

History and Theory Studies, Second Year

What is Architecture? How to Architecture?

Object, Language, Experience: Construction Process as Theatre



People watching the construction of the Angel of the North,
Photography by BBC (1998)

Table of Contents

Prologue.....	4
The Object	
<i>The Specific Moment.....</i>	<i>6</i>
Architecture : a Language that Constantly Writes	
<i>The Building's Transmogrification.....</i>	<i>7</i>
Experiencing the Performance	
<i>The Beauty of the Naked.....</i>	<i>9</i>
Epilogue.....	10
Bibliography.....	15

Object, Language, Experience: Construction Process as Theatre

Prologue

Noises, led lights, grey sky, cars and trucks; A167 road was the epitome of prosaicism. A procession of car crossed Darlington, Coatham Mundeville, Newton Aycliffe, Chilton, Ferryhill, Thinford, Durham, Chester-le-Street, and Lamesley ; where the beauty of gargantuan scale, almost ochre colour, and colossal wings interrupted the commonness of the journey. The translation of the biological, organic form into orthogonal clear planes and faces predominated the twenty meters high and two thousand tonnes built mass. And suddenly, the object which by implication invites you to look to the whole of the context it occupies - the relationship between the sky and factory chimneys, the relationship of the built structure with the tower blocks, and its own relationship with the open fields - stands on a small mount. During the night of 14th February 1997, a 48 wheeled lorry passed over old mining villages; people came out of their pubs and homes and sheered this procession of the gigantic body recessing on the lorry. The next day at 6.30 in the morning the sublime elevation of the massive body gathered

thousands of people that watched this absolutely spectacular phenomena. The mundane scenery was demolished with the striking assembly of Antony Gormley's sculpture "Angel of the North".

"The Angel's night-time arrival was spectacular" says Sid Henderson ¹

The "Angel of the North" – as an art object – manifests the theatricality of its creation process. However could the construction process of a building be theatrical similarly to the art object? Every *Object*² has its own *Specific Moment*³ during its construction *process* where the present moment arouses powerful emotions and stirring reminiscences; where the moment engraves the object's presence in the memory of the viewers/spectators and its creator. The art object is made to express ideologies, ideas, feelings to the wider public. The art object is exposed to viewers once it's creator decides the piece is finished. The purpose of the Object is to be displayed to the public; it is created for the public. Likewise, the building's aim is to communicate ideologies, ideas, feelings, but its greater function is to be inhabited. Thus, for a building to be inhabitable, it needs to be finished. Since we look and experience art and architecture as finished Objects, does the Object have an end and die after the Specific Moment ? The essay attempts to discuss the role of the process; the process which is endless and performative.

¹ Then chairman of Gateshead Council's Libraries and Art Committee, Sid Henderson says "The Angel's night-time arrival was spectacular" during an interview with BBC.

² In this essay, *Object* refers to art pieces and buildings that had an open creation process, where the public was able to watch the process.

³ This essay refers to *Specific Moment* as the period in which the Object has a strong impact on people who were engaged in its creation process.

The Object

The Specific Moment



Photography of the Angel of The North travelling on a 48 wheeled lorry

One must say the theatricality of a piece of art is conspicuous compared to the one of an architectural object. Nevertheless, art and architecture share similarities, especially in their creation process – during which the Specific Moment occurs –. We can assembly all the process branches under a general title which is the communication mode such as sketching, model making or drawing. There are two optional means of achieving the representational type of communication; models and design drawings. The sketch or designing models either for an art piece or for an architectural object are produced during the design process. P.S. Oles writes in his 1979 essay, *Architectural illustration : the value delineation process*⁴ that the horizontal and vertical sectional drawings deliver a development of many phases of the design process. There are subtypes of schematic drawings

⁴ Oles, Paul. Stevenson. 1979. *Architectural Illustration : The Value Delineation Process*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold 1979. In his 1979 essay, Oles discusses the different existing means for the process as well as their advantages and disadvantages.

that are valuable in conveying certain kinds of overlapping relationship over the many parts of a complex Object. A separate subcategory has been introduced by the Dutch graphic artist, M. C. Escher, who studied impossible relationships within the frame of conventional drawing types. Escher's art works combine representational drawing techniques with warped, stretched, reflected, or typologically distorted geometries. The Architect James Stirling in 1978, draws Staatsgalerie Stuttgart by combining perspective and schematic drawing types; the entrance in elevation and the canopy in perspective from below. In this regards, the process of an art object and an architectural object follows the same methodologies.

