

Architecture and its
Image

Or, must one visit
architecture to write
about it?

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At MoMA's "In Pursuit of Architecture" conference in September—a ten-year retrospective on the output of the journal *Log*—a pair of questions kept coming up: Must critics visit a structure in order to write about it? Which is more important, the image of a building or the building itself?

Sylvia Lavin, a frequent contributor to *Log*, traded questions and comments with Cynthia Davidson, its editor-in-chief. Davidson insisted that critics must physically travel to a building's location for their opinions to be considered valid. Her emphasis, therefore, was on the primacy of the built object over its representation through images. Lavin argued this was a false dichotomy. Why separate them at all? Might not the building and its image prove complementary? Critics should make every effort to witness a given work of architecture firsthand, but shouldn't let that stand in their way if circumstances don't permit. One can get the basic gist of a structure, she maintained, by looking at photographs and floor plans. Inferences may be drawn from there.

Neither side can be said to have decisively carried the day. During Q&A, the issue was brought up again, this time by architecture critic Jeff Kipnis, who was in attendance. "I don't understand why Cynthia thinks one has to go see a building in order to write about it," he wondered incredulously. "No composer feels like he has to go hear a performance to 'get' a piece of music. He looks at the score. Some scores he's interested in; others not."

Before Davidson or the panelists had a chance to respond, however, another member of the audience interjected. He challenged Kipnis's remarks by relying on the very same analogy: "Not true. [Johann Sebastian] Bach walked twenty miles to Denmark just to hear a performance of [Dieterich] Buxtehude's music."

"That's because Buxtehude didn't publish his scores!" Kipnis shot back, eager to cover his tracks.

"Again, that isn't strictly true," the man started to reply. But this time the speakers on stage managed to intervene and put the discussion back on track.

How might the two examples—the architecture critic with an architectural construction and the music critic with a musical composition—be related? In either case, if distance separates the critic from the tectonic structure to be seen (or the harmonic structure to be heard), an element of *mediation* enters in. That is to say, if he is unable to

experience the object of criticism in person, in terms of its sensual immediacy, then a more intermediate substitute must be found. All this raises the old problem of the artwork in the age of its technological reproducibility, most famously theorized by the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin. Of particular interest here is the way a work of architecture or piece of music is disseminated on a mass scale. Lost in this process of reproduction, as Benjamin pointed out, is the object's "unique existence in a particular place."¹ What results is thus a kind of spatial and temporal *dislocation*. Furthermore, this process allows for the *transposition* of aesthetic experience into settings and locales where it had hitherto been impossible.²

Photographs and phonographs were often cited by early commentators as paradigmatic examples of the new mass media—as technologically reproduced images and sounds, respectively.³ Both media tend to eliminate variables like spontaneity and accidents from that which is reproduced, whether snapshots or recordings. Still, there are at least two key differences that complicate any straightforward analogy between architecture's relationship to photographic images and music's relationship to recorded sound. For one thing, individual photographs are incapable of expressing duration except as part of a series or cinematic sequence. While individual photographs themselves are susceptible to the wearing of time—fading, smudging, tearing, etc.—whatever they represent remains frozen in the same position it occupied when the picture was first taken. Photographs apprehend the spatial continuum from a specific vantage, but only for a moment.⁴ Motion appears as just a blur or trail of light. By contrast, music recordings necessarily unfold over time.

In addition to their inability to convey duration, photographs fall short in another crucial respect. As the Hungarian scholar and aesthetician Ernő Kállai argued in a controversial article on "Painting and Photography," published 1927, photographs lack anything that might be construed as *facture* (фактура, an attention to material considerations in art). Due to the chemico-mechanical process used to render emanations of light onto plates, and the flatness of the images that result, Kállai concluded that photos could not so much as hint at the texture or raw corporeality of the objects they depict. Photographs cannot hope to replicate the striated patterns left by brushstrokes in even the most polished painting. He wrote:

Photography is not capable of this degree of materiality or objecthood. It creates imitations of reality that can be dazzlingly clear and distinct; but the emotional substrate, defined in real and material terms, is exiguous, indeed almost insubstantial. It extends no farther than the faint breath that mists the photosensitive coating on the plate or film, and the enamel-like gloss or toned texture of the printing paper...[T]here is no facture: no optically perceptible tension between the substance of the image and the image itself.⁵

