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Architecture in the Age of Spatial Dissolution

Douglas Darden

> The whole of mankind has become an imaginary museum: where shall we go this weekend — visit the Angkor ruins or take a stroll in the Tivoli of Copenhagen? We can very easily imagine a time close at hand when any fairly well-to-do person will be able to leave his country indefinitely in order to taste his own national death in an interminable, aimless voyage.
>
> —Paul Ricoeur,
> "History and Truth"

> You'll learn that in this house it's hard to be a stranger. You'll also learn that it's not easy to stop being one. If you miss your country, every day you'll find more reasons to miss it. But if you manage to forget it and begin to love your new place, you'll be sent home, and then, uprooted once more, you'll begin a new exile.
>
> —Maurice Blanchot,
> "Vicious Circles"

Jean Baudrillard has observed that our countryside appears to be an "immense deserted body whose expanse and dimensions seem arbitrary": both time and space collapse under the "ecstasy of communication."[1]

From the physical mobility we achieved early this century by means of the car/train/plane, we have combined the technologies of information (telephone/telegraph/television/film/photography/video/computer) to establish a network of communication that has given us an ever larger and more comprehensive mental mobility, dissolving our perceptual limits of space and time. While it is commonplace for us to consider that the communication technologies have annexed the world to our senses, most of us are less cognizant that these technologies have outdistanced our psyches so that point/speed/duration/placement no longer matter. In our present condition the essential continuity between mind and body is demolished; human physical work is buried beneath a smoothly operational, microelectronic silence, inert to our senses, and lacking all but an inaccessible miniaturized scale.

In short, our culture has ceased to be somatic. Instead, it has become a matter of circuitry, a tangle of ganglions and our own entangled with it.[2]

These alterations in our perceptual framework fiercely combat the idealism of meaning which has persistently nourished Western architecture. All valorized notions of physical place, space, scale and sequence are jettisoned as they pass through the enormous ratio-functional network of communication. Without ever assuming tangible form, the technologies of information offer the simulation of space, visually seductive, yet incorporeal; scintillating, yet transient. They extend forever a solidarity of cybernetic action, while containing it on a 12-inch screen.

In our ardent desire to bring all things closer, we enter spaces less often than space enters us — the ductile supplants the tactile. In this single dimension of information, we cannot feel the presence of a human body nor the substance of a home.[3] Public and private spaces implode and dissolve.

Once the stage for all human interaction, architecture is now submerged by the non-place realm of communication and its continual circulation. With ever-greater ease, architecture is experienced through the network of its simulation and reproduction.

It was Walter Benjamin who in 1928 in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* first elicited the implications essential in these processes of reproduction. Benjamin showed that the techniques of reproduction absorb the technologies of production.[4] Baudrillard has pointed out, subsequently, that increased processes of reproduction have lead to the "real" becoming "that (to) which it is not only possible to give an equivalent ... but that which already has one."[5] It is at this level of production and reproduction that architecture finds itself in the process of being consumed.

Technologies of communication are disseminating more and more information about all places on our globe. These places cannot be "produced" by the sources of communication (that is still impossible), they can only be reproduced — photographed, filmed and televised. The critical feature in this process is LOSS: "Even the most perfect reproduction is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."[6] As information about a place is sent through the waves of communication, the meaning of that place is detached from the domain of its tradition. It is dismantled, made-over ("edited") and multiplied as a simulation for apprehension.

Through the means of shaping information about a particular place, that place conditions our perception of all the other places which will be communicated: Differences are either smoothed over or annulled by the very means of communication.

We say, for example, that the camera "sees all" through the purview of its frame. Yet it empties out the sense qualities of space and dissociates space from experience: As photography takes possession of space, it diminishes spatial differences.

