

## Foreword

David Spurr

The purpose of a “research companion,” let us suppose, is to prepare the ground for new research by providing good examples of it and by encouraging reflection on the field of study to which it is dedicated. The following remarks are intended in the spirit of this latter aim. What unites the studies in this volume is the question of how works of literature and of architecture take form in relation to one another in the context of the urban environment. A number of reflections can be made on how this happens, in the hope that they may serve as points of reference for the reader of these richly diverse essays. Their heterogeneity implicitly acknowledges the generous scope of what we choose to call “literature,” which in the present volume literature ranges from comics to lyric poetry, and “architecture,” which here encompasses everything from shopping centres to Renaissance utopias. In the interest of simplicity, let us say that literature is the art of writing and that architecture is the art of building.

A useful way of understanding the relation between literature and architecture is to consider their relative degrees of autonomy from the economic and social forces which, in the modern era, are most concentrated in cities. On this scale, and at least in an ideal sense, literature enjoys more independence than architecture. It is produced in relative solitude and freedom. If works of literature are initially composed in a single language, they are not limited by the nature of a site or by the availability of specific concrete materials. Hegel considered poetry, and by extension other literary forms, to be both the most subjective and the most universal of all the arts. Subjective because its essential content is the inner life of the subject itself; universal in that its material is the imagination, thereby making it the universal foundation of all the other arts (II.967).

Architecture has other constraints and other possibilities. One of the postcards Bernard Tschumi created in the 1970s as “advertisements for architecture” states that “architecture only survives where it negates the form that society expects of it.” This view has to be balanced with that of a critic like Georges Bataille, for whom works of architecture in general are expressions of authority: primarily that of Church and State but, by extension, that of bourgeois value and of market forces. The truth lies between these two extremes. If we are to distinguish architecture from building, it has an aesthetic dimension by definition; but works

of architecture are also necessarily collaborative, site-specific, and functional. They are designed for living and working, and so are connected materially to their surroundings. The conception of a project may come from the architect's imagination, but its realization is the result of series of compromises between that conception and the objective forces in the economy and society. The number of actors involved introduces an element of chance, even of chaos, into the process—unlike a literary work, which is the creation of its author, with whatever cultural baggage the author brings to it.

Much of the criticism of architecture today, some of which is to be found in this volume, quite reasonably sees the most visible works of contemporary architecture as concrete manifestations of the forces of capital, forces which, paradoxically, encourage the invention of ever new forms and images. However, the implication of architecture in institutions of power also forms part of the collective experience of daily life on a less than fully conscious level, to the extent that the urban environment is experienced in a passively receptive and repetitive manner. A literary work, by contrast, requires a measure of sustained concentration on the reader's part, and if it enters the collective consciousness it does so only indirectly. One of the merits of the essays in this volume is to show how literary works can rouse us from passivity in the face of the built environment by drawing forth the narrative and metaphorical possibilities of that environment.

The difference between the literary work and the built work of architecture also resides in what Peter Eisenman calls the “being-only-once” of the latter, which can be contrasted to the nature of a literary work. The primary form of a literary work is the text—certain words in a certain order—which remains essentially the same throughout its reproduction in different typefaces and material supports such as books, periodicals, and computer screens. But a building constitutes a unique instance of itself on a given site: even in a series of seemingly identical tract houses, each occupies its own position with its particular exposure to the surrounding land, light and air.

Of the three terms which make up the title of this volume, the city is the most subject to social and economic forces, as well as to the haptic and aleatory nature of daily incident. Most cities have their origin on a favorable natural site, and they evolve organically as a function of trade and the concentration of power. There are planned cities, like Brasilia and Canberra, but these somehow never quite work out according to plan, and are overtaken by demographic or

economic forces unforeseen in the original conception. The three terms of our title, then, can be placed on a scale ranging from subjectivity to objectivity, from solitude to collectivity, from artistic autonomy to the functional embodiment of institutional and market forces. If all of this seems overly schematic, that is because it is, but I have made it so as a preliminary move because the specificity of each of these cultural forms must be taken into account in order to gain an understanding of the dynamic ways in which they interact. Much of the energy represented in the present volume is devoted to the study of those dynamics.

