

EMBODIED EXPERIENCE: GIGON/GUYER'S ADDITION TO THE ART MUSEUM IN WINTERTHUR

MARK COTTLE

Georgia Institute of Technology

The body articulates the world. At the same time, the body is articulated by the world.
—Tidal Ando

INTRODUCTION

The work of Gigon/Guyer, a contemporary practice based in Zurich, is exemplary on a number of points—not the least of which is the high level of thoughtfulness, precision, and modesty they bring to the art of building. Their work is carefully situated, in the context of Swiss village life, and within contemporary Swiss construction culture, and much could be written about their production within that milieu.

But rather than focus on how buildings are fabricated per se, I am interested here in exploring how spaces may be constructed by the experience of the beholder or the occupant of architecture—as she engages *bodily* in a tectonics of phenomena, and as that engagement awakens within a host of embodied experiences and spatial intuitions.

Kenneth Frampton defines 'tectonics' as the poetics of construction. In this research, however, I would like to see what we may gain by extending that definition from one concerned principally with fabrication to include the poetics of 'construing'—that is, of *constructing one's experience* of an architectural environment, its spaces and its meanings, through an interaction between cognitive and haptic explorations of the built artifact.

Here I extend the word 'haptic' to involve more than just touching with the hand, but also understandings of space derived through one's ears, one's nose, and tactile information perceived through one's eyes. The gait—registered by the feet, and by the hips, shoulders, and elbows—also

comes into play in the act of constructing spatial experience as one negotiates ramps, climbs stairs, crosses thresholds, bumps into furniture, and so on. To quote August Schmarsow, the nineteenth-century German theorist of space: "The ground under our feet ... is ... the precondition for the sensation of our body and for our orientation to the earth's general arena. It is, however, also a precondition for our naturally developing sense of space, that which is cultivated in beings standing and walking with erect postures."¹

A shift in focus from a conceptual to a *corporeal* understanding of spaces — from intended meanings to constructed understandings — suggests a move away from a conception of architecture as semiotics, as a language to be decoded, that was ascendant in the eighties. The preoccupation with architecture as signification put an emphasis on the systems through which architecture communicates meaning, whether through a symbolic program, a refined absence of iconography, or through "tell-the-tale" details that told all under the careful scrutiny and exegesis of the historian/critic.²

If the building 'as text' and the user as a literate reader of signs are operative metaphors in Frascari's reading of Scarpa's details, I suggest the Ruskinian figure of the "intelligent observer" or the "intelligent eye" as more appropriate for the work of Gigon/Guyer.³ For if their work may still be considered to 'speak' it does so without requiring recourse to representations, to symbolic and linguistic systems, or even an appeal to architectural literacy; it is, so to speak, an *architecture parlante* avant le lettre.

Packaged into books, the buildings of Gigon/Guyer fall in line with current tastes and fashions: minimal, abstract, visual. They present quite differently,

however, in the flesh. As we walk through them, they demand of us a different engagement. Neither the “attentive concentration of a tourist in front of a famous building”⁴ (that the figural assemblages of Gehry, for example, seem to demand), nor the disinterested gaze prescribed by modernism for the contemplation of works of art and architecture. Rather, their work makes a case for the recuperation of a corporeal aesthetics, a recognition of aesthetics’ original sense as “*aisthitikos*, that which is perceptive by feeling”.⁵

Gigon/Guyer’s work provides an admirable terrain for exploring the sensate body as a primary site of spatial understanding.⁶ Their designs do not develop out of what they know; instead through an heuristics of material substitutions, they distill the effects they want to have; by sampling materials for the sensations they evoke, they discover which “sensations a building should awaken”. They proceed through their design process in much the same way an occupant of their architecture might through one of their buildings.⁷ In this sense, their procedures mimic the “perspective of the beholder who begins by looking and marveling at something”,⁸ then sorts through material qualities by sampling the sensations they give rise to. Their way of making their work parallels our way of experiencing and making sense of it.

