

# Oscillating Between Art and Equipment: A Hermeneutics of Sustainability

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## INTRODUCTION

Sustainability speaks to a holistic view of existence, understanding the importance of interdependencies within ecosystems. The subject also introduces the possibilities of a newfound respect for architecture, turning away from decades of pursuing everything from utopian promises to linguistic games. With the hopes of making the profession meaningful once again by accepting a leading role in aiding the state of the planet, architects have the opportunity to introduce and employ designs that recognize development and the environment as one, making the entirety healthier in the process. Yet sustainability as a subject by itself does not ensure the revitalization of the field nor its perception as an interconnected system. The work can be mired in scientific methods and quantifiable measures, derailing this holistic view in lieu of disconnected data and points that do not necessarily guarantee improved and integrated built form. A hermeneutic perspective supports the perception of the environment as a totality, but this outlook cannot be presumed for everyone. This paper explores how people are drawn to such a view by architecture's capacity for an orientation that can be described as oscillating, engaging users through built form that shifts between intrigue and function. Such a position borrows from the works of David Leatherbarrow and Martin Heidegger, whose views on art and equipment run deep with similarities. The work of these thinkers will be explored to not only reinforce but also expand one another, establishing an orientation that is not fixed but moves between aesthetics and purpose. Using sustainable water systems as an avenue for examination, it is possible

to investigate how architectural elements such as rainwater storage are viewed as both artistic and useful. Lake|Flato's World Birding Center and Polk Stanley Rowland Curzon Porter's Heifer International Headquarters provide alternate avenues for this exploration. The oscillation between these the art and equipment of these works invites contemplation that occurs in different ways, promoting a consideration by users that supports an argument for the power of hermeneutics to be recognized as a critical part of sustainability.

## THE CORRELATIONS OF LEATHERBARROW AND HEIDEGGER

The shared basis of the works of David Leatherbarrow and Martin Heidegger establish a person and her world as a holistic system, interconnecting an individual through both context and time instead of perceiving everything as isolated objects. Leatherbarrow expresses this by commenting that his work proceeds to:

"show that the building's exposure or subjection to the many and varied dimensions of its ambient conditions amounts to a disavowal of sovereignty—not just the building's but the designer's, too...for only if we finally let go of the idea of the self-sufficient object will we catch a glimpse of a new—and newly significant—collective, communicative, or urban order."<sup>1</sup>

The notion of releasing the idea of the self-sufficient object turns away from objectivity, a move that Heidegger introduces in his writings by establishing *Being-in-the-World*. Among his most important concepts, *Being-in-the-World* is defined as a person who is always already immersed within a context and history, not able to be comprehended

without such connections. This “unitary phenomenon” emphasizes the inability to divorce a person from his world and time.<sup>2</sup> That is, an individual is the totality of his current and past context of thoughts, experiences and things as well as current and past environments, their events and meanings. Place and its history become as important as a person and his history.

The contrast between *Being-in-the-World* and the more conventional subject-object understanding is stark. In traditional science, subjects are viewed as able to be separated from the surrounding objects conceptually, contextually and temporally, making things independent of one another. This ability to separate the ideas and contents of the world promotes the view that everything exists as an isolated entity. Such a separation is rejected by both Leatherbarrow and Heidegger as it fails to capture the rich and complex relationships of a person and his world.

Similarities between the works of Leatherbarrow and Heidegger expand beyond this foundational understanding. Specifically, both see elements within the holistic system that have the ability to capture attention and to provide a service. Leatherbarrow notes:

“Considering all the arts, the double tasking of showing and serving seems to be architecture’s unique assignment, a cultural role that is reduced when the building is viewed either as an aesthetic object or a functional solution, or some compromise between the two... My hope is that this preamble will provide some clarification of the ways that a building can both adhere to and distinguish itself from its “context” and “program,” performing in ways that acknowledge existing conditions while enriching them.”<sup>3</sup>

Leatherbarrow sees the tasks of aesthetics and function to operate simultaneously, perceiving buildings to be both focal pieces and perform work.

Heidegger also notes the presence of aesthetic objects and functional elements. Within the complex relationships of *Being-in-the-World* there is the existence of art and equipment, which Heidegger explores in his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Here, Heidegger lays out the idea of works of art as pieces of one’s surroundings that are attended to—they capture attention through an ability to stand out from the context. Art is seen as an expression that has an ability to bring to light the nature of something, becoming noticed. Functional elements, on the other hand, are not noticed but

disappear into use. That is, equipment becomes overlooked as the service it provides takes priority. The equipment operates in a way that allows events to happen without commanding attention.