In the epistemological net which envelops our existence, we no longer refer to ourselves as being drawn out of Nature, but of "nature" drawn out of us. So did Jackson Pollock confess inadvertently our entire age when after he was asked if he "worked from nature," he responded, "I am nature." We no

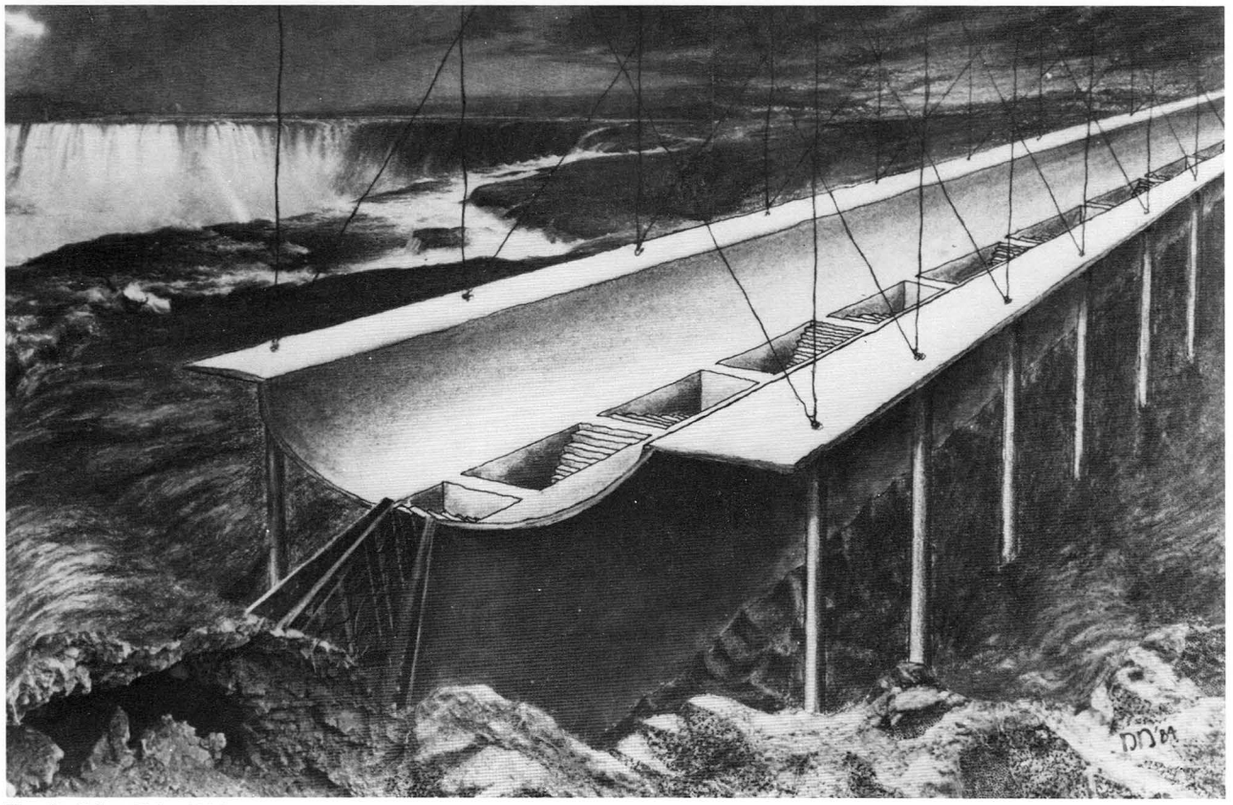
longer pretend to participate with nature. We reproduce nature and claim it as ourselves.

Architectural meaning also has been derived from the application of its history: by continual indentification and iteration, particular formal relations have accrued the aura of incontrovertible and self-evident truth. Principles of geometry and proportion have been used de facto under a similar ideology. The totality of these principles now atrophy beneath the aegis of our satellized and microelectronic world.

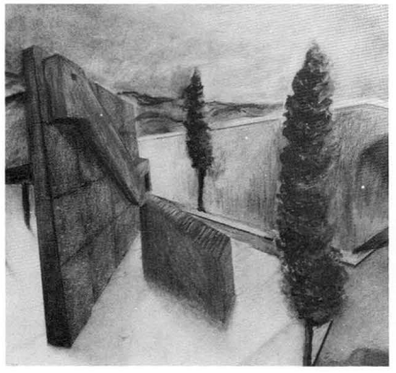
The work of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty suggests a different locus for architectural meaning. Merleau-Ponty presents a preserving phenomenology — at once primordial and contemporary, a fundamental conception out of which architectural inquiry can grow.

In his meditations after the Holocaust, Merleau-Ponty observed: "Introspection gave me almost nothing; on the other hand, everyday experience showed by body to be expressive."[9] After World War II, a war which perhaps more than any other demonstrated the catastrophe of reason (and which, in retrospect, was in need of meticulous dissection by all thinking persons), Merleau-Ponty set out to re-establish the roots of his own mind in the council of his body. Through his body Merleau-Ponty saw himself "rediscover a commerce with the world and a presence to the world which was older than intelligence."[10] He discovered that the body was neither an object known from without nor a pure subject completely transparent to itself, but rather "a way of being for the world from within it." His body was not only an object among objects, but that which "sees and touches them."

