monstrous buildings, which ‘do not provide a rhythm for the city and its exchanges; they are projected on to it like...a spacecraft falling to earth from some dark catastrophe.’<sup>7</sup>

In these observations, Baudrillard is conceptualising his experience of the city in terms of how it results directly from the way the city is constructed; particular building-types, materials and relations between buildings cultivate the experience. The work of Steven Holl tirelessly engages the senses in order to produce the most interesting and most enjoyable experiences of buildings which cannot be separated from their functions. An example of this is Holl’s Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, which consists of several glass blocks, held firm in the grass by poured-in concrete foundations, topped with thousands of square feet of turf and lit by luminous internal lights. As Suzanne Stephens recounts, one has a completely linear experience of a promenade across the landscape, where the visitor flows from one space to another along modulated planes in glorious sunlight.<sup>8</sup> In this building, the outside and the inside merge together, so one is not overcome by the angular glass edges or the steel trusses that hold it together; rather the building offers a curious engagement with the natural environment.

Baudrillard also says the architect’s job is to cultivate urban space by embellishing the landscape, both horizontally and vertically. He cites the World Trade Center and the Pompidou Centre as examples of objects which are not themselves architectural marvels, but which give us back the ‘dizzying sense of space’ because they redefine the landscape.<sup>9</sup> One crucial aspect of the creation of space is the delineation of districts or zones in the city. The Jewish Quarter, Chinatown, the slums and the financial district can be defined architecturally by using appropriate styles and building types to not just give discrete identity but also to

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7 Jean Baudrillard, ‘Cool Cities’, p.52.

8 Suzanne Stephens, ‘Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art’, *Architectural Record* (July 2007), volume 195, issue 7, pp.92-101.

9 Jean Baudrillard, ‘Truth or Radicality: On the Future of Architecture’, in Francesco Proto (ed), *Mass. Identity. Architecture: The Architectural Writings of Jean Baudrillard* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2006).

create the space in which a set cultural or social agenda prevails. For example, London's Docklands area only came about during the 1980s when the Isle of Dogs, Limehouse, Cubitt Town and Wapping were gathered in together in order to rebrand the East End as a home for international business. Here architects had a central role in inventing a whole new space on the site of an old one, where the old peoples were removed and relocated to make way for new ones.<sup>10</sup>

The proposal I now offer is that architects must imbue their buildings with a clear sense of the city's history, so the experience of space constantly engages us in contemplation of history as we go about our business. Therefore, the paradox will be solved by using history to invite aesthetic contemplation through use, where the architect creates a space and cultivates an experience of the city's historical development. In doing this, architects are giving us the power of recollection, so that we can no longer forget architecture because history is imprinted on the buildings that we must use in our daily lives.

The solution to the paradox is found in Nouvel's unrealised plan for the centre of Berlin. Nouvel summarises the story of how Berlin 'became the capital of the Third Reich, was given the onceover by Speer, was partly destroyed, but survived...was martyred, cut up in pieces, and it still bears the stigma. Then the city was freed and betrothed to Europe'<sup>11</sup>. After the war, he says, they employed a reconstruction policy called 'critical reconstruction', which involves replacing everything that was there before, rebuilding the city as if nothing had ever happened by filling in all the newly empty space to delete the memory of past atrocities, replacing emptiness with the lost past.

Critical reconstruction worsens the paradox because future generations have no physical trace, even if they have intellectual knowledge, of what went on before. Preserving this is essential to writing the history of the city accurately: the story of a community which

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10 See John Eade, 'Reconstructing Places: Changing Images of Locality in Docklands and Spitalfields', in John Eade (ed) *Living the Global City* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.122-145.

11 Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, p.58.

has endured hardship, enjoyed triumph and maintained day-to-day existence on this site is the very history architecture seeks to embody. When the Berlin Wall came down, Jean Nouvel Architects proposed that the no-man's-land along the line of the wall be turned into the hub of Berlin's cultural and leisure activities with two lines of bars, nightclubs, stadia, shops, restaurants face-to-face to creating a 'meeting line' in the centre of the city. Nouvel explains, 'by reversing the previous situation, the dividing line would become a weld, fullness would succeed the void, joy follow sadness, freedom prohibition...But most of all, the city's history would remain embedded in its streets and stones.'<sup>12</sup>

This brings together two things. Firstly, the fact is that architecture *is* forgettable: in the course of their daily routines, all the bankers in the City of London have no consciousness of the history that gave them the buildings they use and the streets they walk because the architecture – although physically documented history – is *just there*. Human teleology transcends architecture, which is doomed to fade into the background like so many birth certificates in some far-flung archive of the city, so the mere existence of buildings is simply not enough. Secondly, only architects can solve this problem: Benjamin's film-maker does not have the power to sculpt *architectural form* into a representation of history, but only to present what has long been forgotten. The solution to the architect's paradox is to write and rewrite the history of the city in new buildings and landscapes, constantly supplementing standing the text.

Examples of this approach abound. Norman Foster's roof of the Reichstag hails Germany's return to the international stage by embracing the contemporary with the arms of the past; and his St Pancras International recovers Gilbert Scott's celebration of the golden age of rail travel by emphasising the cathedral-like roofs and sweeping concourses, but also nudges that history into a new era with steel and glass lines that extend all the way to Paris.

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, p.58.

Nottingham's new Contemporary Arts centre is clad in steel that bears the intricate print of a swatch of lace that was unearthed in a Victorian time capsule. Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building shows profound respect for the steady growth of the American city in its homage to the nineteenth century Wainwright building, reminding New Yorkers how the modern tower came to be. In all these examples, the history is not just *there*, not even just *visible*, but it is embodied and entirely conspicuous to even the most casual observer. Although film can help to instil in the citydweller a manifest consciousness of history, this consciousness, I think, also needs to be promoted through architectural form because our use of the city is – like the city itself – not just continuous, but constantly evolving, so architectural form has to evolve in parallel with its deployment in human civilisations.

Remember Nouvel said that architecture must be quickly forgotten and Nietzsche said it seems as if we treat forgetting as a faculty when it is in fact just the lack of recollection: both of these come together once we realise that the necessity of forgetting architecture comes from the fact that the city is there to be used – on the one hand, we must forget so that architecture does not distract us from our business, and on the other hand, we have an innate capacity to forget which ensures the conduct of our business. We simply lack the power of recollection: we cannot recall the history of the city, even though it is manifestly there, because architects have created predominantly functional experiences and spaces for us in the city. By taking Nouvel's Berlin as a model, we can see how it is possible for us to learn and relearn the history of the city whilst conducting our ordinary, goal-directed business amongst the architecture. Since the history is conspicuously embodied, we cannot fail to notice it, and since we are already aesthetically engaged with the city critical contemplation of the buildings we use will follow. Thus, by joining together experience and space, function and aesthetic, past and present in architectural form, the architect's paradox dissolves. With the entire metropolitan area in which millions of people live and work seething with constant

historical reminders, we will no longer be able to forget architecture. The text of human history will be ingratiated in our everyday experience simply in virtue of it being written on every page we must turn in order to read the story of each new day in the city.

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