Their work insinuates itself into the beholder’s world of sensations, its immediate materiality evoking within the occupant sentiments with a precision (to paraphrase Loos) that sponsors a renewed realization, even a *re*-cognition of that world. It is an “architecture that brings our perception, and thereby ourselves, into play ... [our] sensations — in the form of things — come into appearance.”⁹

It is hard to be an “absent” or “decarnalized” observer (*pace* Michael Fried and Norman Bryson)¹⁰ in a Gigon/Guyer building, even in one of their many projects for art museums. The deliberate disposition, even juxtaposition — of surfaces, materials, textures, and colors — never becomes reified spectacle. To the contrary, the careful staging appeals to the whole sensorium as well as to our prior embodied experiences. As we move through, in real time, new sensations entangle us; over time, our accumulated experiences recast these sensations into new meanings.

An architecture that entangles and captivates its occupants is not one that subscribes to the notion of transcendence, to Architecture as Idea. On the contrary, it is a tangible architecture predicated on engagement, on interaction, on performance. In the architecture of Gigon/Guyer, everything — from the insistent color, the resonant materials, the reflections and the views of bodies in motion — acknowledges the corporeal presence of the beholder. There is nothing in the ‘composition’ of forms and volumes that requires a “transcendent point of vision that has discarded the body”,¹¹ achieving a distance from which to view, contemplate, and comprehend the architecture. One is always within the frame, immanent, present within its spaces, a participant in the construction of one’s spatial experience.

In its reëmbrace of the body, the work of Gigon/Guyer shares an affinity with a general revalorization of the body (and of visibility over textuality) evident in the work of scholars like Barbara Stafford and W.J.T. Mitchell. In her “visualist manifesto”, *Good Looking*, Stafford takes on analytical approaches that reconceive “the material subjects of their inquiry as decorporealized signs and encrypted messages requiring decipherment.”¹²

These new approaches to visual culture engage a “long Platonic and Kantian tradition which has privileged ‘interiority’ and denied the body.” What they propose is an understanding of the visual that “does not mark an exclusive preoccupation with the ocular but denotes, rather, a strategic opposition to ... purely textual/semiotic approaches [and] ... which might encompass (via the strategic agency of the ‘visual’) the auditory, the haptic, etc.” Some of the best examples of this desire to engage the materiality of artifacts and spaces in non-linguistic terms — to find significance in the “bodily praxis” that surrounds them — can be found in material culture studies.¹³ Their application to architectural analysis might help sponsor a shift in focus from what buildings *represent* to how they perform and are *performed* by their occupants.

There are a number of theoretical constructs from within architectural thought as well that we could find useful in making sense of work like Gigon/Guyer’s. I have already mentioned August Schmarsow’s kinesthetic understanding of architectural space, his proposition that “bodily move-

ment through space, rather than stationary perception of form, was the essence of architecture,¹⁴ that “spatial images are built over time” through movement in time and in space.

In his formulation of architecture as the “enlargement of bodily feelings into spatial feelings”, of architectural space as “the figuration of human activities ... as a living amalgamation of human impulses, created perceptually by its creator and its users”,¹⁵ one finds an extension of Semper’s notions of “architectural space as a nexus of social activity ... [formed by] various material industries (foremost, the textile arts)”.¹⁶ These two concepts in tandem — spatial forming through the materials of enclosure and through movement and extension outward from the body — suggest a provisional apparatus upon which to drape our experiential understandings of Gigon/Guyer’s work.

Experiencing buildings by Gigon/Guyer in the first person, walking through and doubling back, testing and recalibrating perceptions, and correcting assumptions based on a prior understanding of architectural conventions, brought back to me Ruskin’s phrase, the “intelligent eye”. What manner of instrument is it? How far ‘in front of’ the mind does this intelligence sit? Could its operations be formulated? Another pass at the work of Gigon/Guyer could very profitably be made with these questions at the fore.