The depthless quality of photographic images carries serious implications for the practice of architecture. Beyond the issue of their two-dimensionality, which already places severe limits on their ability to represent three-dimensional objects, photographs are also without surface density. “The force of this optical tension,” Kállai indicated, continuing from above, “depends on the tactile values of the facture.”⁶ At this point, Kállai’s exposition reconnects with Benjamin’s brief treatment of architecture in his essay on technological reproduction.⁷ For Benjamin, buildings operate on both an optical and tactile level—through active observation as well as passive habituation. They are perceived in a state of aloof distraction no less than close concentration.⁸

If a building’s tactile attributes drop out in photographic representations, however, what does the present ubiquity of architectural images portend for the discipline? Earlier, the putative opposition between image and building in architecture was mentioned in the context of Davidson’s dispute with Lavin. The roots of this debate stretch back several decades. Kenneth Frampton counterposed the visual and tactile aspects of perception in his 1982 manifesto “Towards a Critical Regionalism,” corresponding to the scenographic and tectonic components of design.⁹ Because Frampton associates the tactile and tectonic dimensions of built form with a capacity to cultivate critical self-consciousness, architecture’s increased reliance on visual media is potentially cause for concern. This becomes increasingly important when bearing in mind that photographic reproductions are the primary means by which new projects are publicized. Lavin’s contention that images on their own — perhaps supplemented by blueprints and specifications—provide enough information to comprehend a work of architecture would thus seem deeply problematic from Frampton’s point of view.

More recently, authors such as the art theorist Hal Foster and the

architectural historian Gevork Hartoonian have joined a chorus of critics apprehensive over the shift in emphasis away from building toward image and spectacle. All of this focus on creating photogenic, immediately recognizable structures places a new premium on “imageability,” as Foster has noticed. “In the guise of our activation, some work even tends to subdue us, for the more it opts for special effects, the less it engages us as active viewers,” he alleges in his book *The Art-Architecture Complex* (2011). “[T]he phenomenological reflexivity of ‘seeing oneself see’ approaches its opposite: a space that seems to do the perceiving for us. This is a new version of the old problem of fetishization, for it takes our thoughts and sensations, processes them as images and effects, and delivers them back to us for our appreciative amazement.” Foster has therefore endorsed sites that stress “the sensuous particularity of the here-and-now” (tactility), as a potential alternative to those privileging vision and visibility.¹⁰ Such sites, he insists, afford an escape from “the stunned subjectivity and arrested sociality supported by spectacle.”¹¹ Toward the end, Foster pits the two terms directly against each other in an interview conducted with the sculptor Richard Serra, “Building *Contra* Image.” In the course of their conversation, they couch contemporary architecture in these very binaries: tectonic versus scenographic, structure versus skin.¹²

Hartoonian has for his part developed criticisms along many of the same lines as Foster, albeit within a more explicitly Framptonian framework.¹³ Like Foster in *The Art-Architecture Complex* or his earlier *Design and Crime* (2002), the narrative Hartoonian traces in *Architecture and Spectacle: A Critique* (2013) is additionally vectored through Guy Debord’s reading of the “commodity fetishism” section in *Capital*.¹⁴ “Architecture today has become the site of spectacle, and its temporality is informed by a culture that is primarily image-laden,” Hartoonian asserts. “It is therefore the task of the critic to uncover the thematic of the culture of building nestled beneath architecture’s spectacle.”¹⁵ Once again, the antinomy of building and image recurs. For Hartoonian, the present turn to detextured surfaces, a preoccupation with problems of wrapping and envelopment, and the return of organic forms — facilitated by the rise of digital technologies in planning — are symptomatic of a spectacular tendency in architecture.¹⁶ This mirrors the broader logic of late capitalism, he argues, as the internalized exhibitionism of commodities on display. Indeed, Hartoonian refers to the phenomenal

exteriors of contemporary architecture as participating in “the aesthetic of commodity fetishism,” a generalized *promenade architecturale*.¹⁷ As before, the problem is the preponderance of the image: “[V]isual excess is what makes architecture today part of the culture of spectacle produced and sustained by late capitalism operating on a global scale.”¹⁸

