

THE CLEARING AND THE LABYRINTH

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Visualizing the Problem

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that the “logic of visualization” that now informs the entirety of social practice” has changed the way we acquire spatial information, and further that this ‘logic’ initiates a distinction between proximate and distant vision. “The eye tends to relegate objects to the distance, to render them passive. The rise of the visual realm entails a series of substitutions and displacements by means of which it overwhelms the whole body and usurps its role.”¹ The phrase “logic of visualization” is attributed to Erwin Panofsky’s *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, where a man imbued with this visual logic “would not have been satisfied had not the membrification of the edifice permitted him to re-experience the very processes of architectural composition just as the membrification of the *Summa* permitted him to re-experience the very processes of cogitation.”²

Yet, as visual acquisition of spatial data replaces other modes of sensory acquisition (auditory, olfactory, tactile) the body is distanced from its role as spatial locator. This displacement from tactile to visual is a key factor in removing the body from its spatial experience, as the *illusion* of inhabiting a space replaces the *feeling* of inhabiting of a space. The illusory quality of space (or of things) contributes to what Walter Benjamin sees as the loss of aura in the work of art, but more importantly it impacts the power structures which ultimately control space and determine what can and cannot take place there.

The Pyramid and the Labyrinth

To address the question of how this logic of visualization affects the production and consumption of architecture, it will be useful to first consider epistemological constructs of architectural understanding. Bernard Tschumi has been instrumental in articulating one such architectural epistemology. In one of his first published articles, Tschumi argues the true medium of architecture is not form but *space*, and additionally that any space is necessarily incomplete without the *events* that take place in and around it.³ Borrowing Bataille’s metaphoric notion of the *pyramid* as the disembodied Idea of space, pure space, and the *labyrinth* as the experience of space, use, an epistemological dialectic is constructed in which architectural knowledge is acquired

through the junction (and disjunction) between the conceptual understanding of space and the data of experience.⁴ Put in its simplest terms, when the experience of space coincides with the preexisting idea of the space, this is the *pleasure* of architecture. When the experience conflicts with the idea, this is the *violence* of architecture.⁵

For Bataille, this sets up the nagging paradox of architecture: The pyramid is always conceptualized from within a labyrinth and likewise the labyrinth is always susceptible to the conceptualizing pyramid of thought. For Tschumi, this necessary friction between pure space and pure experience does not present a limitation, or failure, of architecture, but rather an absolute condition of architecture: The boundaries which delimit the playing field within which architecture maneuvers.

The Garden and the Stoa

There’s a story that says Plato preferred to teach in the *garden*. Aristotle, on the other hand, is said to have preferred the *stoa*. Whether there is any historical accuracy to this story is probably less important than its suggestion that the junction of space and use might impact how knowledge is developed. To inhabit one place for any length of time (the garden) fosters a level of understanding, or pleasure, with respect to one’s immediate surroundings. In removing the necessity to continually confront one’s surroundings, the garden allows for movement into other potentially violent confrontations with ideas. To continually move through the space, on the other hand, (the stoa) suggests a violent relationship with one’s surroundings, a continual process of disorientation and reorientation. In the stoa each idea thought to have been previously secured is continually subject to potential contention as new spatial configurations impose themselves on the topics under discussion.

Visualization: Proximate and Distant

Lefebvre’s comments on the logic of visualization appear in a chapter entitled “From Absolute Space to Abstract Space,” and it is an abstract space with which we are concerned.⁶ Abstract space is the space inhabited. “This space is ‘lived’ rather than conceived.”⁷ The labyrinth not the pyramid. It is space met by use, the moment where Tschumi’s pleasure and violence are set in motion. “A product of violence and war,”⁸ it is a highly political

space — a space where political conflict defines the acute connection between knowledge of a space and control over that space.