Many thinkers have discussed concepts such as aesthetics and art or function and equipment, but what is intriguing about Leatherbarrow and Heidegger is that they not only characterize these in essentially similar ways but also contrast them with one another, noting a particular distinction that is seen in the pairing. These parallels are perhaps even better understood in Leatherbarrow’s comment that “buildings sometimes allow themselves to be seen independently, as images, and other times recede from prominence in order to accommodate everyday life.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, both Leatherbarrow and Heidegger see an artistic role as separate from a functional responsibility, yet the differences encourage a specific relationship that helps give definition to either task.

While the correlations of these works are strong, both Leatherbarrow and Heidegger offer further insight that helps extend an understanding of these issues. For Leatherbarrow, the crux of the matter seems to lie in the *between*; that is, he implies the importance of balance among forces instead of catering to one particular concern. His term “otherwise” is defined as buildings that are oriented beyond themselves and notes that this is a “counter-positioning,” which derives from the Renaissance and is explained as follows:

“Medical texts of the same periods and of classical antiquity elaborated an even more basic concept, that of equilibrium (krasis) among the parts of a body and, more importantly, between the body and its surrounding milieu, inasmuch as the vicinity combined both attractive and displeasing aspects. The same sort of engagement between an individual and its vicinity can exist in architecture.”<sup>5</sup>

In this way, Leatherbarrow turns the examination toward the connections rather than what is being connected, perceiving the criticality of the links. For him, this underscores the interconnections of a person and his world as well as recognizes many possible interpretations within a context. The ability to move among these provides a way of understanding architecture as not focused on the singular object but emerging from and beyond its many relationships. Citing ideas such as “double tasking” and “equilibrium” addresses the complexity of the

topic and alludes to the changing nature of the situation. For Leatherbarrow, *orientation* is a term that begins to summarize this ability of architecture and the experience of the user.

Heidegger also looks at these connections but begins with a focus on the elements within the relationships to identify their nuances. His investigation of art begins by recognizing that an individual sometimes notices a certain piece of her surroundings, attending to a thing whose presence has somehow become apparent. These certain pieces include works of art—things that have been made with some intention of expression, capturing interest through their ability to stand out from the rest of the context. While many parts of the environment are noticeable, what distinguishes a work of art is an ability to bring to light the nature of something. That is, art expresses something about its subject, capturing one's interest because of its power to communicate information about its topic. Heidegger states "[t]o be a work means to set up a world."<sup>6</sup> That is, a work of art isn't just a documentation of a group of objects but a way in which the meanings and relationships in life are shown more clearly. Heidegger uses Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes to illustrate this point, noting how the painting portrays the situation of the peasant. Her life is difficult and hard, observable in the simple and worn footwear. By presenting this piece of the peasant's circumstances in a painting, the depiction makes it possible for an individual to see the peasant in a way that was previously unseen, opening up an understanding of her world. All the complexities of the situation of the peasant are recognized in the work of art. For Heidegger, art is not about aesthetic beauty nor is it about reproducing reality. Art discloses by describing something about a situation, allowing for a new comprehension.

In contrast to art, equipment disappears into use. That is, when something is functioning like expected, this element is overlooked in lieu of the activity it is supporting. Heidegger states:

"The peasant woman wears her shoes in the field. Only here are they what they are. They are all the more genuinely so, the less the peasant woman thinks about the shoes while she is a work, or looks at them at all, or is even aware of them. She stands and walks in them. That is how shoes actually serve. It is in this process of the use of equipment that we must actually encounter the character of equipment."<sup>7</sup>

Within the network of relations, equipment operates in a way that allows events to happen without calling attention to itself. It is part of a larger system that is taken for granted, performing a service and losing its own identity in the process.

In the pairing of art and equipment, Heidegger recognizes that the former opens up an understanding while the latter retains its original essence. Together, they have the power to extend and hold knowledge about the world—the more one sees meanings and connections, the more one recognizes that there are irrefutable inherent qualities contained within things. Heidegger states:

"Truth happens in Van Gogh's painting. This does not mean that something is correctly portrayed, but rather that in the revelation of the equipmental being of the shoes, that which is as a whole—world and earth in their counterplay—attains to unconcealedness."<sup>8</sup>

The "counterplay" of world and earth is the contrast of art's ability to disclose one's circumstances and equipment's potential to continually contain this situation. Heidegger sees these working together, each operating to compliment and broaden the other. This contrast relates back to Leatherbarrow's focus on the links of the relationships, understanding that it is the connections that capture the complexity of the situation and move beyond a formal reading to an interpretation that contains richer, deeper relationships. Referencing the directional qualities insinuated in Leatherbarrow's use of the term *orientation*, the connections between the artistic and the functional in architecture can be seen to draw their power from their ability to move from one to the other and work together—even seen as dependent on each other—in a holistic system. That is, an oscillating orientation promotes an interpretation that continually shifts between, gaining strength through this situation. As a piece that captures attention through its ability to communicate, an artful built environment guides a person toward an experience that opens up new understandings, beginning the process of awareness and study of one's surroundings. This study comprehends the piece as serving a functional role, shifting from an understanding of art to equipment.