Literature and architecture are distinct cultural forms, but they communicate between themselves. Let us look at their common ground. A long tradition holds that architecture is structured like a language, with its own vocabulary and grammar. More recent theory has extended the metaphor to the point where architecture can be seen as a form of writing, if one understands writing in the largest sense to be an inscription or trace bearing a coded and symbolic meaning, as in Derrida's notion of "archi-writing." Even if we commonly distinguish between writing and architectural form, a definition of their absolute difference is difficult to formulate. Architecture writes itself, among other ways, through the distribution of interior spaces, as in a Gothic cathedral, where the movement eastward from portal to sanctuary to altar to choir enacts the narrative of the soul's journey toward eternity. The worshipper's relation to this sequence of spaces is analogous to the reader's relation to the printed text; both of them produce meaning from the material disposition of symbolic elements; both of them organize the subject's perception and thought. But a literary text, of course, is more than a sequence of conventional symbols. It testifies implicitly to an inner life, to an interiority which lies beyond purely linguistic formulation, and which the text represents in the form of enigma and indeterminacy. This metaphorical interiority belongs to architecture as well, in its spaces of alterity and mystery.

The human body and psyche are affected by architectural space in powerful but often imperceptible ways. Beyond the literal interior of architectural space, then, there lies a further interiority opened up by the subjective experience of that space in feeling and in spirit, derived from the manifold perception of substance, material, depth, light, shadow, and sound. Like literary form, architectural form, in the senses of its design and its material substance, is capable of recalling cultural memory, telling a story, and transforming human subjectivity. This is one condition of what we might call its authenticity. The notion of architecture's authenticity raises the question of its possible relation to truth, which, as in the case of

literature, has always been a vexed question. To the extent that either art approaches its own truth, however, that truth cannot consist of mere imitation; it must rather have to do with an original and lasting relation to space and materials in the case of architecture, and to language in the case of literature. Even so, such truths will be variously understood. If an architectural work constitutes a “being-only-once,” the human experience of it does not; as in the case of the literary work, its meaning is subject to the vagaries of individual interpretation and cultural transformations. The “truth” of architecture or of literature is always something unexpected.

Since the industrial revolution, cities have been the primary site of literary and architectural production. One might even say that modern literature and architecture are about the city. On one hand, the urban environment provides the principal setting for works of literary modernism. On the other hand, architectural modernism derives both its function and its meaning from the same environment in the form of office buildings, apartment buildings, museums, universities and concert halls. In the urban context, however, there is a difference between the relative degrees of imposition of the two arts; you don’t have to read *Ulysses*, but if you work in downtown Chicago it is hard to avoid the Sears Tower and the rectilinear grid of streets on which it stands. The movements of daily life are irresistibly structured and channeled by urban architecture.

The fact that a city is made physically of an ensemble of built structures makes it difficult for individual architectural works to gain a critical distance on their surroundings, though there has been no shortage of avant-garde movements which have attempted to do so. It is rather an enlightened principle of modern architecture that it be in harmony with its context, a principle which in practice often produces buildings that reflect only too passively the forces that condition their existence. In contrast, literary works have more inherent freedom to adopt a critical stance toward this aspect of the city, and they have done so recently in their representations of architectural works that reflect the excesses of global capital. In one sense, the movement from modern to postmodern literature has been from the joys of the urban *flâneur* to the existential dread of the lonely city-dweller, and to the bewilderment of the modern subject in the face of a global system of power, finance, and information—a system embodied in the city yet incommensurable to the scale of individual human life and consciousness.

However, I want to close these remarks by insisting on the possibilities of sheer discovery shared by literature, architecture, and the city. The study of literature discovers meaning in the relations between the elements of the text, between this text and others, and between these and the world of meanings beyond the text. The study of architecture is no less one of discovery, of meaningful relations between spaces and materials, of the surprising forms these spaces can take, and of the uses to which they can be put. And the city, of course, is always the space of discovery in its infinite sequence of incident and occasion, its never-ending current of fresh impressions. Despite everything, what Samuel Johnson said is still true, that when one is tired of London, one is tired of life.

Jonathan Charley has gathered, from the world over, an impressive array of studies marked throughout by the sense of discovery. He introduces a welcome companion for the exploration of a new and thriving field.

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