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Hermeneutics, Architecture and Belonging

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Abstract

For many aestheticians, architecture occupies a difficult position within the pantheon of the arts. Hegel's normative approach leaves architecture limited in its truth-disclosing capacity due to its brute physicality. This paper argues, with Gadamer, that this physicality is fundamental to architecture's role in establishing a space for the emergence of all other art forms. As such, architectural space creates a space for the creation of and encounter with all other forms of cultural expression. Architecture, therefore, both includes decoration and is, in its very nature, decorative. It is bound to imposing its aesthetic content and then foregrounding its contents in order to facilitate the encounter between viewer and art work.

Gadamer's interpretation of architecture thus requires a rehabilitation of ornamentation which refutes Hegel's separation of ornament in his reading of architecture. Ornamentation becomes inseparably related to the harmony of the architectural work as the whole, its *komospoeisis*. This reciprocity between ornament and the work as a whole is an analogue of the relationship between architecture and 'bildung'. Once shaped by culture, architecture becomes the 'house' in which culture is established and sustained. As a result, Gadamer restores the connection between art and the ethical life of a community that is lost in Romanticism where the artist is sequestered through the concept of genius.

The paper makes reference to selected passages from *Truth and Method*, *On the Relevance of the Beautiful* and other select essays by Gadamer. Although for such a brief presentation an exhaustive account of the advantages of a hermeneutic approach to architecture cannot be provided, the paper suggests that it is perhaps incorrect to debate its position within the pantheon of the arts, for, as Gadamer's approach highlights, it remains the foundational space of culture itself; the site in which culture and community are brought not only into being, but into question.

Keywords

Gadamer; Hermeneutics; Architecture; Ethos

1. Introduction

In Gadamerian aesthetics, through its space designating function, architecture occupies a position of distinct significance. Since architecture, for Gadamer, creates the settings in which art, as cultural expression emerges and is set to work, architecture and the other arts are placed into a relationship of contingency. Without architecture's mediation, the art work can obtain no real 'presence' (Gadamer 2013, 156.) In recognising *Dasein* as always-and-already situated in not only a physical world, but a system of norms and values, both emergent from and sustained by tradition, Gadamer's hermeneutics recognises architecture as the ground from which *Bildung* (culture) is physically articulated and thus questioned or sustained. Without this crucial process, dangerous ideas or indeed delicate balances of power cannot be fully comprehended and thus refuted. Gadamer identifies the richness of expression possessed by other art forms as uniquely present in architecture. A space that expresses something in itself, whilst facilitating cultural expression, or indeed a certain function; works of architecture make a claim that, although initially striking, necessarily recede to foreground its respective function or cultural meaning.

In a break with Hegelian aesthetics, architecture transcends the lowly position it's often afforded in aesthetic hierarchies, obtaining lasting relevance as that which establishes and sustains the ground for the cultural life of its own epoch and those that follow (Hegel 1998).¹ With architecture thus established, as a means of designating and articulating the priorities of a given community, in accordance with his wider project of reuniting ethics and poetics; Gadamer returns architecture to a position of centrality within the ethical life of the community of history; a unique expression of epochal ethos.

Gadamer's hermeneutic approach has several implications then for architecture and belonging. It gathers a work and its community together, creating a 'fitting' environ for hermeneutic dialogues to unfold. As works of permanence, architecture attests to the vital role of tradition in world-articulation, a theme central to Gadamer's understanding of *Dasein*'s self-realisation. It can serve to foster the community of spectators vital to the setting to work of the work of art, but also to aid in the recognition of *Dasein*'s membership to a wider community of historically effective cons-

1. Gadamer draws heavily on Heidegger in this reading. Progressing his idea of activities owned and designated by dwelling as articulated in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* in particular; but with crucial difference (Heidegger 2001). Gadamer stresses architecture's space designating function in order to develop a position that sees architecture as a womb from which other forms of art might be born. Whereas for Heidegger, earth's claim over being, overtly stresses a rootedness incompatible in many ways with our modern living (Harries 1998). Gadamer's reading, on the other hand, based in *poesis* or the articulation of a world provides for the evolution of architectural expression within the laterally expanding horizon of our spatial understanding.

sciousness. As that which resounds with the 'echoes of the past' it occupies a central position in the memory of collective historically effective consciousness, and reconciles the divide between the architect and artist forced into being by the post-enlightenment rise of 'genius'.

