Features of the Human Scene. People's Expectations and Architecture

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Woodland Cabin

What people can expect from buildings is not a question that can be answered once and for all, primarily because their mutual relationship changes constantly. Architecture – valuable and life-affirming architecture – is perhaps more expensive and more inaccessible than ever, not so much because the price of materials and building costs are increasing, but because not enough is being invested in buildings accessible to all. That is why, in a depressing essay from 2001, Rem Koolhaas introduced the notion of "junkspace", suggesting provocatively that what architects produce in terms of public buildings is necessarily devoid of value: abandoned, neglected and worn out before they have even been occupied. "If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe", Koolhaas writes, "junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet. The built product of modernization is not modern architecture but junkspace. Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course."[1] It is impossible to prove the validity of this fatalistic conclusion. In 1936 Walter Benjamin wrote in his essay on the "technological reproducibility" of artworks: "Buildings have accompanied human existence since primeval times. The human need for shelter is permanent. Architecture has never had fallow periods."[2] People have high expectations of architecture. Both literally and figuratively, both publicly and privately, we are continuously investing in buildings.

What is fundamental about architecture is that these investments – and the relationships that people have with buildings – lay claim to many human capacities. Art and culture generally target a limited number of senses, and respect or establish borders, for instance between art and "real life", feeling and thinking, watching and listening, inside and outside, nature and culture, word and image, past and future, the individual and the community. Architecture is the activity that manages to address the largest number of these opposites without erasing them. Buildings are the only artworks in which people live and which, as Benjamin put it, are experienced in "a state of distraction".[3] Paradoxically enough, you only see architecture when you no longer pay attention to it and concentrate on everything that architecture makes possible. Moreover, only architecture is experienced with the eyes, the ears and the sense of touch, and in some cases also with smell. What is most important is that buildings involve decisions about society: about including or excluding, forbidding or facilitating, taking part in the world or withdrawing from it. Therefore, whoever wishes to learn about how people live and to understand the characteristics of the human scene must turn to architecture.

Office Robbrecht en Daem

A house is the simplest and most widely found form of architecture. However, it is a building that in the past was generally defined negatively as a place where a lot could happen but where no work was done. That was something done elsewhere, at the office, in a factory or in other buildings that were public to a greater or lesser extent. For many, the time when this distinction was clear and when a house was the absolute opposite of a workplace is long gone. This does not mean that everyone constantly and literally works at home, although for younger generations it has become a reality in an age defined by the internet, by wireless communications and by an intense relationship with computers. More fundamentally and imperceptibly, since the start of the 21st century "things" and "services" have been produced uninterruptedly at home, or the domestic sphere is expected to contribute significantly to the economy.

1. Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace", in Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong, eds, *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (Cologne, 2001), p. 408.
2. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility", in Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, eds, *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings Volume 3 1935–1938* (Cambridge/London, 2002), p. 120.
3. Idem, p. 119.

It is a strange consequence of the "participation society" and of growing individual responsibility: whoever expects to be able to rule the household without having to give something back to the outside world is overlooking the time-consuming existence of surveys, accounting, grant applications, lifestyle products, internet shopping, renovation subsidies, group purchases and social media – a personal factory that is kept running day and night.

What is remarkable is that this situation has, in part, caused a leap back into the past of at least a couple of centuries. The modern understanding of the house emerged when people went to work outdoors. Before that, houses were organised self-sufficiently: traditional and craft professions coincided within one place and one building – the house as workshop, farm or office. Today the trend seems to be returning, with the significant difference that the macroeconomy of the house is not self-supporting, but is dominated by an invisible and transcendent world economy.

What this evolution means for buildings in which only work is performed is an important issue. The reverse is not true: if houses become workplaces, offices do not become residences. The traditional domestic sphere is not simply moved to the workplace. Rather, office spaces offer resistance to the blending of living and working. Other evolutions and fashionable innovations play a role, such as the landscape office, social control or clean-desk policies. But in some cases, the office building, as one of the few office types, brings to mind an older form of life: the structured and imperturbable harmony of the monastery, where human activities, both in time and space, can be limited.