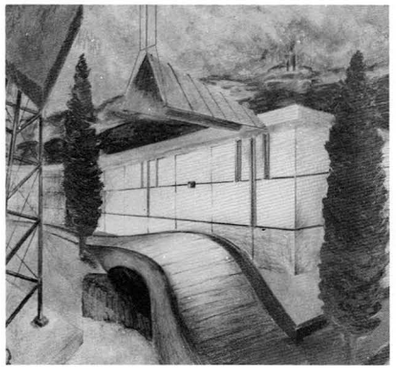
Consequently, Merleau-Ponty created a phenomenology which was not simply the study of how objects appear, but was a description of the way objects *arise*. This philosophy provides a study of the



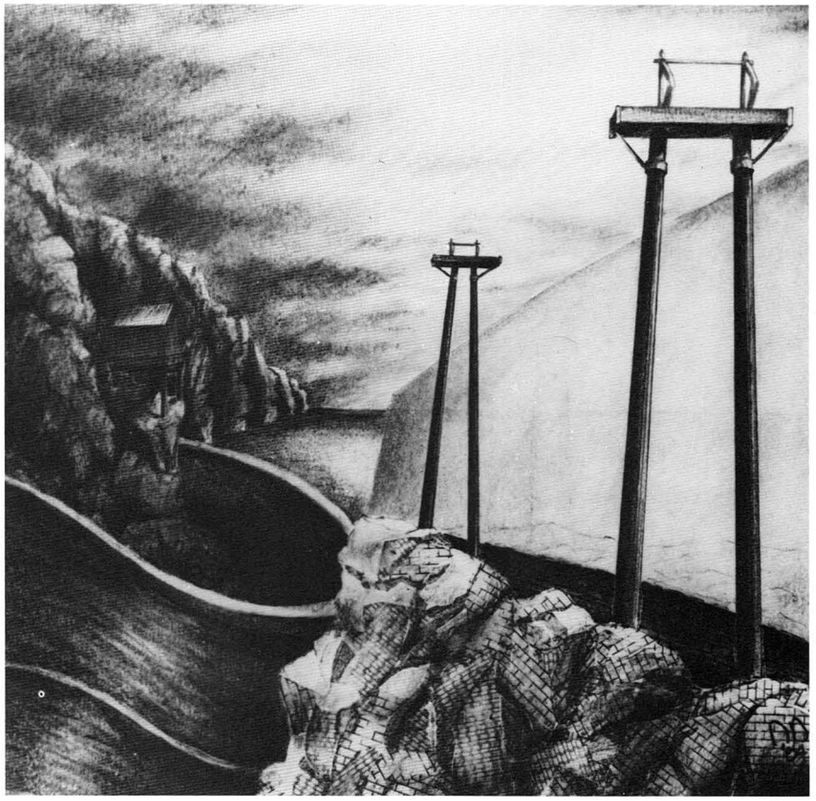
Hegel's Other Gale, 1984.



For the Woman with One Arm, 1984.



Entry Somewhat, 1984.



Symptoms of Refuse, 1984.

geneology of perceptual meanings and an aesthetics of lived experience counterposed to that of the well-designed object and the libertine pleasure of a text.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology asserts that the body is the pre-objective ground of all experience and the fundamental locus for the registration of meaning. The body is the possessor of irreducible authenticity, yet the ontology of sense and non-sense.

In this conception, the world is stable for us, but never completely secure. It's meaningful, yet menaced by disorder. Since the body is not in space the way things are, the body is neither an instrument nor a means. Instead, the body *intends, inhabits* and *haunts* space. The body is our expression in the world — the visible form of our intentions, fulfilled and desired.[11]

In the wider annexation of our senses to the technologies of communcation, Merleau-Ponty thus posits the body as a conserving source of disposition and of meaning. His philosophy recognizes that what is remembered in the body is remembered well; that what we learn and know in our culture is registered by the way we shake hands and how we talk in front of our door.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy suggests a fundamental origin of meaning for our culture. As such, it also posits an origin for meaning for architecture through the phenomenology of the living act of drawing.

