

THE PLAY OF IMAGINATION

SCOTT DRAKE

University of South Australia

Introduction

Descriptions of design in terms of a “process” or “method” are often motivated by the seriousness of architectural practice. Present day architects are seen to produce works of great functional and technological complexity, and do so at the center of a network of governing and professional bodies, and construction and financing industries. Learning to be an architect is also serious business, requiring long and often expensive university education, as well as several years supervised work, before registration is possible. This seriousness is also motivated by the modern dominance of the scientific world view, where legitimacy depends upon alignment with the natural sciences, often at the expense of the connections with artistic practice. The irrational aspects of creative production — such as play or imagination — are problematic, and so tend to be omitted from design theory.

One recent alternative to the conception of design as a “process” or “method” has involved the use of hermeneutical theories of Heidegger and Gadamer. Snodgrass and Coyne, for example, have argued that design is an act of interpretation similar to the reading of a text.¹ Gadamer, however, does not describe creative production as a form of interpretation, except to say that they are alike.² What he does do is develop his theory of interpretation based upon the experience of a work of art. This experience is itself described through an investigation into “play.” What does Gadamer mean by “play,” and what is its significance for hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics and Play

While largely ignored by the analytic philosophy of the English speaking world, the subject of play has been an important theme in what we now refer to as “continental” philosophy. Kant’s use of the term, alone or as “free-play,” was to describe the relationship between the faculties of imagination and understanding in aesthetic experience. Nietzsche, in his return to the Pre-Socratics, uses the Heraclitean metaphor of child’s play in describing the Will to Power, thus reviving the metaphysical significance of play. The apparent “irrationality” of play was significant in Nietzsche’s rejection of reason as a theological alternative. For Heidegger, play takes on ontological significance, characterized by the “play of Being” which manifests itself as human being.³ And when Gadamer shifted the attention from ontological to

philosophical hermeneutics, the play of art remained paradigmatic; Gadamer develops his description of the hermeneutics of interpretation by starting from the to-and-fro of play.⁴

For all of these authors, it is the irrationality of play which is significant, leading Heidegger to refer to it, after Silesius, as *without why*.⁵ With the western dominance of reason, play, like art, is rejected from the realm of seriousness: neither are recognized as valid forms of knowledge. Play is seen as recreation, as distraction from the more serious work of the “real” world, a world of economic productivity. It was Huizinga who reminded us that play is much more than an aside to our lives, but is integral to it, a part of our language, our culture, and our self-understanding.⁶ Play is not simply one activity among others that may be used to pass time, nor is it a pretending that is divorced from reality. Rather, Huizinga argues that the human capacity for play (the eponymous *Homo Ludens*) is as fundamental as those of reason (*Homo Sapiens*) and making (*Homo Faber*).⁷

Huizinga shows that there are many different manifestations of play in our culture, all of which originate in the play of a child, the paradigmatic case used by philosophers from Heraclitus to Gadamer. Today, “child’s play” is seen as easy or simplistic, an imitation of, and preparation for, adult life. Yet merely being imitative does not prevent it from being serious. As Huizinga explains:

... the consciousness of play being ‘only a pretend’ does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome ‘only’ feeling. Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players. The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is continually being offset by the superiority of its seriousness. Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play. Play may rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far beneath.⁸

The fact that play can “wholly run away with the players” is also crucial for Gadamer. By playing with utmost seriousness, players are able to lose themselves in the play. When this happens, a shift in ontological primacy,

from the players to the play, has occurred: "Play is not to be understood as something a person does. As far as language is concerned, the actual subject of play is obviously not the subjectivity of an individual who, among other activities, also plays but is instead the play itself."⁹ The shift means that the play itself is presented by being played, or, more accurately, the play presents itself. Thus, "[t]he players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation (Darstellung) through the players."¹⁰

It is by virtue of this presentation that art is seen as a form of play. Art not only presents, but represents; art as representation is a bringing to presentation once again. To present again is to present for another, thus opening up the play of art to an audience: "All presentation is potentially a representation for someone. That this possibility is intended is the characteristic feature of art as play."¹¹ This is most evident in the theatrical play of imitation, where the work is represented by the players. The existence of an audience, Gadamer argues, does not open out the closed world of the play, but rather completes it, bringing the audience into the play: "[The spectator] — and not the player — is the person for and in whom the play is played."¹²

Gadamer is not simply using the play of art as an illustration of hermeneutical interpretation. Instead, it is the starting point from which much of the description of the hermeneutical process originates. It is perhaps as a reaction against the Idealist cult of genius and the myth of the freely creative imagination that Gadamer ignores the role of imagination in play. But for Eugen Fink, also a student of Heidegger, the imagination was vital in achieving the ontological shift from players to the play.