Concert Hall

"Painting", Walter Benjamin writes, "by its nature, cannot provide an object of simultaneous collective reception, as architecture has always been able to do, as the epic poem could do at the time, and as film is able to do today."[4] It is the ambition of artists, writers and architects – as of everyone who does something and has something to offer – to reach and influence as many people as possible. Yet Benjamin is referring to something else. He wonders whether the experience of an artwork can be shared. In theory this is impossible. We can never be sure that two or more people, after an encounter with, for instance, a painting or a film, can feel or think the same, simply because we can never share feelings and thoughts unambiguously and with absolute clarity.

This does not necessarily mean that an artwork can be viewed or listened to by more than one person simultaneously and at the same place. Nevertheless, some art is completely unsuitable for a collective experience. A novel is created to be read by one person at a time. A painting, no matter how large the canvas, cannot be viewed by a hundred people simultaneously, not if you want to observe the real thing.

To reach and influence people as a group, Benjamin suggests, you have to be an architect, poet-performer or film-maker. What plays a role in the background of his considerations is the revolutionary character of art and architecture, and the way in which the masses can be reached, but also incited to action – action that has direct social consequences. Belgium, so some history books tell us, emerged after a crowd of people at the Brussels opera house, La Monnaie, moved by a performance of the popular *La Muette de Portici*, revolted against the rule of King William I. Architecture and art too lost many of these political ambitions over the course of the 20th century, not least because opera, for instance, became a middle-class and sedate pastime instead of a popular one.

Yet it remains that buildings in which the arts are central – museums, concert halls, theatres, cinemas – bring people together for a single activity. There are ways in which architecture can mix with these arts and have an influence on the experience. Whoever watches a film in the dark will, if the film is good, no longer see the cinema, which in part explains why cinemas are not canonical commissions in the history of architecture. Even then, it is undeniable that the place where an artwork is experienced determines the experience of that artwork, because every art viewer belongs to a community, however temporarily, thanks to that place.

4. Idem, p. 116.

Chamber Music Hall

Ever since Giovanni Battista Piranesi in the 18th century made his engravings and labyrinthine etchings of Rome, architecture can be seen as a critical and avant-garde art form. Buildings, designed by an architect, can confront people with a reality or truth that they cannot, will not or dare not face. Architecture is severe but fair, and tries to expose forms of false awareness and illusory peace, for example by pointing out, as Piranesi did, how hypocritical the handling of history is, and how difficult or ridiculous it is to try to find a connection with a tradition that belongs to the past. Since the start of the 20th century, the development of technology and the growth in capitalism have been thus targeted: architecture projects can show, for instance, how houses are produced in industrial fashion with the purpose of capital development, as a result of which they hardly differ at all, no matter how much people believe that they have a unique, individual, cosy and authentic home at their disposal. Instead of reassuring them and giving the impression that if everything is not allright then at least everything will be allright, such "wicked" architects point to the facts and to the pointlessness of the life that is reinforced by the unjust organisation of society. This critical, cruel and at times inhuman tradition in modern architecture, and the desirability or possibility thereof, is something that Manfredo Tafuri has dealt with in all his writings. Yet he has also recognised how another approach is possible – a more comforting and supportive one – which instead of showing how bad things are in the world, tries to improve things in the confines of a single building and to create a place where the laws of the world do not prevail, but are replaced by a welcome that, from a pessimistic viewpoint, is no longer of this world.

For Tafuri, Alvar Aalto was such an architect. "For the 'cruelty' of the avant-garde", he writes in his 1976 book *Modern Architecture*, "Aalto substituted a 'cordiality' which was not without its own hermetic accents. It was an antitechnological and neo-humanistic myth disdaining rhetoric and therefore aspiring to a positive relationship with the public on the basis of empirical languages in which they could have confidence. The qualities of his works have a meaning only as masterful trajectories, not subject to reproduction outside the remote reality in which they have their roots."[5] According to Tafuri, Aalto's buildings try to provide people with accommodation, but they cannot be repeated outside the self-chosen reality in which they came into being. These are unique places: an adjective that for Tafuri cannot be reconciled with architecture, but which coincides with the greatest possible quality, from another intellectual tradition.