To draw is to image with one's own body. And by lending one's body to the world, the architect changes the world into drawings and on into buildings.

A mind alone cannot draw, and no matter what telematic worlds are eventually offered to us, drawing is nothing if it doesn't strike out from the impulses of the body. To draw we must go to the actual body — not to a chunk of clay, nor a vessel of space, but to that body which is the intertwining of physical effort, movement — and our visceral vision.

Cezanne once said, "Quality, light, color, depth, which are all there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them."[12] If we as architects believe this, we realize that all things have an internal equivalent: Form and space are an annex, a prolongation of the body; they are encrusted into its flesh, a part of the body's full dimension and definition. By these correspondences we acknowledge that our body is made of nothing less than of what we make our perceived world. The body is our point of view, and whatever we make intensifies that view.

This way of turning the world around — this carnalization of the world — is also a way of saying that vision is an incident of the body. Were we to strike the architect blind, there is no reason the architect could still not make architecture: One's vision resides behind the fleshy structure of perception. An arch, a cantilever, an extraordinary stair — all have their presence because they have a profound allegiance to the human body. To draw architecture is but to make an amplification of the structure of our flesh and our body's will to live.

While we may argue that a drawing does the same thing, it is different from photography for two salient reasons. Unlike photography, drawing neither asks us to accept its images as wholly "real," nor is it proliferated as a simulacrum of the real. In other words, drawing is never perched above the level of human artifice. It is intended as a device of representation, and as Picasso quipped, "mis-representation" (unavoidable interpretation), but never of re-presentation."

On the other hand, photographs are not seen as statements on the world, so much as unpremeditated slices of it. They are the catcher of the moment and the dispenser of the truth. While photography is certainly involved with interpretation, this capacity is subjugated before the tyranny of its authenticity. In the contemporary systems of information, photography not only reproduces the modern world and recycles it, as Susan Sontag points out, the photograph *is* the modern world and executes its work in a hyper-real thrill of exactitude.[7]

Beyond this thrill of immersion in photographic facts, we are immersed further in film. Film is a stream of temporality where nothing stops and where nothing is conserved or kept. (By way of comparison, even in the family album, the photograph allows us virtual escape from our loss and from our fate.) In film nothing is isolated as an object, and nothing is *touched*, disposing of the very fact of any physical existence.

The net effect of these systems of information is that we are experiencing an overwhelming thrust towards greater uniformity of our built environment. The different architectural definitions we give to one place and to another are vanishing, and in the cycles of production and reproduction everyplace becomes the same. The systems which inform us of a particular place nullify at the same time any differences from other places, imposing the effect of *indifference.*

As places are programmed in and blipped out, produced and reproduced, they become indistinguishable from their mediated simulacrae and from all other places. Spaces — real, mediated and imagined — melt into a mammoth digital veil of equivalences.

By having such a vast system of equivalences, the potential risk is that we ourselves will be consumed in a world without difference and without value: We will live in a varnished world where everything is shielded from difference and sheared to a wafer — thin homogeneity. Far beyond these consequences is the staggering implication that as the simulacrae of mass media become evermore seductive through the vertigo of their nondifference, they become a more encompassing yet reductive system of cognitive thought.

In turn, our recognition of the value of architecture — at one time, crucial in identifying and communicating our cultural beliefs — is obliterated. While architecture itself is undeniably tactile, our habits of communication determine to a large extent our empirical reception. As architecture has been inserted into the global constellation of information, it becomes a shadow of its former self. Architecture loses the privileged position it once had in society to represent anything more than a tectonic fact of building.

Now it is crucial that architecture invest itself not only in its modes of production but the modes of its disappearance. If it does not, it may be left as a senile idealism, an archaic envelope. Under these conditions, architecture could become a vestige of human relations, released from its psychic determinations and shelved on the periphery of our time.

> What has left its mark on the development of organisms is the history of the earth we live in and of its relation to the sun. Every modification which is thus imposed upon the course of the organism's life is accepted by the conservative organic instincts and stored up for further repetition. Those instincts are therefore bound to give a deceptive appearance of being forces tending towards progress and whilst in fact they are merely seeking an ancient goal by paths alike old and new.
>
> —Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle"

The horizon of events in this century defies our ready conversion of the past into a useful act: memory and meaning deflate in the implosion of technique. Nonetheless, it is our impulse (whether we accept this implosion or not) to uncover a grain, a locus, a stillpoint, of understanding. No matter how frail the connection, we resist the dissolution of architecture and turn in a direction where we can reassert its meaning.