Work as sumptuous in the flesh and as immediate in its pleasures as this does raise the issue of a ‘critical distance’, a nagging trope of analytical ‘objectivity’. How does one get ‘outside of’ work like

Gigon/Guyer’s, work that is predicated upon a twinned set of experiences: of fabrication and of occupation. Perhaps an approach may be borrowed from recent work in the anthropology of art that calls for a “methodological philistinism”: a method that disassociates itself from projects of aesthetic appreciation in order to “engage with art objects themselves, with their specificity and efficacy.”¹⁷

What I think makes the work of Gigon/Guyer so compelling — and so important — is that they completely buck the current trend of normative practice, which seems to be a calculated trajectory of attrition, toward a built environment predicated upon inattention. The makers of a typical building (designers and builders both) are constantly saying to themselves, and subsequently to us, “Oh, no one will ever notice that.” And we become acclimated in time not to look where there is no pleasure looking. When was the last time, in an American building from the past decade or so, that you wanted to look up, and were rewarded with what you saw?

Gigon/Guyer assume that you and I will be looking, that we will notice how things are put together and might wonder why it was made this way rather than another, that we might notice how the light moves across a surface, or the sounds and deflections of our feet on different floors, or how a space alters its proportions as one turns toward a distant view. They expect us to notice, so they take great pains to make it worth our attention. And for the respect that they accord to us, I would submit, they deserve our respect and our attention in full measure.

The Addition of the Art Museum in Winterthur



The Addition to the Art Museum in Winterthur offers a contemplation of Semper's attempts to sort out the various motives involved in the act of building, together with a quietly but intensely argued case for the social and cultural importance of an architectural intervention, no matter how modest.

Beyond this, however, the spatial configurations of the project—as they are enacted in both the wall section and the plan—establish a compelling dialogue between conceptual and corporeal understandings of the same building.

The design brief called for a temporary structure over a parking lot, located just behind the neo-classical main building (dating from 1913), which would house the museum's impressively select collection of late modern and contemporary art—among them, Agnes Martin, Brice Marden, Ellsworth Kelly, and Gerhard Richter. As these are 'modern times', the parking needed to remain.

Given the project's status as a temporary building, its concomitantly limited budget (for Switzerland), and the urbanistic desire to defer both to the Semper building across the street as well as the museum proper, humble materials were in order. Gigon/Guyer's reading of the brief, and of the urban situation, led them to employ quotidian industrial materials: planks of c-channel glass and galvanized metal sheeting. Somehow, they effected an alchemy.

The galvanized metal, while clearly understood as such, has the same tonal value, texture, and sheen of the limestone facing on the existing building. At grade, the planks of c-channel glass are spaced a few inches apart around the perimeter of the building to create a shimmering fence for the parking. Above, surrounding the new galleries, the vertical glass cladding is backed by planks of insulation running horizontally, creating a *moiré* of two ordinary materials that, together, become extraordinary.

From the photographs the serrated roof forms, the crisply defined edges, and the industrial materials can seem almost shocking in the quiet context of Winterthur. Yet the building almost disappears in the actual condition. Despite the volume's taut lines, the surfaces blur with the surrounding landscape. A resident could be forgiven for walking this street every day without noticing the building, be-

cause the focus of attention remains with the large trees lining the sidewalk.

One can readily perceive how this volume supports a Semperian reading of enclosure and textiles, together with the gentle humor involved in describing the translucent parking plinth as a form of mound—a relation which is reversed on the interior, in the galleries.

Perhaps the most important thing to discuss about this project is the treatment of space on the interior, where Gigon/Guyer establish quite carefully a dialectic of conceptual and perceptual experiences of space, understood diachronically in both rational and organic terms.

This is not entirely new. Both Frampton and Robin Evans have noted how Mies's German Pavilion in Barcelona oscillates between rational and organic deployments of space. Frampton finds a classical description of space in the eight columns, which could be understood either as fragmentary grid or as peristyle, overlaid with an 'organic' pinwheeling plan among the wall planes that he identifies with the Arts and Crafts movement.

Evans's analyses are rather more subtle, revolving around various modes of symmetry and asymmetry in the project. Further, the Mies pavilion already participates in a discourse of uncertainty with regard to structural support, mass versus plane, tectonic versus abstract, and the ontological and perceptual status of materials.