In order to understand the fruitful revision of architecture provided in Gadamer's aesthetics, the following paper will examine the references made to architecture within a range of texts by Gadamer: *The Artwork in Word and Image*, *On the Relevance of the Beautiful*, *The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century* and his magnum opus: *Truth and Method* (Gadamer and Bernasconi 1986; Gadamer and Palmer 2007; Gadamer and Linge 1977; Gadamer 2013.) This brief introduction to Gadamer's architectural theory will be presented thematically, firstly to the role of the architectural work as playful interlocutor, and the vital role of play in the emergence of cultural critique. Following this, a brief examination of Gadamer's comments on the role of the architect in contrast to that of the artist will identify the rise of 'artistic genius' as an alienating force in our understanding of artistic and architectural practice. Gadamer's redefinition of the architectural as *necessarily* decorative, will cite a crucial feature of the experience of architecture. Namely, that it 'speaks' to us through a twofold mediation, as both aesthetic object, and as the fitting scene for the commerce of our daily lives. This designation I argue, serves to reconcile the harsh division between building and architecture enforced by the Pevsnerian line, which arguably reduces architecture to the following: '*mere* building + aesthetic intention = architecture' (Pevsner 1948, xix). This understanding of the architectural work as decorative will be deployed in a brief account of the Gadamerian concept of festival and the event-like nature of understanding. Though brief, it is hoped that this introduction will serve to indicate the significance of Gadamer's approach to architecture as one which reconciles the aesthetic at work in building without alienating it from the commerce of our daily lives or forcing the assumption of a detached aesthetic regard in order to let it speak. In this sense architecture rehabilitates us into the community of historically effective consciousness to which we are necessarily members, and as such achieves a gentle rehabilitation that highlights the framing of our experience within the fragile temporality of existence.

2. Artwork as playful interlocutor

The dialogical structure at work in aesthetic experience and indeed all experiences within Gadamer's hermeneutic system, places the emergence of meaning for the historically situated subject within the to and fro of question and answer. Artistic practice likewise becomes an interpretative

act (although the reconstruction of artistic intention is of no relevance for Gadamer.) Through the concept of play he rejects the impossibility of a Kantian 'aesthetic consciousness' characterised by disinterest as well as the validity of readings based on intentionality, arguing that such a stance always eludes the historically situated subject (since each subjectivity is held and sustained tradition, the position of objectivity proposed by Kantian and various romantic aestheticians necessarily inaccessible.) (Gadamer and Bernasconi 1986, 29) The play of question and answer engages the spectator in dialogue with the work, bringing about an extension of being and an uncovering of meaning such that each experience gives rise to a further question. In the play brought about by the artwork the spectator enters into a process of self-representation developed after Huizinga's account of play as the origin of social ritual (Gadamer and Bernasconi 1986, 23):

Primitive society performs its sacred rites, its sacrifices, consecration and mysteries, all of which serve to guarantee the well-being of the world, in a spirit of pure play truly understood. Now, in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play. (Huizinga 1971, 5)

The participant belongs to the play in a way that the artist (or architect) belongs inseparably to their social context, or indeed the way in which partners in 'genuine' conversation belong to the process of question and answer. For Gadamer, each creative act should be the result of this praxis, an interpretive act in relation to the world-as-text. 'To interpret [Gadamer states] means precisely to bring one's own preconceptions into play so that the text's meaning can really speak for us.' (Gadamer 2013, 415)

For architecture, this entails an articulation of the aspirations of a given community. Play and festival as concepts underline the need for spatial designation, for indeed for one to be 'at' play either of the immersive kind that Gadamer offers in the case of the art work or the more common formulations of the practice of play he gives as examples; a specific venue, domain or arena in which the play might take place is required. Architecture, whilst inviting the spectator into a 'play' of its own also performs the double function of establishing a ground from where the types of play instigated by other forms of art can be established.