To return to the musical analogy proposed at the outset, the needle may be threaded with the aid of a contemporary figure of thought: the “sight-bite,” a coinage of British architecture critic Jonathan Meades. Images of buildings provide merely one angle of viewership, and in this respect resemble those condensed, easily-digestible snippets of music or speech now commonly referred to as “sound-bites.” “There can be no doubt about what type of building will come to be regarded as almost parodically representative of this age,” Meades caustically opined in his 2007 BBC documentary, *On the Brandwagon*. “A new type of structure, characterized by its hollow vacuity, by its sculptural sensationalism, by its happy quasi-modernism, and by its lack of actual utility. Yet it has two definite purposes: to be instantly and arrestingly memorable, to be extraordinarily camera friendly. This type of structure is a sound-bite’s visual analogue. A sight-bite.”¹⁹

The problem with architecture’s current fixation on its representation in media is neatly illustrated by a reflection on “Photography and Modern Architecture,” published just over a year ago on *The Photographers’ Gallery* blog. Its author, Owen Hatherley, has for some time been a champion of Meades, so the fact that his own thoughts on the matter seem to echo Meades’s should hardly come as a surprise. Hatherley’s opening paragraph is worth quoting here at length:

Modern architecture was the first architecture to really market itself, so it makes sense that it has become an architecture largely consumed through photographs. The internet has intensified this to a degree that the main architectural websites... provide little but glossy images of buildings that you will never visit, lovingly formed into photoshopped, freeze-dried glimmers of non-orthogonal perfection, in locations where the sun, of course, is always shining. In art, this approach to reproduction is dubious enough [e.g., Benjamin], but in architecture — where both physical experience and location in an actual place are so important — it’s often utterly disastrous, a handmaiden to an architectural culture that no longer has an interest in anything but its own image.²⁰

Notably, Hatherley underlines the idea that the vast majority of these photographs depict buildings that the viewer will never visit. Contemporary architecture's image-obsessed visual culture almost recalls the passage by Feuerbach that served as an epigraph to Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), whereby "the present age... prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality."²¹

So where does this leave the disagreement between Lavin and Davidson? Four weeks after the *Log* conference, Davidson presented a paper to the Southern California Institute of Architecture titled "Image and Word: A Critical Context." In the event description, she expanded on a point which she felt distinguished *Log* from its predecessor, *Any* magazine. "The bare-bones design... and paucity of images [in *Log*]," explained Davidson, "are a deliberate attempt to resist the seductive power of images." Evidently, Lavin's objections were still fresh on her mind. Lavin herself had been prepared to address these questions through her engagement with Foster, two years prior at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, in an event called "Kissing Vs. Komplex." Here she defended the centrality of "affect" in her book, *Kissing Architecture* (2011), from the charge, leveled by Foster, that this empirical emphasis leaves itself open to the bedazzling effects of spectacle in contemporary architecture. As Lavin saw it, subtle intellection was not necessarily preferable to exuberant affection, as cerebral detachment was no guarantee of critical insight.²²

Nevertheless, the issue is far from settled. A few outstanding questions remain: What of those buildings that were never built? Perhaps more than any other discipline, architecture dwells on those plans that were never executed—the projects and proposals that went unrealized. In such cases, the proviso that critics must visit a building in order to write about it cannot have any meaning. Though they should probably not be accorded as much significance as structures that were actually built, they must be judged part of architectural history writ large. And what of those buildings that were built but eventually demolished? Some of the most iconic works of architecture of the last two centuries survive only in photographs, such as Paxton's Crystal Palace in Hyde Park and Wright's Larkin Building in Buffalo. Indeed, there is little today being built that stirs the imagination as do these images.