Rubens Square

In a recent book *City Squares: Eighteen Writers on the Spirit and Significance of Squares Around the World*, Michael Kimmelman, architecture critic for the *New York Times*, writes about the redesign of Madison Square in New York City. For years this was the place where Fifth Avenue and Broadway intersected. "The Bloomberg administration's idea", Kimmelman writes, "was to turn the middle of that street into a new public plaza. One day I ran across Michael Bierut, whose design firm, Pentagram, faces the site, and he told me he had thought the plaza was a crazy plan when he first heard about it. Who in the world would sit in the middle of the street, he wondered, when you had one of the most beautiful parks in the city right there?"[6] And yet the plaza has become one of the city's most successful public spaces, writes Kimmelman:

5. Manfredo Tafuri, Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture* (New York, 1979), p. 365.
6. Michael Kimmelman, "The Craving for Public Squares", *The New York Review of Books* (7 April 2016), p. 12. Kimmelman's essay was also published in: Catie Marron, ed., *City Squares: Eighteen Writers on the Spirit and Significance of Squares Around the World* (New York, 2016).

"from there you can see the Flatiron Building one way and the Empire State Building the other, but also for the reason people gravitate to Trafalgar Square in London or the Piazza della Signoria in Florence as opposed to Hampstead Heath or the Boboli Gardens: to be in the middle of things.
As retreats, parks give us room to breathe and feel alone. Squares reaffirm our commonality, our shared sense of place, and our desire to be included. It's why we congregate near the kitchen at a dinner party instead of in the living room. That's where you see people coming and going to the fridge to grab a beer and watch stuff happen."[7] A square is an urban place where people sit, watch and are watched, which always gives these kinds of places a slightly theatrical character. Whoever is in a square does not have to do anything else: neither eat, nor be going somewhere, nor wait. Whoever is in a square has *time*, no matter how little, and finds themselves in an exceptional position, where it is possible to watch the world without having to expect anything from it, and especially without being subjected to the expectations of the world.

Whitechapel Gallery

In 1904 the American writer Henry James, aged 61 at the time, returned to the United States. He had left the American continent a quarter of a century earlier. His impressions were published under the title *The American Scene*. What he saw in his native country, on the other side of the Atlantic, did not please him: an economy that was going off the rails; urban development steered by the use of cars but also lifts; a longing for money and profit that inevitably turns to greed; a society that was becoming more diverse and could hardly still be called a society. Filled with an almost paralysing sense of self-awareness, James realised how subjective his experiences were, how conservative his ideas risked becoming and how difficult it was to report on what he called the "features of the human scene".[8] In some cases, buildings offered advice, or they formed a haven or held a mirror to the city of his birth in 1843, which had changed beyond recognition.
To his considerable surprise, the Presbyterian Hospital on Madison Avenue, for instance, was a respite in a New York that he did not recognise. The city no longer spoke to him, and therefore, for him, could not express human values. "It was as quiet there", James writes,"on its ample interspace, as if the clamorous city, roundabout, as if the passion of the Elevated and of the Elevator in especial, were forever at rest and no one were stepping lively for miles and miles away; so that visibly, it had [a] spell to cast and a character to declare – things I was won over, on the spot, to desire a nearer view of."[9]
Yet the city did not simply disappear. Within this building New York City was still present, but its force was filtered and the city's wild versatility was collected into an undivided positive presence. "I recall noting there", James writes, "all responsively, as not before, that if the *direct* pressure of New York is too often to ends that strike us as vulgar, the indirect is capable, and perhaps to an unlimited degree, of these lurking effects of delicacy. The immediate expression is the expression of violence, but you may find there is something left, something kept back for you, if that has not from the first fatally deafened you."[10]
A modern metropolis like New York can only be experienced and can really become a part of human experience, James suggests, thanks to the interior of the buildings and to architecture: the force of the city literally resides somewhere inside.

