

# The Afterlife of Buildings: Architecture and Walter Benjamin's Theory of History

PATRICIA A. MORTON

University of California, Riverside

In an early note for the "Arcades Project," Walter Benjamin gave architecture a central place in his theory and critique of history:

Architecture as the most important witness of the latent 'mythology.' And the most important architecture of the nineteenth century is the arcade.<sup>1</sup>

The "mythology" to which Benjamin refers is the positivist ideology of automatic historical progress. The materiality of architecture makes it one of Benjamin's most important "witnesses" because it can physically demonstrate the operation of reification and commodity fetishism. In Benjamin's theory, architecture makes visible the transience of the "new" and the lie of the promise of progress in commodity culture by physically embodying outmoded styles and functions beyond their moment of fashion. Precisely because of the lag between the generation of new modes of consumption and the production of architectural forms, architecture served him as a gauge for the illusion of "progress" under capitalism. Architectural artifacts, rather than the intentions of architects or architectural theory, were his "witnesses."

The arcades were Benjamin's premier example. He also used the interior of the bourgeois home, the ruin, and Paris as transformed by Hausmann as metaphors for and images of the operation of history. The mechanism by which architecture operates in Benjamin's theory of history is embedded in his conception of the work of art.

Art provides the most visible example of those things left out of history's dynamic because the art work marks and represents historical experi-

ence, according to Benjamin. The durability of the art work is important to the process by which its "truth content" is revealed by the critic. Benjamin privileged criticism for revealing the truth content of a work and exposing the contradictions and myths of modern life. The critic performs a transformation of the work — a destructive act — in revealing the truth content of a work, much as alchemy changes base matter into precious metal. Time also operates on the work of art and separates the truth content from the material content. Benjamin emphasized the decline of the superficial appeal of the art work, which led him to valorize works in decay such as the Parisian arcades. As their popularity declines, the truth of their reification comes to the fore. And the hidden truth content of the work "is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of material content (*Sachgehalt*)."<sup>2</sup> (Trauerspiel, 29; translation altered)<sup>2</sup> This program for submersion in the minutia of material content, in the physical traces left by an art work, became the directive for the "Arcades Project," Benjamin's massive but incomplete study of the nineteenth century.

Quotations and fragments of works were the blocks out of which Benjamin's works were built. Criticism "looks for that which is exemplary, even if this exemplary character can be admitted only in respect of the merest fragment" (Trauerspiel, 44). These fragments can be used to make up wholes which, like mosaics, "preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles". (Trauerspiel, 28) Benjamin's method consisted of "ripping" these fragments out their historical context, providing commentary on them and putting them together using the "montage principle." Not only is this ripping activity the process by which

history is written, it has a critical charge as well. Criticism operates through a destructive movement: the "ripping" of a text, event or concept from its context, which thereby reveals its essence. It completes the relevatory operation begun by the changes in a work of art wrought over time by history. The critical historian can penetrate the superficial aspect (*Schein*) of works by understanding their pre- and post-histories and thereby gain a demystified picture of the "design of history."

The life history of the art work gives the critic a picture of historical truth. The work's usefulness to the critic arises out of two different periods of its life: the "afterlife" of a work of art and its "pre-history" in other works and historical phenomena. The notion of the "afterlife" of a work of art was developed by Benjamin in his essay "The Task of the Translator," an introduction to his translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*.<sup>3</sup> A translation is not a literal likeness of the original, however, but performs a transformation on it. This transformation is, in part, the product of historical processes that change languages and their usage. The translation should never attempt to imitate the original because it would then deny the changes the original undergoes in its afterlife.

In his essay on Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin amplified the concept of "afterlife" in terms of his theory of historical materialism.

For a dialectical historian, these works incorporate both their pre-history and their after-history- an after-history in virtue of which their pre-history, too, can be seen to undergo constant change. They teach him how their function can outlast their creator, can leave his intentions behind.<sup>4</sup>

The afterlife concept shifts critical attention away from the intention of the architect and the moment of the creation of a building. It further deflects concern from the heroic figure of the artist or architect to the status of the work over time.

The afterlife concept is not equivalent to the teleological scheme of history posited by Sigfried Giedion, but involves a complex interaction between past and present.

"Apart from a certain *haut-goût* charm, the artistic trappings of the last century have gone musty," says Giedion. (Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich*, Lpz Berlin, 1928, p. 3) By contrast, we believe that the charm they exert on us reveals that they still contain materials of vital importance to us- not, of course, for our architecture, the way the iron truss-work anticipates our design; but they are vital for our perception... In other words: just as Giedion teaches us we can read the basic features of today's architecture out of buildings around 1850, so would we read today's life, today's forms out of the life and the apparently secondary forgotten forms of that era. (N1, 11)

In Benjamin's view, the appeal exerted by nineteenth century artifacts is relevant to the critic's task not because they anticipate today's design forms, but because they inform our perception of the present. Whereas Giedion saw the past as the dead precursor of the present, Benjamin believed it continued to have a specific relevance to today's life. This relevance is not based on a one-to-one correspondence, however, nor is the present the inevitable result of the past. The persistence of yesterday's forms in today's life, despite their seeming obsolescence, signals their importance to Benjamin and constitutes their status as the prehistory of the present.