There are those that might cynically claim this process simply means the slow acceptance through sensuous experience of the ideas of a dominant group. Certainly, the idea architecture preserves and sustains culture could give rise to concerns in this regard. As projects of scale and expense architectural works would suggest the preservation of the ideas of the most powerful or well-moneyed. Gadamer does not dispute the power of social

norms or that in the development language there may be a certain balance of power that is at play:

Fundamentally in our world the issue is always the same as it was in the beginning: in language we are trained in conventions and social norms behind which there are always economic and hegemonic interests. But this is precisely the world we as humans experience: in it we rely on the faculty of judgement, that is, on the possibility of our taking a critical stance with regard to every convention. (Gadamer 2013, 573)

On the contrary, it is the awareness that we are always and already in this state of affairs that allows the emergence of criticality. What he says of authority is instructive here: ‘.....authority cannot actually be bestowed but is earned, and must be earned if one is to lay claim to it.’ (Gadamer 2013, 291) If the work of architecture is the site of the self-understanding of a community, then it possesses a crucial role in bringing about critique of dominant ideas and affecting understanding between communities divided by time, distance or social contrast. In order to find or dispute common ground one must first understand the community in which they find themselves and their relation to the ideas dominant within it.

3. Defining the Architect and the Architectural

Gadamer adopts open criteria for the designation of objects or items as: ‘art’. He states in *The Artwork in Word and Image*:

In contrast to this, an artist, even if he or she uses a mechanical means of production, constructs something that is for itself and is there only to be contemplated. One allows an artwork to be exhibited or would like to see it exhibited, and that is all. And precisely *then* it is a work. (Gadamer and Palmer 2007, 202)

The proper reception of artwork, is contingent on the exhibition space to create a fitting or situation in which the work of art to be encountered as such. Architecture on the other hand is not offered the same freedom. In a somewhat more prescriptive tone, Gadamer informs us that the work of the architect may not: ‘stand anywhere like a blot on the landscape’ as result of the myriad concerns it must arbitrate in order to truly bring truth to bear (Gadamer 2013, 156). The restoration of the public nature of all art in Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, serves to reconcile the gulf between architects and other artists opened up through the post-enlightenment rise of genius. An alienation of the artist as genius had transformed him/her into an ‘ambiguous figure’ in Gadamer’s reckoning, with the result that:

today we feel that the architect is someone *sui generis*, because unlike the poet, painter or composer, he is not independent of commission and occa-

sion. (Gadamer 2013, 80)

To our detriment we overlook the fact that most artistic production has historically been subject to the predilections of patrons and public bodies. Far more than the simple historical fact of the need for commission in placing the artist as interpreter and viewer as the same at two ends of an elliptical process of emergent understanding, both the production of art and the reception of its becomes a matter of praxis. Gadamer's refutation of aesthetic disinterest reunites the architect and the artist through the identification of the crucial processes of interpretation at the heart of the activities of both. Gadamer's more astringent criterion in relation to the work of architecture relates closely to his contention that architecture is fundamentally decorative in its performance of a 'twofold mediation'; at once a visually engaging schema, able like the work of art to 'pull one up short' but also fundamental in the creation of fitting environments that sustain a given culture and preserve its ethos.

4. Rehabilitating Ornament

Central to Gadamer's reading of architecture is a re-conceptualisation of ornament or decoration as a necessary element of architecture's basic character. In great works of architecture, it is the countenance of the whole building, inclusive of the scheme of decoration that bears forth its meaning to the contemporary viewer. Decoration itself, is more than embellishment, it retains a sense of propriety that resonates through the work as a whole. He writes:

On surveying the full extent of the architect's decorative tasks, it is clear that architecture explodes that prejudice of the aesthetic consciousness according to which the actual work of art is what is outside all space and all time, the object of an aesthetic experience. One also sees that the usual distinction between a work of art proper and mere decoration demands revision. (Gadamer 2013, 158)

A criticism not only of Hegel's hierarchical Aesthetics, in which ornament serves to usher in the demise of architecture and the rise of sculpture but something of a response to Loos' pejorative use of the term, Gadamer firmly argues that architecture is, in its very nature, decorative. That is, that the architectural work provides a fitting backdrop to the activities of the given community for which it has been created. Decoration is thus rehabilitated as an element of the self-presentation of the architectural work and thus of the culture in which it is situated. In this sense he returns ornament to its original relation to the Greek *Kosmos* or the concept of *komospoeisis* the specific ordering of parts in respect of a harmonious whole; and the

later conception of fitting ornamentation in relation to the built whole recounted by Vitruvius:

The temples of Minerva, Mars, and Hercules, will be Doric, since the virile strength of these gods makes daintiness entirely inappropriate to their houses. In temples to Venus, Flora, Proserpine, Spring-Water, and the Nymphs, the Corinthian order will be found to have peculiar significance, because these are delicate divinities and so its rather slender outlines, its flowers, leaves, and ornamental volutes will lend propriety where it is due. (Vitruvius 2014, 29)

The propriety of any given building rests for here on the use of a fitting mode of decoration in keeping with the characteristics of the deity to whom the temple had been erected. He applies the same principles to the construction of Florentine villas. Ruskin cites the expectation of propriety as a characteristic ‘good’ buildings in *The Stones of Venice* (Ruskin 1960). The position of ornament in relation to the built whole is analogous to the hermeneutic structuring of experience. Each experience points to a yet-to-be conceived whole, each moment of understanding gives rise to a new question, a Socratic wisdom whose depth of knowledge is wedded to a recognition of its own ignorance. The re-conceptualisation of the decorative in Gadamer’s aesthetics cements the belonging between all elements of building within a harmonious whole as well as presenting architecture as both an aesthetic object and vital element of the commerce of life.

5. Architecture as Occasion and Festival

Gadamer extends his concept of the event-like structure of understanding to the hermeneutic encounter with the work of art. Thus the work of architecture when encountered draws the subject into its own temporality through a mediation of its rootedness in its own time and yet retains its capacity to remain contemporaneous. Even as they stand amid the changing built landscape around them, buildings possess a unique duality; belonging profoundly to their own time and irrefutably to the present in which they stand. They are: ‘borne along’ by the stream of history. (Gadamer 2013, 156) The complex reality in which it was conceived remains a vital element of its being, although it can only be reconstructed in terms of the horizon of understanding possessed by successive viewers. The space-shaping function of architecture means that it always and already embraces all other forms of representation displayed and consumed as art. Individual works of art must lay claim to space in their own right and their claim to a certain or ‘fitting’ space for an encounter between the and the viewer becomes an intrinsic element of the ontology of the work itself:

This is why works of art can assume certain real functions and resist others: for instance, religious or secular, public or private ones. They are instituted and erected as memorials of reverence, honour or piety only because they themselves prescribe and help fashion this kind of functional context. They themselves lay their claim to place, and even if they are displaced- e.g., by being housed in a modern collection-the trace of their original purpose cannot be effaced. It is part of their being because their being is presentation. (Gadamer 2013, 155)

As such, architecture possesses a 'twofold mediation'. Where other works of art simply invite the viewer to tarry with them; architecture once having captured the attentions of the viewer is bound to redirect them 'to the greater whole of the life context which it accompanies.' (Gadamer 2013, 157) In creating an appropriate setting for a given way of life, architecture ensures the potential of such experiences to be genuine and meaningful. Gadamer accounts for this capacity in the concept of the festival. Like play, the festival infers a goal-less intentionality. The festive in art works, like play, serves to suspend the day-to-day, allowing experience to unfold in the liminal space between spectator and work. Like architecture, the festival has an inherently public character performing a gathering function in contrast to the individuation of 'work-time' or labour. (Gadamer and Bernasconi 1986, 41) The work of architecture, like the celebration, is an immersive experience. Indeed, Gadamer explains the power of 'festive quiet' in light of his experience of the national museum at Athens (Gadamer and Bernasconi 1986, 40).

The festival possesses an 'autonomous time' and, like architecture, is fundamentally communal. The work of architecture expresses this time in its unique physicality. Unlike the other arts, Architecture consistently stands exposed to the unrelenting passing of time. In their submission to the ravages of time, the body of buildings undergo a kind of graceful ageing. Stone is worn away by rain and harsh weather conditions, users inscribe themselves into the given space. In the surrounding areas, new buildings spring up in the face of which the existing structure seems stylistically out of step, to embrace practices for which the old building is ill-equipped. Although such a reading might be excessively anthropomorphic, it illustrates the applicability of Gadamer's concept of 'autonomous time' to the aesthetic encounter of architecture. We can extend his observation of our intuitive recognition of aging to our relationship with the built environment. (Gadamer and Bernasconi 1986, 42) Although we may not 'know' the specific completion date of a certain building in terms of objective time, we can recognize it as aged and worn. We can distinguish between architecture in its youth and in decline. Just as the individual cannot extricate themselves from their given historical context, and the ornament cannot be isolated from the architectural work at large, neither can the practices of life be

seen in isolation from the physicality of its setting.