Recognizing the possibility of changing interpretations in architecture supports an awareness of an environment that is complex and encompassing in nature. An oscillating orientation that advances out

in more than one direction moves participants beyond a simplistic reading to capture the fullness of an experience that includes many and varied connections. By focusing on the conceptual correlations found in the work of Leatherbarrow and Heidegger, both how orientation can move between artistic and functional interpretations and the way in which participants are drawn to such contemplation can be investigated. It is this oscillation that has the power to open an understanding of the holistic nature of sustainability, extending architecture through the environment in a way that recognizes an overall integration. A look at an aspect of sustainable water systems helps elucidate the situation.

### **THE OSCILLATING ORIENTATION OF SUSTAINABLE WATER SYSTEMS**

Ranging from low-flow plumbing fixtures to water harvesting, the conservation of water is a major part of the green building movement. The ability to bypass dependence on a water service by collecting and storing rainwater makes such a system both a logical and vital part of sustainable design. The rainwater can be used for a wide variety of purposes, gathered from roofs and channeled into collection tanks. How a collection system is incorporated and the way in which it is experienced becomes a design decision that has an impact on the user's view of sustainability and how they perceive their connection to it. By exploring how the orientation of participants can oscillate between noticing the artistic expression and recognizing the functional requirements, the potential and power of a hermeneutic interpretation of sustainability can be studied. A look at two well-known projects provides an opportunity for exploration.

The most basic rainwater collection system is, of course, a tank filled from rain that runs off the building's roof. Such tanks can be very apparent, as seen in Lake|Flato's World Birding Center in Mission, Texas. Finished in 2004 with sustainability as a guiding principle, the center allows the public to visit a Rio Grande Valley refuge for birds and butterflies and includes a water collection system that can hold 47,000 gallons of rainwater caught from the roofs of the structure. Visitors walk past the large above ground cisterns, able to touch these tanks and observe them closely. Located at the ends and sides of the long one-story Quonset-hut

forms, these elements punctuate the end of the linear movement and provide visual interest. People immediately recognize the elements as storage for rainwater as they are familiar equipment in the Texas landscape. They see the common cylindrical forms made of corrugated metal and understand them instantly. The gutters and downspouts are also apparent to the visitors, able track the connections and follow the path of the rainwater. Even the base of the tanks displays the necessary spigots and piping; the operation of the system is exhibited for everyone to see.

This collection system creates interest, drawing in users because of its placement and size. The unexpected proximity with these large pieces and the frequency of their presence cause users to take notice of these tanks. The awareness introduces reflection on water and its value, directing visitors toward consideration of the role of water in the environment and how this facility demonstrates an interconnection with it. In this way, the tanks become art as described by Heidegger—they offer an expression which catches attention and provides visitors with insight to a larger environmental system, giving them a new view of water and their relationship to it. A person's context is opened as the perspective brings a new light to this everyday resource that is too often taken for granted, not always seen as a vital part of a web of relationships.

The presence of the storage tanks prompts visitors to acknowledge the value of water, but the operation of the system is similarly evident. People see the gutters, downspouts and spigots that are connected to the large cisterns and immediately grasp the function of these pieces. The rainwater collection pieces are interpreted as equipment in the Heideggerian sense because they are utilitarian elements that provide a way to save water for watering habitats and nourishing wildlife. The industrial nature of the equipment is not hidden. From this view, placement of the tanks can be understood to be functional, occurring with a frequency that divides collection and offers optimal distribution.

The placement and the proximity of the storage tanks begin a reflection process by enticing people to contemplate these elements that are then noticed for the purpose they serve. This orientation moves between the artistic and the functional, supporting an interpretation that makes connections to

the environment. That is, the sustainable elements are expressed in ways that are noticed, making apparent the integration of the facility with the environment. This oscillation expands one's perception of his place in the larger world, linked through a sustainable architecture that is an integral part of this holistic system.