Each Object has a creation story that includes different chapters that contain special instants. These special instants make the Object memorable for those who played a role in the making process of the Object and those who observed this process. At the moment when the Angel of the North's first wing was attached to the body without any support - a very nervous scene for Gormley – if there were wind to blow too heavily the sculpture could have collapsed. The beauty of the scene can't be neglected because of experienced sensations: fear, astonishment, admiration and excitement were at their apogee until the second wing was put into place. The Specific Moment is experienced during a short period of time which can be identified as the present moment since the action takes place at a particular point in time. In the course of the Angel's elevation viewers were strongly touched by the impressive scene staged by the end of the construction. Thus, the art object accomplished its function by being exposed to the public and procuring people different emotions and experiences.

*"There was this sense of complete engagement of the crowd, silent, in a way, emotional. There was a moment when I saw this man in floods of tears. I had to go up to ask what's going on and he said :
I lost twenty of my mates in this place, 15 years ago..."*

Antony Gormley, Zoom talk, Construction as Theatre (2020), Arup Group

In this sense the Object's end is marked by the happening of the Specific Moment since it reaches its profound function: meeting the public. Once the process is finished, and so is the Specific Moment, does the Object encounter its finitude?

We often see and experience architecture as a finished object. The object confronts its finitude once the construction process ends. Be that as it may, architecture is also experienced after its finitude when the physical

building begins to be inhabited. Thus, paradoxically, the Object's finitude gives the object a new existence. The *building's* end which is the finishing of the construction process that marks the finitude of the object, serves as a transition from the construction process to the *living process*. In a sense, the object "dies" to reach another existence. The transition from building as a verb describing the construction – the doingness – to building as a noun which is the shelter, the physical space – the thingness – is what makes the object an infinite entity. A building has an endless process of metamorphosis. Hagia Sophia's architecture not only reflects the amalgamation of people and cultures existing in Istanbul but also the History of the city. In May 1453, people of the city learned that the Sultan Mehmet decided on the date of the storming of Constantinople. On May 29, women, children, monks, priests walked around the walls to encourage the defenders who were fewer than the attackers. The Turks came to the church fighting all, killing and taking prisoners. The doors of the church were shut and once the attackers entered the church they either imprisoned or killed people who took refuge in the church. As R. Krautheimer writes in his book *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*⁵, "In this hour, continues the chronicle, they smashed the holy Pictures to pieces while ripping off the decoration; [...] they plundered and damaged everything. The transmogrification of buildings underlines the fact that architecture is never frozen in one specific moment but continues to be constructed and molded in a vast period of time and perhaps a building is a collection of static moments and has in itself many Specific Moments which makes the process endless. Hagia Sophia is a witness of the multiple cultures and ideologies present in Turkey. There is the reality of an accumulation of memory in every stage of its metamorphosis because it imprints multiple Specific Moments. These moments engrave the Object not only in the present and future, but also in the past. Architectural identity has never been static because of its transitional character. The different visual and technical features of the building, let us deduce the many phases the building went through while its transmogrification process. Therefore, I can argue that the metamorphosis of the building – including the creation and the living process - is a medium of communication.

⁵ Krautheimer. Richard, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*. 1897. New Haven ; London : Yale University Press, 1986

Architecture: A Language that Constantly Writes

The Building's Transmogrification

Architecture is a language that constantly writes. As seen in the previous example of Hagia Sophia, each left trace on the building is similar to words written on pages; buildings are monumental books that narrate the History and events that had an impact on the presence of the building. Another example would be The Cathedral Notre Dame de Paris. In Chapter IV of *Notre Dame de Paris*, Victor Hugo writes that the cathedral has barely withstood the test of time. The various traces of destruction that still scar its façade was the consequence of the French Revolution. A large part of the cathedral was ransacked by opponents of the monarchy. Consequently, by the time of the novel, the façade had lost a countless number of statues and even a flight of eleven steps leading to the front entrance. As the narrator remarks: “Time is blind, man stupid”⁶. As each age has attempted to imprint its sense of beauty on the cathedral's facade, it lost a definite period of time to call its own, becoming a "transition edifice". It has the memory of multiple constructions embodied in it. The endless metamorphosis process of a building gives us the opportunity to read through the building not only History but also politics, human condition, desires, and memories. As John Hejduk says in an interview with Peter Eisenman “Architecture more than its physicality has feelings and memories in it.”