6. Ethics, Culture and Community

Culture possesses a fundamental role in hermeneutics. As a product of tradition, it is the means by which the historically effective consciousness situates itself within and against tradition. As physical artefact, architecture serves as a powerful reminder of the historical context from which subjectivity cannot extricate itself. Gadamer follows Hegel in his definition of *Bildung* (culture) as an element of spirit. Gadamer argues that: 'Keeping in mind, forgetting, and recalling belong to the historical constitution of man and are themselves part of his history and his bildung.' An acute awareness of this becomes the mark of a 'cultivated consciousness'. (Gadamer 2013, 15-16) The concept of communion with a wider community of historical consciousness is intrinsic to the experience of all works of art despite the distancing effect of history or social division:

The essence of the beautiful is to have a certain standing in the public eye. This in turn implies a whole form of life that embraces all those artistic forms with which we embellish our environment, including decoration and architecture. If art shares anything with the festival, then it must transcend the limitations of any cultural definition of art, as well as the limitations associated with its privileged cultural status. (Gadamer and Bernasconi 1986, 50)

Above, as with the festival, Gadamer firmly roots art within the development of a cultural consciousness that is in no way esoteric or associated with the good taste. Rather, culture is the sum total of a life-world. In demanding the attention of the viewer, the art work brings the viewer into its distinct temporality. In tarrying with architecture, one becomes a player or guest at the feast that is the festival of the work at work.

As a means of designating space, architectural works put dwelling at issue. They provide a ground for the self-understanding of a given community. As historically situated, any encounter with a work of architecture is an interpretation of ones belonging in the light of their own community and in the historical community of consciousness. It is this capacity of architecture to provide a fruitful self-encounter that reunites art with the ethical and political life of a community. With the reference to the Greek concept *Kalon*, Gadamer strives for a reunion of the good and the beautiful. Gadamer presents music and architecture as prime examples of this kind of praxis, the only place where one 'find[s] the art of getting it just right' (Gadamer and Bernasconi 1986, 222) In reuniting art with a 'good' life in this way, Gadamer elevates it from the disinterest of an aesthetics of good taste or amusement to a vital position in the general health of a community:

... one must admit that for the good life in general this art is needed “if one is simply to find one’s way home” (Gadamer and Palmer 2007, 222)

In his concept of community Gadamer infers a community across history, rather than of simple geographical or historical immediacy (he says of artists):

Nevertheless, he does create a community, and in principle, this truly universal community (*oikumene*) extends to the whole world. In fact, all artistic creation challenges each of us to listen to the language in which the work of art speaks and to make it our own. (Gadamer and Bernasconi 1986, 39)

It is this community that a Gadamerian understanding of architecture ushers its subjects into. One that recognizes the processes of change across tradition, tests ideas through their articulation and experience through its repeatability.

Conclusion

Although such a brief paper cannot give a full account of the Gadamerian approach to architecture, it is hoped that the foregoing has served to provide an introduction to the deeper implications a hermeneutics of architecture has for the concept of belonging. As a form of art in which the creator (the architect) has never been displaced from their role within the concerns of their peculiar societal setting, architecture is the art par excellence in terms of the praxis Gadamer demands not only from the architect but from artists and viewers alike. The latent aspirations of a community must, Gadamer reminds us, be instantiated in order for their full comprehension. With proper understanding necessary for the conclusive refutation of such ideas, architecture is reunited with the ethos of the community, ethics re-joined with poetics. Spatial priorities and the implications of the decorative schema adopted in a given epoch therefore allow for such assumptions to be brought into question and for our unique position within a wider community of historically effective consciousness to be comprehended.

In a post-modern age where debates around the temporary and the virtual seem to dominate, Gadamer’s approach to architecture serves as a quite reminder to architect of the lasting significance of the built environment to our self-understanding and sense of belonging. As clients demand iconic buildings of their architects and architects themselves strive to create universally recognised ‘signature’ styles, a hermeneutic understanding can help to traverse such difficult debates between plurality and communality. The concept of architecture presented by Gadamer possesses significance, not only to the communities of immediacy which we foster, but

the wider process of tradition and community of a historically unfolding culture from which we cannot stand apart.

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