Winery Le Pin

The way in which something is made and in which a building is constructed can be compared with the way in which a text is written. What words are used, what is the narrative point of view, how do words relate to one another and how are sentences structured? Is there a language that is more real, more upright and more honest, and can a narrator hide behind unreliability? Can words borrowed from other languages or clichés from pop culture appear in a text? Can a novel be based on ironic concepts that suggest something that does not exist, like when a steel skeleton structure is concealed behind wood panels, which in turn are painted with a marble pattern?
Just as it can seem romantic to allocate to language (and everything that enters into it) a pure and permanent value that cannot be revealed, neither is it entirely realistic to think that materials and techniques have a character that must be respected, and that excludes falsehood or material ambiguity.
The historian who has expounded on this concept most fully is Kenneth Frampton. In his 1990 article "Rappel à l'Ordre: The Case for the Tectonic", for instance, he distinguishes three ways in which an object or a building element can be part of architecture: a technological object instrumentally meets a need; a scenographic object refers to something that is hidden or does not even exist; and a tectonic object has a form that arises from the constructive role that it fulfils. Frampton speaks of "a similar concatenation of span and support that amounts to a tectonic syntax in which gravitational force passes from purlin to truss, to pad stone, to corbel, to arch, to pediment and abutment. The technical transfer of this load passes through a series of appropriately articulated transitions and joints."[11]
How influential the tectonic sincerity of building elements can be is a pertinent question, as is whether a structure that shows the interaction between material and gravity influences the experience that people derive from architecture. At the same time there is little or nothing about architecture, art or culture that can be determined unambiguously or definitively. Architecture is dependent on intentions, and on aspirations that can be successful without their effectiveness having to be proven. The same holds for the contact with building materials and structure, and with what people can expect from them.
"Within architecture", writes Frampton, "the tectonics suggests itself as a mythical category with which to acquire entry to an anti-processal world wherein the 'presencing' of things will once again facilitate the appearance and experience of men."[12]

Deep Fountain

The demand that art should enter a museum or (ultimately) should be destined for a museum is rather futile. That a museum space could better satisfy, and more fully, the condition for the completion of art is an illusion: it is quite likely that art only really remains sterile in a museum, unwatched, unchallenged, merely mute, and silently accepted and honoured. Conversely, art outside the museum, in a public space, is annoyingly in the way; it blocks everyday life and evokes more annoyance and frustration than anything else. Wherever there is art, Bart Verschaffel writes in an essay from 1998, it "breathes in the surrounding culture, and breathes something, almost unnoticed, into the general culture".[13]
Yet it is certainly so that something else is expected from an artwork in a museum than from art in the open air of the public domain. What it comes down to is that (good) art outside the museum shifts in the direction of architecture, the main consequence being that, like a building, it must always also be possible to neglect art in the public space.
Concentration on an artwork is not desirable outside the museum, in the city, where everyday life follows its course. This is not to say that concentration is impossible there, but that concentration is generally focused on something else. Nor does it mean that art must be omitted from the public domain: it simply implies that it fulfils another, more subtle and, if

7. Idem.
8. Henry James, *The American Scene* (London, 1907), p. vi.
9. Idem, p. 188.
10. Idem.
11. Kenneth Frampton, "Rappel à l'Ordre: The Case for the Tectonic", *Architectural Design* 3–4 (1990), p. 20. Frampton's essay was republished in: Kate Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture. An Anthology of Architectural Theory* (New York, 1996).
12. Idem.
13. Bart Verschaffel, "Niet voor het museum. Over kunst en openbaarheid", in Jan Baetens, Lut Pil, eds., *Kunst in de publieke ruimte* (Leuven, 1998), p. 117. (my translation.)

desired, invisible role. Walter Benjamin also wrote on this subject in his 1936 essay: "A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide."[14] An artwork in the public space does not overwhelm people: it is itself overwhelmed by the presence of people, who can pursue their ordinary concerns by tolerating the artwork in a distracted but no less defining manner, in the same way that a sound or light source can play an important role in the dream of someone sleeping.