The work of art is invested with relevatory powers in Benjamin's theory of history, and architecture was his "most important witness" to the aporias of modern life. Architecture's importance to Benjamin lies in the fact that it is both a product of culture and enmeshed in economic structures of development. In Benjamin's terms, the most important attribute of architecture is its physicality, its material content. It is vital as a material "witness" because it resists easy erasure and remains within the city as a reminder of the lack of progress and the transience of the "new" in modern life. The "afterlife" of buildings is critical evidence of the origins of the present in the "trash of history." The example of the arcades illustrates how Benjamin used architecture to produce dialectical images in opposition to the phantasmagoric illusions of capitalism.

The arcade was one of Benjamin's *Urphänomene* (Ur-phenomenon) which make general laws vis-

ible within their specific forms. Benjamin borrowed this notion of physical form in which objective laws are made visible from Goethe's writings on biology. The Ur-phenomenon, in Goethe's theory, is a primal, natural form which makes visible instantaneously those fundamental principles that are more generally applicable to a species of phenomena. The general is contained in the particular. Further, the Ur-phenomenon contains within it the future development of that class of things. In the "Arcades Project," Benjamin sought to transfer Goethe's notion "from the realm of nature to that of history" (N2a, 4).

I pursue the origins of the forms and changes in the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and grasp them through the economic facts. These facts, seen from the point of view of causation, that is as causes, wouldn't be primal events; they only become that insofar as, in their own progress — unfolding would be a better word — they allow the whole series of the arcades' concrete historical forms to emerge, like a leaf unfolding all the wealth of the empirical world of plants. (N2a, 4)

Economic facts do not directly determine the life history of the arcades as in the traditional Marxist matrix of base and superstructure. Rather, Benjamin posits a more complex relationship between economy and the history of Ur-phenomena such as the arcades, in which their forms develop out of changes to their economic foundation. The metaphor of unfolding indicates that the arcades both represent the development of the nineteenth century economy and are transformed as it changes. Thus, the history of productive formation can be "read" in the afterlife of the arcades.

While such revelations can be seen in the Ur-phenomena, they require another critical transformation to make their meaning clear. This operation results in what Benjamin called the "dialectical image." "The dialectical image is... the very object constructed in the materialist presentation of history. It is identical with the historical object; it justifies its being blasted out of the continuum of the historical process." (N10a, 3) Dialectical images are formed by a momentary conjunction of elements

of the past and present and are built through the "montage principle" of removing historical entities from history's continuity. They are not arbitrarily developed, but have a particular utility with regards to the dialectical problem of the present. Images come to "legibility" at a specific time with regard to the needs of that moment.

It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather, an image is that in which the past and the present flash into a constellation. In other words: image is dialectic at a standstill. (N3, 1)

The fragments of the past which have been left by time's destructive power and the critic's alchemical "ripping" operation are reassembled by the historian into dialectical images which give a truer picture of the present than the illusions of modern life. At the moment when they become recognizable and "legible," they initiate the waking from the myth of capitalist progress.

Buildings themselves are not "fleeting images" in the literal sense of Benjamin's dialectical images. As they are experienced, however, they can flash into unintentional constellations with other phenomena. As Benjamin pointed out in his "Work of Art" essay, architecture is perceived through use and habit rather than contemplation.<sup>5</sup> The "distracted state" with which architecture is understood is analogous to the cognitive mode of hashish trances or dreams. Dreams, in Benjamin's early work on the "Arcades Project," reveal historical knowledge that has been repressed. Whereas the dream in Surrealist theory is privileged as an end in itself, Benjamin viewed it as a means for gaining insight into historical phenomena that must then be brought to consciousness.<sup>66</sup>

What makes the very first glimpse of a village, a town, in the landscape so incomparable and irretrievable is the rigorous connection between foreground and distance. Habit has not yet done its work. As soon as we find our bearings, the landscape vanishes at a stroke like the facade of a house as we enter it... Once we begin to find our way about, that earliest picture can never be restored.<sup>7</sup>

Just as the distant view of a city cannot be recuperated when we comprehend it through habit, our naive view of modern life cannot be restored once we have been undeceived about its hidden truths.

The arcade is an Ur-phenomenon that makes visible the general laws of capitalism. Like other of Benjamin's Ur-phenomena, they consist of a range of activities and economic processes as well as the material object itself. Benjamin built up a myriad of images out of the life in and around the arcades: the flâneur and flânerie, gambling, prostitution, consumerism, glass architecture, and advertising. The general principle they illustrate is that of commodity fetishization. The arcade is itself fetishized, contains fetishes, and furthers the process of fetishizing objects into commodities. It obscures the concrete social relations housed within it with the image of a "fairylane" of pleasure. Buying and selling are not the exhibited activities of the arcade; the phantasmagoric pleasures of display substitute for the economic transactions concealed behind the arcade shop fronts.