The movement from absolute space to abstract space begins when the space is co-opted, inhabited by the gaze, when revelations and distinctions are made in the “overall texture” of space.⁹ José Ortega y Gasset begins to elaborate on how these distinctions develop when he takes up the question of proximate and distant vision:

Proximate vision organizes the whole field of vision, imposing upon it an optical hierarchy: a privileged central nucleus articulates itself against the surrounding area. In the center there is the favored object, fixed by our gaze; its form seems clear, perfectly defined in all its details. Around the object, as far as the limits of the field of vision, there is a zone we do not look at, but which, nevertheless, we see with an indirect, vague, inattentive vision. Everything in this zone seems to be situated behind the object.

Compare this with distant vision. Instead of fixing a proximate object, let the eye, passive but free, prolong its line of vision to the limit of the visual field. What do we find then? The structure of our hierarchical elements disappears. The ocular field is homogenous; we do not see one thing clearly and the rest confusedly, for all are submerged in an optical democracy. Nothing possesses a sharp profile; everything is background, confused, almost formless.¹⁰

It's clear that Ortega y Gasset favors not even an optical democracy, but his view that the construction of a strong figure upon a clearly established (if unfocused) ground offers more solace for pleasure than the figureless ground of the distant vision follows well Tschumi's epistemology. If experience is conditioned by prior conceptions, the presence of a strong figure firmly establishes preconceptions that can be empirically tested. The confusion stemming from the formlessness of the distant visual field lies not in Ortega y Gasset's inability to experience the field — he knows enough about it to characterize it as homogeneous, even democratic — but in the violence generated between distant use and proximate preconception.

Ortega y Gasset describes this distinction as qualitative rather than quantitative. Distant vision does not necessarily suggest an object is farther away, but that it relates to our other senses differently than the object of proximate vision.¹¹ When I hold an object, whether in my hands or in my proximate gaze, I feel its weight. Does it smell? Is it warm or cold? Wet or dry? If I tap it, it produces a sound. Is it solid or hollow? Distant vision, on the other hand, works purely on the visual sense. I can no longer tell if it is warm or cold, solid or hollow, wet or dry, heavy or light. If it produces a smell, how can I be sure it is that object which produces the smell? A causal breakdown results as well - if it makes a sound, it was not because of my touch, but from some *other* source. The illusion of a distant other is what Benjamin attributes as *aura*.

The definition of the aura as a 'unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be' represents nothing but the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception. The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. Unapproachability is indeed a major quality of the cult image. True to its nature, it remains 'distant, however close it may be.' The closeness which one may gain from its subject matter does not impair the distance which it retains in its appearance.¹²

Projective Imagination and Becoming – Pierre

Architectural design is sometimes described as *projective imagination* — projecting imaginary additions and alterations onto existing landscapes. Sartre tells a particularly interesting story of how this process works.¹³

Sartre is late to meet his punctual friend Pierre at a local café. As he enters the crowded café, he scans the room for a glimpse of Pierre. As his gaze systematically travels across the interior of the café, Sartre briefly sees the image of Pierre in each face in the crowd. For a moment each customer is perhaps Pierre ... no, it's not Pierre. Is that Pierre? No. How about at this table? Again, no. The bartender, the waiters, even the coat rack are tested as potential PIERRES. Sartre projects the figural image of Pierre onto the ground of the café, and in doing so each element focused upon by the gaze travels out of Sartre's distant vision toward his proximate vision, for closer inspection, before its negation as not-Pierre returns it back to its distant position in the ground. In this case, the figure is not an object in the ground; it never becomes fully proximate. The figure is imagined, projected, and the movement initiated in the ground distinguishes a series of possible foregrounds in a more continuous background.¹⁴

Sartre posits an “optical democracy” of the visual field that is not homogenous as Ortega y Gasset proposes, but one where the ground, with its foreground, background, middle-ground, peripheries, in and out of focus, its affirmations and negations, allow for a rich and heterogeneous mixture of elements, none of which is fixed by, or subjugated by, the field, but all of which possess the potential to reterritorialize the visual field. Sartre's architecture, his projective imagination, is not concerned with designing objects in a field, or figures on a ground, but is concerned with designing the ground itself - articulating foregrounds and backgrounds. Sartre's malaise (or nausea) with this process of projective imagination stems from projecting pleasure onto the distant background which reflects violence as the recipient of the projective gaze moves toward the proximate foreground.¹⁵