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Works*, Vol. 4: 1938-1940 translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 2003), 253.
2. "[T]echnological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record. The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover; the choral work performed in an auditorium or in the open air is enjoyed in a private room." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 2003), 103.
3. Adorno's argument was made independently of Benjamin's influence, as his article "The Curves of the Needle" appeared in 1927: "[P]honograph records seem to have suffered the same historical fate as that which once befell photographs: the transition from artisanal to industrial production transforms not only the technology of distribution but also that which is distributed." Theodor Adorno, "The Curves of the Needle," in *Essays on Music*, translated by Thomas Y. Levin, (Los Angeles, University of California Press: 2002), 271.
4. "Photography presents a spatial continuum; historicism seeks to provide the temporal continuum... The equivalent of [historicism's] temporal photography would be a giant film depicting the temporally interconnected events from every vantage point." Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, translated by Thomas Y. Levin, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1995), 49-50.
5. Ernő Kállai, "Painting and Photography," in *Between Two Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes*, translated by David Britt, (Cambridge, The MIT Press: 2002), 685-686.
6. *Ibid.*, 687.
7. Both historically and conceptually. According to György Márkus, Benjamin followed the debate surrounding Kállai's article closely in preparation for his own work on photography. György Márkus, "Benjamin and the German 'Reproduction Debate,'" in *Moderne begreifen*, (Frankfurt, Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag: 2007), 354-355.
8. "Buildings are received in a twofold manner: tactilely and optically. Such reception cannot be understood in terms of the concentrated attention of a traveler before a famous building. On the tactile side, there is no counterpart to what contemplation is on the optical side. Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation. Under certain circumstances, this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value. For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means—that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit." Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 120. Benjamin on distracted reception: "The masses are criticized for seeking distraction [Zerstreuung] in the work of art, whereas the art lover supposedly approaches it with concentration... Distraction and concentration form an antithesis... Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction." *Ibid.*, 119.
9. "[T]he tactile opposes itself to the scenographic and the drawing of veils over the surface of reality. Its capacity to arouse the impulse to touch returns the architect to the poetics of construction and to the erection of works in which the tectonic value of each component depends upon the density of its objecthood." Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Bay Press: 1983), 29.
10. Hal Foster, "Preface," in *Vision and Visuality*, (Seattle, Bay Press: 1988), ix-xiv.
11. Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, (New York, Verso Books: 2011), xii.
12. "One of the big problems I see in architecture now is the division between the structure, the more engineered part, and the skin, the more architected part. The architect becomes the person who focuses a little on the layout and a lot on the ornament, whether it's glass, titanium that bends, or scenographic surface, while the structure is handed over to the engineer. That wasn't a problem with, say, Jørn Utzon in his Sydney Opera House. But the division becomes problematic with post-modern architecture, and more and more architects are limited to the design of ornament as skin. (There are exceptions, such as Koolhaas' library in Seattle where the glass surface is tectonic)." *Ibid.*, 234.
13. This is hardly surprising if one considers that Foster edited *The Anti-Aesthetic*, the volume in which Frampton's "Towards a Critical Regionalism" debuted, while Hartoonian is Frampton's protégé.
14. "In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) Guy Debord defined spectacle as 'capital accumulated to such a degree that it becomes an image.' With Gehry and other architects the reverse is now true as well: spectacle is an image accumulated to such a degree that it becomes capital." Hal Foster, *Design and Crime, and Other Diatribes*, (New York, Verso Books: 2002), 41. "[T]he spectacle...in the present context of commodification of the life-world should be considered neither a mere technological effect nor, as Debord reminds us, 'something added to the real world... On the contrary it is the very heart of society's real unreality.'" Gevork Hartoonian, *Architecture and Spectacle: A Critique*, (London, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.: 2013), 47.
15. *Ibid.*, 3.
16. *Ibid.*, 233-254.
17. *Ibid.*, 2, 9, 63, 77, 103, 127, 141, 207, 216, 234, 237, 248, 251.
18. *Ibid.*, 255-256.
19. Jonathan Meades quoted in Douglas Murphy, *The Architecture of Failure* (London, Zer0 Books: 2011), 114-115.
20. Owen Hatherley, "Photography and Modern Architecture," *The Photographers' Gallery*, December 10, 2012.
21. Guy, Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, Zone Books: 1995), 11.
22. "Today, affect should be defined as the internalization of perception and not as feelings overdetermined by cultural codes. We no longer need to equate detachment and distance with intellection and abstraction nor feeling with crude sentimentality." Sylvia Lavin, *Kissing Architecture*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 2011), 21.