But first, as Gigon/Guyer's interiors here depend upon explicit contrast with the exterior, back to the mound: The plinth of the Barcelona Pavilion reads initially as a solid block, its weight and mass intensifying the sense of lightness in the structure that rests upon it. Even the stone walls seem to hover slightly over this condensed, consecrated ground. Tellingly, some of Mies's earlier sketches for the pavilion show the stairs carved out of this dense stereometric material.

Apparently, however, Mies was dissatisfied with such a literal and unambiguous reading of material and mass, or found such unrelieved weight incompatible with his ideas of modernity, because he proceeded to develop the front face of the plinth to read as two separate parallel vertical planes as it engages the steps, one in front of the other, fold-

ing them at the top to form the horizontal plane of the floor. This is no longer quite the sacred mound of a classical temple, even though the reference may remain. Rather than a concentrated ground, it creates an abstracted, reconstituted one, the surface of a volume comprised of planes as opposed to solids.

In the Winterthur project Gigon/Guyer turn the relation upside down. From the exterior one's first impression is of a volume on pilotis. While this impression is almost immediately qualified by strips of translucent glass cladding that slip down to the ground, fencing off the space beneath, the feeling of lightness is maintained, even exaggerated, by the taut metal and glass cladding, which seem to wrap a large volume of air as though it were a Zeppelin.

But here no steps qualify or define the ground. The frail metal stairs suspended from the main volume are for emergency egress only, and their materials belong to the enclosure, or even the roof.

One enters the temporary museum with strict propriety: via the permanent one. After one has explored the galleries on the piano nobile of that building, one finds an almost secret passage at the back of the last room. One makes a dogleg turn and descends to the new galleries through an echoing bridge cum staircase (fashioned of masonite panels which have been polished and presented as though they were as precious as onyx).

Since one has climbed a series of monumental stone stairs to reach the galleries in the old building, and have now just descended these almost flimsy stairs to reach the new galleries, one might rightly expect to be back on the ground. And the smooth grey concrete floor of the new galleries, the solidity one feels again under one's feet, supports that supposition.

By this time in the sequence one has gone through a number of grey-upholstered rooms lined with some astonishing paintings, so one could be forgiven for forgetting one is directly above the parking lot. Still, a suspicion lingers. And directly as one proceeds into the first room one finds on one's left a large window (or, rather, a glazed opening from floor to ceiling), from which one can see one's exact location, and can gauge the floor's distance from the lawn and the street.

As in the Barcelona pavilion, this dual reading, maintained in suspension, extends to the structure. Yet while Mies sustains a structural indeterminacy by using two orders of elements, attenuated columns and partition-like walls, neither apparently quite up to the job, Gigon/Guyer collapse the two, threading the columns you know are there (because you've seen them as pilotis among the cars) through walls that appear solid in the galleries and don't appear at all from the outside.

The plans of the two buildings couldn't look more different: In the Barcelona pavilion the two systems of support and/or spatial definition are layered into a 'free plan' of star columns and offset floating planes. The Winterthur project compresses them into a nine-square of rooms, where the conversation between rational and organic takes place in an apparently neutral grid, which has been distorted and disrupted subtly to suit local agendas (and dimensioned to accommodate parking below).

Yet the two plans share an interest in the movement of the body through their spaces. Both encourage one to meander through them. In the free plan this is rendered explicitly. In the nine-square/grid it is encoded in the fragmentary enfilades; it is not obvious, but discovered.

While grids of rooms are a mainstay of many admirable galleries (one thinks of Kahn's British Museum in New Haven, Venturi's addition to the National Gallery in London, Moneo's Beck Museum in Houston), these do not necessarily lead to meandering paths—or at least the meander is not necessarily embedded in the gridded plan.

They do not de facto come with the territory of either nine-square or grid plan forms. We should perhaps remember that Renzo Piano has employed one of each—the open grid at the Beyeler, just outside Basil, and the nine-square in the Cy Twombly pavilion, in Houston. Both are exquisite structures. But in neither is the spatial sequence the main event.