THE CLEARING AND THE LABYRINTH The Beginnings of a Spatial Typology

Clearings

If, following Tschumi's lead, the true medium of architecture is not form but space, then the “formal”

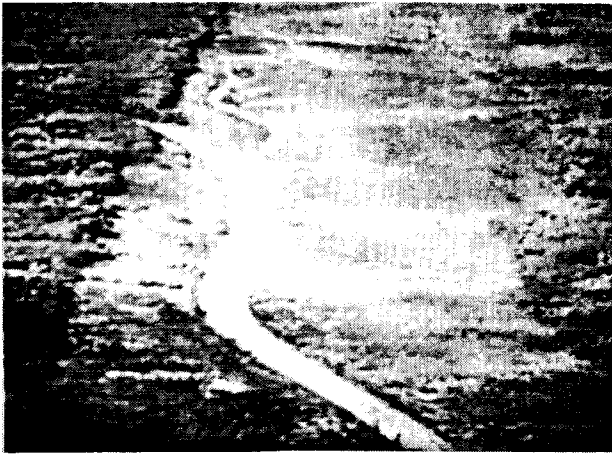


Fig. 1. Clearing, Vietnam. 1968.

conception of the pyramid needs to be reconfigured in spatial terms. I propose the *clearing* as the spatial negative of the pyramid (as conceptual void rather than conceptual solid), which, when considered in relation to the logic of visualization, becomes the experiential negative of the labyrinth.

A *clearing* is typified by a central space of visibility and vulnerability surrounded by a dense space of refuge. The spatial dialogue between the surveyor and the surveyed defines the clearing as an *inverted panopticon*, where those in the center are the focus of the ubiquitous surrounding gaze.

The spatial configuration of the clearing applies to both the forest and urban open space where, as absolute space (to continue Lefebvre's terminology), the predominance of activity is usually located at the rich edge condition between refuge and vulnerability. Once politicized, moving "from absolute space to abstract space," as in the napalmed jungles of Vietnam (Figure 10), the clearing is rendered spatially neutral, i.e. all parties involved are equally vulnerable in the center and equally safe in the surroundings. The introduction of a clearing into a landscape of conflict, then, does not necessarily shift existing hierarchies power. (This is not to say a clearing cannot reinforce existing power structures, but in itself it does not generate them.)

Labyrinths

A spatial condition distinct from the clearing is the *labyrinth*. The labyrinth is typified by the oscillating spatial experience of disorientation and reorientation. As an architectural strategy, the introduction of a labyrinth offers the potential to shift control of a space based on who knows its plan. On the power of labyrinth Hans Magnus Enzensberger writes:

Every orientation presupposes a disorientation. Only someone who has experienced bewilderment can free himself of it. But these games of orientation are in turn games of disorientation. Therein lies their fascination and their risk. The labyrinth is made so that whoever enters it will stray and get lost. But the labyrinth also poses the visitor a



Fig. 2. Labyrinth, Paris. May, 1968.

challenge: that he reconstruct the plan of it and dissolve its power. If he succeeds, he will have destroyed the labyrinth; for one who has passed through it, no labyrinth exists.¹⁶

Parisian students in May 1968 reclaimed the space of Haussmann's boulevards in a similar fashion by constructing labyrinths as barricades in the streets near the Sorbonne (Figure 2). Acting as guerrilla architects, these students empowered themselves with the knowledge of the labyrinth's design, a knowledge the authorities confronting these spaces did not possess. For these designers, no labyrinth exists.