Constructing the building can be seen as the first left trace in the infinite process. Nonetheless, the origin of the trace is diffused in a sense that it can have many origins and it can be difficult to define these origins. Should we accept the construction on site as the first trace? One can argue that the making of the material used in the construction process such is the first trace. Thus, the definition of the first moment that left the very first trace is undefinable. In the second phase of the process, hence the living process, people that inhabit or use the building leave physical traces of their existence on the building. Buildings and architecture incur different and multiple attacks on their initial existence since each user fragments the building and tries to change - the way the building articulates with its first design intension - according to its owners' needs. There is an impossibility of escaping

⁶ Hugo, Victor, *Notre Dame de Paris* 1831, Paris: Hachette Jeunesse. 1949

the act of leaving traces since the building is a trace in itself because of the physicality of being built, and being inhabited but also being destroyed.

Experiencing the Performance

The Beauty of the Naked



Photography of Gordon Matta Clark cutting a slab⁷

Once we accept that a building never dies and that it has an infinite process of transformation, we need to understand, as viewers/spectators the way we perceive this performative process. Do we perceive it through a choreography of space, an interaction and engagement with the object, a human sensorial experience...? Gordon Matta Clark in his piece of collaborative project, *Anarchitecture* (1974), reveals something unusual, the unknown and unpaid attention features of the building. He opens a window for the viewer to view through a performance. With the simple gesture of a cut, Gordon Matta Clark steps into the post-inhabitation process. With

⁷ Bessa. Antonio. Sergio ; Fiore. Jessamyn. *Gordon Matta Clark: Anarchitect*. New Haven : The Bronx Museum of the Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2017.

his performative play, Matta Clark enrolls a *metteur-en-scène* role and decides on the frame of the scene. The performative movement/operation Matta Clark undertakes, gives a theatricality to the design process of his art. The theatricality of the Object in its creation process is amplified by the choreographed movements of the artist. Matta Clark is showing the beauty of the naked when he deconstructs a building. In fact by deconstructing, he exhibits the construction process of the building since the viewers see the covered inner parts of the walls likewise we would see in unfinished buildings in construction process. The construction site of a building, thus resembles to the theatricality which is inherent in the process of making an art object. It enhances sensorial experiences such as visual pleasure when a large object is raised in the sky to be installed into place and installed as seen in Antony Gormley's *Angel of The North* or perhaps auditive disturbance when a jackhammer drills the floor.

Epilogue

The Specific Moment defined as the period in which the Object has a strong impact on people who were engaged in its creation process is the general moment where multiple special instants are inscribed, and make the process memorable. Once the object faces its finitude, it achieves a new existence stage where the object is not only visually exposed to the people but is also being lived and experienced by them, changing the way the building articulates as designed. In this existence process of the building many performative moments occur; either while in its construction process, inhabitation process but also in its post habitation process during which the building turns to an art object by being this time deconstructed as illustrated earlier with the work of Gordon Matta Clark. The life cycle of the object can perhaps be reduced to *creation, inhabitation, deconstruction* which potentially acts as a rebirth of the object, thus returning to its starting point of being theatrically constructed and seen as an art object. We have an unconscious aspiration to construction. Settled living started by placing a stone on the

ground, linking the Earth and the sky as discussed in Antony Gormley's angel of the North. There is a symbolic dimension within the construction that reunites different cultures.

The analysis raises the question "How do we perceive the Object?" largely discussed by Harman Graham in his lecture *Objects, A Brief Description*⁸ and in his book *The Third Table*. Harman Graham talks about the Object-Oriented Ontology where he discusses the different ways we can perceive an object. The object he takes as an example is a simple table. Firstly, a table is a physical structure with atoms so it has a scientific connotation. Secondly, a table has cultural aspects with traditional and historical connotation. According to Graham the object can be perceived through multiple perspectives and is also an entity that can change through time. He argues that the object should be independent of its qualities and that qualities can change over time. On this subject, Objects have the ability to change and to acquire new existences and architecture as an object is constantly in flux, it changes identity during its endless process of metamorphosis that contains multiple Specific moments which make the process performative. Finally, I would argue that architecture is the outcome of construction and in any case the instrument used for architecture.

⁸ Graham. Harman. 2007. *Objects, A Brief Description*, Lecture, 2007.

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