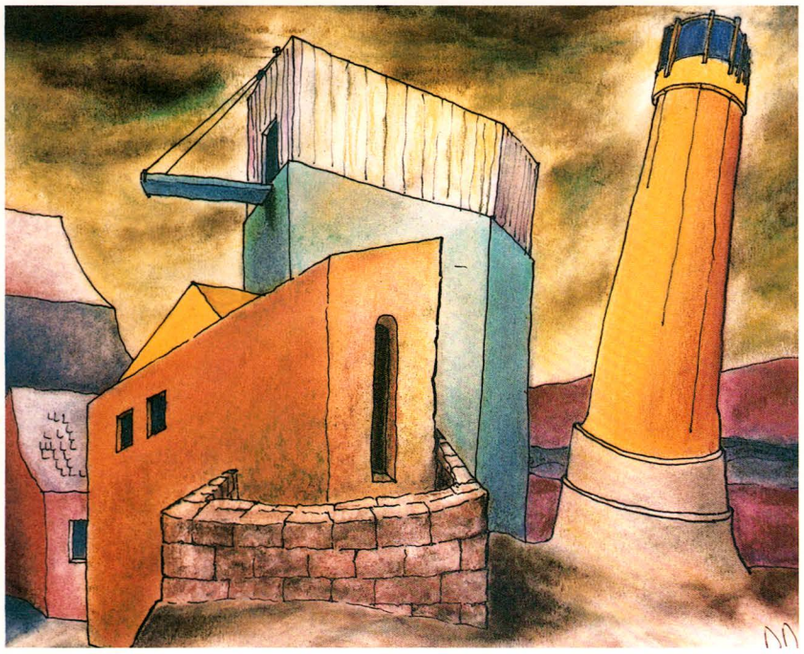
The current draining off of architecture through the circuits of simulacrae deny us from establishing architectural meaning in the terms once afforded to us by the constructs of vision (the pictorial and the scenographic), and by the constructs of anthropocentrism (axiality, centrality, tripartition). These constructs are the husks of classicism.

In classical architecture, nature supplied the fundamental locus for meaning. Nature was at once the prime mover and the signifier of resonant creation. Today, the "once great referent, Nature, is dead; it has been replaced by 'environment,' a term which simultaneously designates and designs its death and its restoration as a model of simulation (its 'reconstitution,' as one says of orange juice that has been dehydrated).[8]

In the current dissolutions of architecture, there remains in the process of architectural conception through the act of drawing the irrevocable presence of the human body. As the body draws, it is the vessel and the maker of our life and of our will to live. A work of architecture is the articulation of a body aware of itself as a world. This knowledge, in turn, is registered in built works of architecture at every threshold and under every roof. '

While we wrap ourselves more completely in the cables of communication, we nonetheless live through our bodies. The production of architecture sustains sentient knowledge of ourselves. This knowledge is found in the shortness of our breath at the top of a stair and in the pressure in our chest before a stone enclosure. It is found in our induced gait as we enter a hall, and in the craning of our neck as we are drawn into a tall room. The empathy between who we are and what we make has the power to overcome the proliferation of simulacrae and replace such losses with cogent explanations for our life on this physical planet.

Through these explanations we can believe that architecture will stir up the paradoxes which surround it and help us go beyond the incoherent agitations of our age. Such work will allow us to recover the colossal vitality which endorses our imagination and our lives as physical beings. In reaching past the silent glistening wires of our technical operations, we may touch again our architecture, assuring us that we will be touched, in turn, by it.



Jersey I, 1984.

Jersey II, 1984.

NOTES

1. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmondern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Bay Press, 1983), p. 129.
2. Carter Radcliff, "Rosenquist's Rouge, "*Artforum International*, Summer 1985, p. 94.
3. Baudrillard, p. 131.
4. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York, Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 98.
5. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 146.
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7. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, Delta, 1982), p. 174.
8. Baudrillard, *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Telos, 1981), p. 202.
9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, translated with a preface by Hubert Dreyfus & Patricia Dreyfus (Chicago, North-Western University Press, 1978), p. xii.
10. Ibid., p. xii
11. Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, edited with an introduction by James Edie (Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 1964), p.5.
12. Ibid., p. 164

CREDITS

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