Implementation

A series of related spatial types can be identified as derivations of the clearing. The *allée* can be seen as a linear clearing. Originating in French fox hunting, the *allée* is a straight path carved out of the woods. Dogs were used to flush the fox out of its place of refuge and into the cleared path, where it could easily outrun the slower dogs but was quickly run down by hunters on horseback, caught by the faster horse and ultimately by the even faster bullet — the hunter's gaze as traced by the horse, then the bullet. Now more commonly used as a decorative and symbolic formal motif (man's control over nature more than man's control over other men), the early origins of the *allée* were the inspiration for Haussmann's Parisian *boulevards*, where grand paths were carved out of the urban fabric of Paris to facilitate military deployment to potentially troublesome areas of the city - the gaze as traced by troop movement. Haussmann pursued this in two ways: by making the clearings wide enough to prevent their "re-forestation" by protesters and by cutting the paths directly from the military barracks to working-class neighborhoods.¹⁷

The *trench* can be seen as a variation of the labyrinth. With the trench, the same morphology presents two very different spatial conditions — a barrier (a line in the sand) or a labyrinth, depending on changes in the political context. Only when the enemy invades the space of the trench does the labyrinthine configuration become

significant in empowering its designers.

One of the most effective recent examples of the clearing and the labyrinth appears in James Inigo Freed's design for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. The dislocating journey of the museum-goer begins in the small elevator ride to the top floor of the museum. From here the traveler is confronted with a maze of darkened corridors containing a series of exhibits; many of them textual, many on small video monitors. By combining exhibits that need to be confronted close at hand, at a visual distance comparable to reading a book and watching television, with a disorienting and labyrinthine space, Freed has created an experience which immediately separates the traveler from the other museum-goers. The result is a museum whose material has to be confronted alone. Two clearings in the museum, the Hall of Witness and the Ejszyski Tower, repeatedly impinge upon the exhibit-maze, helping to relocate the traveler within the rest of the museum complex.

Compare the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum with Daniel Libeskind's new Jewish Extension to the Berlin Museum. Libeskind's design also employs a labyrinthine exhibit space wrapped around a clearing with one notable exception — the void of Libeskind's clearing is uninhabitable. Museum-goers can view into the space at many different points throughout their journey, yet can never occupy the space of the surveyed. Here everyone is surveyor, and no one surveyed.