The nature of an oscillating orientation can be further explored by examining the water collection system included in the Heifer International Headquarters in Little Rock, Arkansas. Designed by Polk Stanley Rowland Curzon Porter (now Polk Stanley Wilcox), the facility was built specifically for this non-profit organization that works to bring livestock and plants to people in need around the world. The building's water storage tank is located near the center of the curving form, held within a glass enclosure and standing five stories in height. This glass enclosure is actually a stair tower (also used as fire egress) with the storage tank wrapped by cantilevered stairs that move people around the element when they use this circulation. From a distance, a person has the opportunity to recognize the water storage as something held within a transparent container, placed as a valued object. This vertical piece takes center stage in the structure's overall composition, emphasized by the arc of the building. As a 42,000 gallon tank, it receives water from the 30,000 square foot roof. This water is treated and used to flush toilets, circulate in the radiant heating system, and replenish the wetlands at the base of the building during extended dry weather periods. Even thermal assistance is put into play as the presence of the water tank helps to moderate the temperature of the staircase.

Although the shape of the storage tank is typical, its placement within the footprint of the building brings to light the enormity of its form. Its proximity is uncommon for such elements, and its verticality introduces a monumental silhouette within the complex. The smooth cylinder contrasts with the flattened skin of the building and the rectangular glass enclosure that holds it. This monumentality of the element and its contrast to the rest of the facility support a shape that works as Heideggerian art, making visitors notice its presence. In this noticing they begin to contemplate the element, which makes possible an awareness of the importance of water in the environment. People perceive the water tower because of its prominence, shape

and proximity, but this opens up a reflection that could easily have remained out of sight.

Once visitors notice the tall tank, its function becomes recognized. They see the storage of water and know that it has the potential to be used for purposes throughout the facility, such as maintaining the wetlands at its base. Inside the staircase, people feel the temperature modification introduced by the water storage and understand another operation of the system. The work serves as equipment, fulfilling its purpose in storing and supplying water to the building.

Users of the Heifer International Headquarters are made aware of the value of water because the presence of the storage tower leads to its contemplation, yet they also perceive the purpose the tower fulfills, addressing the necessary task of attending to the supply and care of water. Like the World Birding Center, visitors to the Heifer International Headquarters move between the artful disclosure of this resource and the functional nature of its collection and storage.

Yet in comparison, the oscillations of the World Birding Center and the Heifer International Headquarters are remarkably different. The oscillation of the World Birding Center relies almost solely on proximity and placement of its rainwater collection system for capturing attention, showcasing the equipment without apology. Observers see the equipment and are aware of the role it plays, but at the same time they perceive the system as a compositional statement connected to the surrounding environment. The World Birding Center keeps the collection system at the forefront of participants' attention through straightforward and repetitive means, turning the celebration to the function in a way that allows people to see something that usually remains unnoticed.

The collection system of the Heifer International Headquarters is also noticed, but for other reasons. Not only is it seen because of its proximity and placement, but the manner in which the water storage is framed, how it is lighted, its interaction with the stairs and wetlands, and even its moderation of temperatures makes one take notice of it. Visitors become aware of and connect to water in many different ways. They see it, they walk over and around it, it becomes their orientation point,

and they even feel it. Through these experiences they engage in an interpretation of the built environment that continually opens understandings of a sustainable world and their relationship to it.

Contrasting the two, a person at the World Birding Center encounters a sustainable environment that can be described as artistically functional while someone at the Heifer International Headquarters is met with a sustainable environment that may be expressed as purposefully intriguing. Whether these projects are seen to range between artful equipment and equipmental art, the ability of the collection systems to serve and express simultaneously increases our awareness of our holistic situation because the systems are seen as not isolated elements but as many possibilities that observers move between, necessitating interpretations that are continually shifting.

## CONCLUSIONS

The writings of Leatherbarrow and Heidegger give insight to the establishment of an oscillating orientation as they have similar perspectives in how the artistic and the functional can be identified and help define one another. A critical balance can be recognized in how this movement occurs, seeing art and equipment as working together yet in very different ways. The two architecture examples provide a beginning to understandings that are described as artistically functional and purposefully intriguing, yet they are certainly not opposite ends of an imaginable spectrum and present only two possibilities in a much larger range of potentials. And while the orientations of these two systems are different, they are similar in that both are understood by users not as detached objects comprehended in a limited way but as parts of complex relationships that incorporate both artful and purposeful connections in a sustainable and holistic environment. In each of these facilities, visitors are invited to contemplate how they find themselves *between* in these understandings, moving among interpretations of art and equipment. In addition, visitors are engaged in these buildings in a way that connects them beyond the built form. In both projects, people are encouraged to perceive their relationships to the environment, understanding the ties and becoming aware of all the interdependencies involved.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 David Leatherbarrow, *Architecture Oriented Otherwise* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 10- 11.
- 2 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 78.
- 3 Leatherbarrow, 8.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 9-10.
- 6 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 44.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 56.