The redemptive aspect of the arcades lies in their "afterlife" in the city as outdated forms of commodity culture. While, at a certain moment in their history, they represent capitalism in its most virulent incarnation, after they have been left behind by fashion, they embody the demystifying potential of the survival of neglected things. According to Benjamin, the Surrealists were the first to:

perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded," in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photographs, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them.<sup>8</sup>

As with all of Benjamin's examples, the arcades are both contaminated by their collusion with capitalism and redeemed by the fragments of historical truth they retain. This truth is found in the incongruous images that flash up among the objects and activities housed in the arcade and in the incongruity of the arcades themselves within the city.

Benjamin's use of architecture provides a model for examining architectural artifacts in terms of their life histories without placing them in a normalizing "context" that denatures them of political content.

[The materialist historian] breaks the epoch away from its reified *historical continuity*, and the life from the epoch and the work from the life's work. But the result of this construction is that *in* the work the life's work, *in* the life's work the epoch, and *in* the epoch the course of history are suspended and preserved. (Fuchs, 352)

Architectural history, based on this constructive principle, may be conceived as actively constructed by a critical historian concerned with the specificity of a time and a place, including the present. It is an active creation rather than the passive enterprise of the historian who recounts the past "as it really was" or the critic who waits for the revolution and uses only ideological criticism as a weapon against engagement. It must also be distinguished from the type of manipulative history that Sigfried Giedion undertook. In Giedion's account, the past served as the determinant of the present, in a steady trajectory from good to better. This teleological vision of history is no longer tenable, according to Benjamin.

In the spirit of Benjamin's theory of history, I propose that historians and architects should look more closely at those moments when history seems *not* to suit our purposes. Manfredo Tafuri argued for examining "felicitous moments" when "architecture, techniques, institutions, urban administration, ideologies and utopias converge in a work or formal system."<sup>9</sup> While these moments are important to architectural history, moments of *divergence* are more revealing of the aporias of history.

The construction of history with a specific political goal looks to the marginal and outmoded for escape values from the totality of instrumental reason and its cultural hegemony. This task is grounded in the recognition of the actual conditions of a time and a place, including the "trash" as well as the "culture." This political ground addresses injustice, lack, oppression, struggle, and hate, not as word "constructs," but as conditions

of human lives. Further, the emphasis Benjamin placed on the “afterlife” of buildings shifts attention from the intentions of the architect at the moment the building was conceived to the social and political history of the object. Built works can be examined as provisional witnesses without fixing their value with the intent of their ostensible author.

The political content of this exercise lies in making history “actual,” in Benjamin’s sense, by reference to what Tafuri calls the “historic space.” (Tafuri, 9) This space is, I believe, where the “real” is both brought into crisis and brought into focus.

Historical space does not establish improbable links between diverse languages, between techniques that are distant from each other. Rather, it explores what such distance expresses: it probes what appears to be a *void*, trying to make the absence that seems to dwell in that void speak. (Tafuri, 13)

History is that construction which “leads the past to place the present in a critical condition.” (N7a, 4) The void between languages is that space which allows the divergences of history to speak about the discontinuity of architecture’s apparently monolithic uniformity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *Das Passagen-Werk*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982. 1002. (Do, 7)

<sup>2</sup> In a later essay, Benjamin altered the terms from *Wahrheitsgehalt* (truth content) to *Bedeutungsgehalt*

(meaning content). “[...] the more crucial the works are, the more inconspicuously and intimately their meaning content [*Bedeutungsgehalt*] is tied to their material content [*Sachgehalt*].” (“Rigorous Study of Art” [*Strenge Kustwissenschaft*], trans by Thomas Y. Levin, *October*, 47, winter, 1988. 88.)

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin. “The Task of the Translator”, *Illuminations*. Trans. by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 69- 82. Hereafter cited as Translator.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin. “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” *One Way Street and Other Writings*. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: New Left Books, 1979. 351 and 384. Hereafter cited as Fuchs.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*. Trans. by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on the dream and the “dreaming collective” in Benjamin’s Exposé of 1935 is the source of his famous dispute with Theodor Adorno. Adorno asserted that the characterization of the commodity as a dream was subjectivized into a mythical category akin to Jung’s “collective unconscious”. “The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather, it is dialectical, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness.” (Theodor Adorno to Walter Benjamin in *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: New Left Books, 1977. 111.)

<sup>7</sup> “One Way Street,” *One Way Street and Other Writings*. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: New Left Books, 1979. 78.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin. “Surrealism,” *Reflections*. Trans. By Edmund Jephcott. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978. 181. Hereafter cited as Surrealism.

<sup>9</sup> Tafuri, Manfredo.

*The Sphere and the Labyrinth*. Trans. by Pelegrino d’Acierno and Robert Connolly. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987. 13.