Market Hall

Is it possible to love a building? J.M. Coetzee asks himself this question in *A House in Spain*, a story from 2000 about a man who buys a holiday home in Spain: "What it comes down to, astonishingly, is that he wants a relationship with this house in a foreign country, a human relationship, however absurd the idea of a human relationship with stone and mortar might be. For the sake of that relationship, with this house and its history and the village as a whole, a village that, from the highway, looks as though it had been conceived by a single mind and built by a single pair of hands – in return for that relationship he is prepared to treat the house as one treats a woman, paying attention to her needs and even her quirks, spending money on her, soothing her through bad times, treating her with kindness."[15] For whoever has reconciled himself to staying somewhere, settling in a house establishes the paradoxical balance of love: out of self-interest, care and attention are initially offered, which return as intimacy, permanence and beauty. And of course this bond gets stronger as the habitation lasts.

Can that atmosphere of giving and taking (in other circumstances, at another place) be shared with strangers? Can love of and for a building be a common affair? A public building is a space where a single activity is organised for many people, such as a library, a museum, a school, a shopping centre or a swimming pool. For almost everything that happens in the public domain, there are strict rules: dress codes, lifestyles, musical genres, reading habits, circulation patterns, table manners and dialects. These render public buildings as somewhat exclusive, because if a couple of people do something a certain way (swimming, for example, or shopping), then it excludes the presence of other people and of other activities. There is probably only one occupation that many different people can devote themselves to, undisturbed, without any unhappiness, naturally: that is, doing nothing for a moment, for example by being en route to somewhere. Buildings or urban places can recall that old, rather medieval aspect of city life, predating the emergence of leisure, and of the entertainment and culture industry: everyone does his own thing, goes his own way, manages his own affairs, circuits and contacts. The true public domain is the area where all these life lines touch without disturbing each other. What happens is the accumulation of countless (possible) events, which would otherwise also take place, but not simultaneously – only now they are visible to everyone. In that case, relationships between all citizens (without exception) are conducted freely and voluntarily. The love for such a building must become – perhaps not immediately, but certainly after a period of time – a common matter, because it is about a piece of architecture that establishes a human relationship with stone and mortar, just as Coetzee described it, or with any combination of building materials.

Golfclubhaus

In 1927, the German priest and philosopher Romano Guardini wrote his *Briefe vom Comer See* about the relationship between humanity and technology. This is a bond that has been under pressure since and because of the First World War, and which caused a crisis that grew only deeper after the Second World War. Guardini did not simply reject technological innovations, but believed in the possibility of turning technology into a positive force by means of cultural interventions. "In truth", he wrote, "nature begins to relate to us only when we begin to dwell in it, when culture begins in it. Culture then develops and, bit by bit, nature is refashioned. We create our own world, shaped by thoughts and controlled not merely by natural signs but by ends that we set to serve ourselves as intellectual and spiritual beings, an environment that is related to us and brought into being by us."[16] It is no coincidence that Mies van der Rohe read much of Guardini's work and that his copies of the latter's books are abundantly underlined, as Detlef Mertins showed in his 2014 book on Mies.[17] Architecture assumes the role par excellence of an intermediary between technology and humanity, but also between culture and nature.

For many reasons, the thoughts of Guardini, like those of Van der Rohe, can seem idealistic and naive. We know now that even if people are not determined by technology, they often master techniques, machines or inventions with only few positive consequences. Even a humanist belief in the undivided positive aspects of culture and architecture no longer seems to be of this day and age. And yet it remains that architecture, probably more than any other human activity, is the activity that expresses this belief most insistently. Ultimately, this is what people can expect from architecture: the justification of the hope that humanity can continue to develop positively.

14. Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 119.
15. J.M. Coetzee, *A House in Spain* (Amsterdam, 2000), pp. 13–14.
16. Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como* (Grand Rapids, 1994), p. 10.
17. Detlef Mertins, *Mies* (London, 2014), pp. 158–60.