NOTES

- ¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 286.
- ² "We are faced neither with "rationalism" in a purely functionalistic sense nor with "illusion" in the sense of modern *l'art pour l'art* aesthetics. We are faced with what may be termed a "visual logic" illustrative of Thomas Aquinas's *nam et sensus ratio quaedam est*. A man imbued with the Scholastic habit would look upon the mode of architectural presentation, just as he looked upon the mode of literary presentation, from the point of view of the *manifestatio*. He would have taken it for granted that the primary purpose of the many elements that compose a cathedral was to ensure stability, just as he took it for granted that the primary purpose of many elements that constitute a *Summa* was to ensure validity. But he would not have been satisfied had not the membrification of the edifice permitted him to re-experience the very process of architectural composition just as the membrification of the *Summa* permitted him to re-experience the very process of cogitation." Panofsky, Erwin. *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), pp. 58-59.
- ³ "Questions of Space: The Pyramid and the Labyrinth (or the Architectural Paradox)," *Studio International* (1975), pp. 136-142
- ⁴ Bataille's metaphors of the pyramid and the labyrinth are explored at length by Denis Hollier in *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*. tr. Betsy Wing (Cambridge: MIT Press; 1989).
- ⁵ These arguments are continually reaffirmed and increasingly nuanced through a series of publications in art and architecture journals, fifteen of which fill out two recently published collections of essays, *Questions of Space* (London: AA, 1991) and *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994). Two notable elaborations of Tschumi's epistemology arrive in "The Pleasure of Architecture," *Architectural Design*, (1977) and "Violence of Architecture," *Artforum*, (1981) where the potential pleasures and pains of architectural disjunction find full flower through the metaphors of seduction, eroticism and bondage. "Architecture is not 'architectural' because it seduces, but because it sets in motion the operations of seduction." The rigors and orders of pure, abstracted space provide the potential pleasures, as traces of reason revealed through the immediacy of experience. "The more numerous and sophisticated the restraints, the greater the pleasure." An architectural erotic seeks not the excess of pleasure, but the pleasures of excess, bound up in the many logics and concepts which fuel the architect's imagination.
- ⁶ *The Production of Space*. pp. 229-291.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* p. 235.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* p. 285.
- ⁹ "Absolute space cannot be understood in terms of a collection of sites and signs; to view it thus is to misapprehend it in the most fundamental way. Rather, it is a space, at once and indistinguishably mental and social, which *comprehends* the entire existence of the group concerned (i.e. for present purposes, the city state), and it must be so understood. In a space of this kind there is no 'environment', nor even, properly speaking, any 'site' distinct from the overall texture. Secret space, the space of sanctuary or palace, is entirely 'revealed' by the spatial order that it dominates." *Ibid.* p. 240.
- ¹⁰ José Ortega y Gasset, "On Point of View in the Arts," *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 110.
- ¹¹ "Proximate vision has a tactile quality. (the mysterious resonance of touch preserved by sight when it converges on a nearby object.)" "Men consider as "things" only objects solid enough to offer resistance to their hands. The rest is more or less illusion. So in passing from proximate to distant vision an object becomes illusory." *The Dehumanization of Art*. pp. 111-112.
- ¹² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1986), p. 243.
- ¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), pp. 40-42.
- ¹⁴ "Each element of the setting, a person, a table, a chair, attempts to isolate itself, to lift itself upon the ground constituted by the totality of the other objects, only to fall back once more into the undifferentiation of this ground; it melts into the ground. For the ground is that which is seen only in addition, that which is the object of a purely marginal attention. Thus the original nihilation of all the figures which appear and are swallowed up in the total neutrality of a ground is the necessary condition for the appearance of the principle figure, which is here the person Pierre." *Being and Nothingness*. p. 41.
- ¹⁵ Compare this process of projection/reflection with Sartre's progressive/regressive method. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, tr. Hazel Barnes (New York: Vintage, 1968). The progressive/regressive method is offered as a response to an opposite malaise, i.e. receiving immediate pleasure in the proximate world does not always secure pleasure in the distant world. In this scenario the distant world is 'capital h' History, when Sartre, as a good Marxist, takes up the question: do we make History or are we made by History? Sartre answers: a little of both. "If History escapes me, this is not because I do not make it; it is because the *other* is making it as well." [p.88. (my italics)].

The problem is posed that each act in the proximate world always alters part of someone else's distant world. The field of vision, or rather the field for potential change, from any one

point of view is always necessarily incomplete. How are we to act, to transform the world, even a portion of it, if we cannot be sure our actions are successful, given our actions necessarily affect others differently than they affect us? An elaboration comes with respect to the struggles of the working class, "The existence of numerous provincial movements which never succeeded in uniting with one another, where each one, *other* than the others, acted differently - this was enough to make each group lose the real meaning of its enterprise. This does not mean that the enterprise *as a real action of man upon history* does not exist, but only that the result achieved, when it is placed in the totalizing movement, is radically different from the way it appears locally - *even when the result conforms with the objective proposed.*" [p.88] Sartre responds that one needs to oscillate, progress and regress, between near and far, between foreground and background. He even suggests that "Marxism in the

nineteenth century is a gigantic attempt not only to make History but to get a grip on it, practically and theoretically, by uniting the workers' movement and by clarifying the Proletariat's action through an understanding both of the capitalist process and of the workers' objective reality." [p.89] The message is clear: one needs to continually venture into other points of view in order to paint a more complete landscape into which one will intervene. The violence generated by these shifting perspectives also contributes to a fuller understanding of one's own position in the milieu.

- ¹⁶ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Topological Structures in Modern Literature," in *Sur*, (May-June 1966), Buenos Aires. (tr. Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986).
- ¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1986), p.159-62.