In the Beyeler the grid is so loose as to lack coherence; the spaces only come into focus at the perimeter (notably, where the 'canonical' shots are taken). This is not necessarily a criticism, as one could convincingly argue that the spaces should be subordinate to the works of art on display. In the Beyeler, however, one can find oneself using

artworks as landmarks, which privileges the larger, brighter, more eye-catching pieces. Moreover, it encourages a distracted drifting from object to object, rather than a ramble from room to room.

All the deadliest aspects of the nine-square configuration come to the surface in the Twombly, exacerbated by the symmetrical entry. One is led in a ring around the outer rooms. The central room is a dead end, on axis with the entry; one enters it either at the beginning or the end of the perambulation—an hieratic relation to space that harkens to a classical temple (and evidently considered appropriate for some forms of 'high' art).

In the case of the Winterthur plan, the tension between central figure and neutral field is sustained in a tightly controlled hybrid of grid and nine-square. The boundaries are precise, as are the hierarchies of articulation.

It may come as a surprise to arrive inside this building, which from the exterior seems to be one large volume of undifferentiated space—a warehouse—and instead find rooms. While these spaces are treated as rooms, however, to the extent that they employ what some may call windows and doors, these openings are treated very abstractly, with no millwork or articulation whatsoever. Some could see these austere openings as the natural expression of an extremely *haute bourgeois* minimal style. Nonetheless, this abstraction serves more than a discrete good taste; it operates in service of an oscillation of registers between wall and partition, of one volume subdivided or several rooms aggregated.

This question of subdivision/aggregation is taken up by the serrated vaults. Unlike the Liner, which offers one vault per room, the Winterthur galleries are covered by multiples, which not only admit natural light from the north but also provide a unit of measure to the spaces. They vary in number across the plan: four over the three rooms closest to the old building, five over the 'middle' three, three over the farthest three. One can count them to understand how the spaces of the grid, typically standardized, here expand and contract.

Dividing the spaces along the north/south axis, the vaults run continuously east to west. Through the tall openings one can see them as they work in both directions, to define rooms and also flow

across them. This differentiation is continued in the walls, which are twice as thick on the 'x' as they are on the 'y', adroitly absorbing structure (the hidden columns) and mechanical systems.

These experiences of the vaults, along or against the grain, encode a diversity of scales to the spaces, much like Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth. Further, the vaults participate in a dialogue with the walls and their openings that encodes the body's relation to light, view, and surface—and also to the body's movement through the spaces.

It doesn't take much longer than a heartbeat to grasp the basic configuration. The nuances, however, take a great deal of time. The dimensions of the rooms are manipulated, together with the locations of the openings between them, in order to ensure that no room is exactly the same in its specifications, or in the way one approaches, enters, and moves through it.

Openings in the two types of walls never occur next to each other, as they sometimes do in the Liner Museum, but one can still register the difference in thickness as one passes through them, experiencing with one's shoulders the directional grain set up by the vaults.

These openings are tall, with no detail other than two expansion joints in the floor, floating the threshold, and always placed in the corners of the room. As one moves through the spaces, the pattern of the openings is not immediately apparent. But a look at the plan reveals that they are placed in opposite corners in the room as one moves north/south and enfilade as one moves east/west.

This encourages a meandering movement for the viewer, who already has a mental picture of the general plan, but needs to experience each room individually to appreciate its specific qualities. The immediacy and apparent neutrality of the overlying grid organization, combined with an instinctive recognition of the direction 'north', removes wayfinding anxiety from visitors to the gallery, encouraging them to wander through the spaces, rather than 'do' the rooms in any strict sequence.

Variations in dimension and the directionality of the vaults are given greater mystery by encouraging the viewer to experience each room several times. And each time the room will be different,

because one has entered it from another direction or orientation, and because one sees the works on the walls in juxtaposition with the works of a different neighboring room.

Most importantly, one can see a painting within the confines of a particular room, and then catch a glimpse of it again framed through a series of openings, or chance upon it on the oblique while wandering back through.

Three windows, one on each façade of the building, provide an itinerary for one's path. As destinations, they allow one to re-define more- and less-important spaces within the general field of rooms. As views, they re-inscribe one back into the city landscape. A sculpture placed on the lawn outside encourages one to treat the views from the windows as an important part of the experience of looking at the art—just as in the Kirchner they counterposed views of Swiss countryside with paintings of it. The fourth wall, of course, contains the opening to the bridge back to the galleries in the main building—to which one returns when it is time to depart.

I believe that Gigon/Guyer are quite consciously encoding time-release understandings of the spaces into the experience of the visitors, rewarding those who spend the most time with the art and perhaps encouraging them to interact with each other, as well as the works on display.

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NOTES

¹ Harry Mallgrave. *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893* (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 65. Schmarsow's theory of *Raumgestaltung* (spatial forming), and his proto-phenomenological insights into physiological and psychological aesthetics are borne out in our daily experience of the world we live in. Barcelonans, for example, will tell you that they cannot

ever get lost in their city. Their feet always tell them where they are — between the micro-topography formed by the varying patterns of tiles that line the sidewalks and the subtle but insistent gradient of the land as the city tilts slightly toward the sea. Granted, there are many other factors that contribute to wayfinding and to the often intense pleasures of Barcelona's pavements. But a short walk in, for example, Amsterdam or Providence, Rhode Island, will suggest that there's something to what they say.

² Marco Frascari. "The Tell-the-Tale Detail". *Via 7* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1984), 22-37. The signifying function of architecture is preëminent in this reading of the detail's pragmatic and representative functions. Frascari sees details as the "minimal units of signification in the architectural production of meanings" (23) through their conjunction of the "practical norms (technology) and the aesthetic norms (semiotics)" (36).

³ John Ruskin. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984). In "The Lamp of Truth" Ruskin mentions, but does not develop, the notion of the *intelligent* and the *careless* observer: "... that building will generally be the noblest, which to an intelligent eye discovers the great secrets of its structure ... although from a careless observer they may be concealed." (40).

⁴ Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art In the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 240.

⁵ Susan Buck-Morss. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered". *October 62* (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 3-41. She argues that "the original field of aesthetics [was] ... corporeal, material nature" and its sensible experience (6), very different from the way aesthetics has come to be understood, as "detached contemplation rather than instinctual cognition" (Pinney 2001, 160).

⁶ This is not to suggest that Gigon/Guyer's practice is unique in this regard. One could certainly find, and be rewarded by, similar concerns with the experience of the body in the work of Peter Zumthor, Rafael Moneo, Alvaro Siza, Kazuyo Sejima....

⁷ Martin Steinmann. "Conjectures On the Architecture of Gigon/Guyer". *Gigon/Guyer Architects: Works & Projects 1989-2000*. (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2000). Steinmann mentions their 1993 exhibition in Lucerne in which they made their way of working manifest: "Shelves filled with samples of different materials occupied the middle of the exhibition space ... they were simply there, like in their atelier, in order to investigate their suitability from case to case to evoke certain sensations" (219).

⁸ Max Wechsler. "Beauty is Admissible: Architecture as Visual Event". *Ibid.*, 360.

⁹ Steinmann. *op.cit.*, 219.

¹⁰ For Bryson's notion of disembodied vision and Fried's disparagement of "theatricality" in painting (paintings that acknowledge the presence of the beholder, see: Norman Bryson. *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Michael Fried. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

¹¹ Bryson. *Ibid.*, 106.

¹² Barbara Stafford. *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtues of Images*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 6.

¹³ Christopher Pinney. "Visual Culture". *The Material Culture Reader*. (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 81-85. Pinney makes a provocative reference to Lyotard's distinction between 'discourse' and 'figure': between "linguistic-philosophical closure (discourse) and ... a domain where 'meaning is not produced and communicated, but intensities are felt' (figure)" (85).

¹⁴ Mitchell Schwartz. "The Emergence of Architectural Space: August Schmarsow's Theory of *Raumgestaltung*". *Assemblage 15* (August 1991), 50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁷ Nicholas Thomas and Christopher Pinney. *Beyond Aesthetics: Art and the Technologies of Enchantment*. (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 2.