Imaginary Play and the Play of Imagination

Hermeneutical descriptions of play provide a dual sense of translation. On the one hand, play is seen to "reach presentation" through the players; the play comes to the players and comes to being through them. On the other hand, the play is seen to run away with the players, so that the players are seen to be transported to another place. Both suggest the idea of a different world, a world of play. This is made explicit by Fink: "We play in the world which we call real, but in so doing, we create for ourselves another world, a mysterious one."¹³ According to Fink, it is the imagination that gives access to this world: "The world of play is an imaginary sphere."¹⁴

That play occurs in a world of imagination is easily understood in reference to the ideal of *paidia*, the play of a child. Yet it may be thought that the formalization of play through the imposition of rules, the change from *paidia* to *ludus*, would eschew this connection to the imaginary world.¹⁵ The rules themselves do not prevent the imaginary nature of play, which can continue without an opponent precisely through the imagination. "The solitary player is often playing with imaginary partners."¹⁶ But, according to Fink, the fact that play can be formalized shows that the world of play is a shared world:

We might expect these improvised games to be the most popular, since they leave the field open to

*imagination and permit the development and free reign of pure possibilities. But this is not necessarily the case. The act of being bound to a pre-established rule is often a positive experience with its own delights. This may seem strange, but it is explained by the fact that the traditional games are often bound up with collective imagination, with self-commitments rooted in the deep primordial patterns of common experience.*¹⁷

Fink's description of the world of play might seem to suggest that it is separate from the real world. But it is precisely the connections between the real world and the world of play that are significant. Play transports the player from the real world to the world of play; reciprocally, the play itself is brought to presentation in the real world. The exchange between the two worlds is seen to have ontological significance for the players, as described by Schiller,¹⁸ and for the play, as developed by Gadamer.¹⁹ To claim, as did Fink, that the world of play is imaginative is also to describe the medium of exchange between the two worlds; it is our imagination that enables us to play. For play to occur, we must imaginatively engage in the play. But we can also, as solitary players, imagine the presence of other players. The absence of partner or game does not prevent access to the world of play.

To say that the world of play is an imaginary world is simply to say that we relate to it with reference to the physical experience of spatiality. This is similar to the recent trend in moral philosophy of the shift from economic to spatial metaphors.²⁰ Yet while we might conceive of the imagination as the means of accessing the world of play, there is another possibility; namely, that the imagination itself plays. Accessing the world of play is less a matter of imagining play taking place as it is allowing the imagination to play. In this way, play is not imagined, in the sense that we see an image in our mind of play taking place. Rather, our image forming capacity is itself playful, so that access to the imaginary world of play is achieved when we allow it to play.

This idea originates in Kant, who spoke of aesthetic experience as the "free-play" between the faculties of imagination and understanding. Prior to this, however, Kant described a more fundamental role for the imagination. In the first critique, *Critique of Pure Reason*, the imagination is the necessary connection between perception and understanding. The variety of sensory experience becomes united under a concept of the understanding only by virtue of its reproduction in imagination. These three sources of subjective knowledge — intuitive apprehension, imaginative reproduction, and conceptual recognition — come together this way in the constitution of experience. But because the concepts are already given (*a priori*) the imagination is subservient to the understanding.

In the *Critique of Judgement*, however, this relationship is reversed. This reversal is brought about by the different kind of judgement that characterizes aesthetics. "Judgement," says Kant, "is the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal."²¹

Where the universal is given, as is the case in the comprehension of nature, judgement is *determinant*. But for aesthetic judgement, no universal is available, and must be provided. Judgement is then *reflective*. The imagination, free to provide its own concepts, is no longer subservient to the understanding. The harmony reached between the two when the concept is provided by the imagination is referred to as “free play” or “lively play.” This harmony gives rise to a quickening of the faculties and is experienced as a feeling of pleasure. This is neither a sensate pleasure, not a pleasure in the object being judged. Rather, it is the pleasure taken in the act of judgement itself, in the feeling of the suitability of the faculties for judgement and for cognition in general.

The inclusion of feeling in aesthetic experience may have led to much of the subjectivity of Idealism, but that is not what Kant intended. For Kant, pleasure was disinterested, and was also communicable.²² Because an aesthetic judgement is dependent not on the satisfaction of individual interest, but on the pleasure of the faculties in cognition, we claim the assent of others who possess faculties. Since the faculties are common to all, the pleasure is deemed universal. Unlike concepts of the understanding, which can be communicated verbally, aesthetic concepts are simply presumed to be available to the experience of others through the same harmony of the faculties. This gives rise to a *sensus communis*, where judgements are made in expectation of the judgements of others, not as a limitation, but as possibility. As Kant explains:

[B]y the name sensus communis is to be understood the idea of a public sense, i.e., a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of every one else, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective, an illusion that would exert a prejudicial influence upon its judgement. This is accomplished by weighing the judgement, not so much with actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgements of others, and by putting ourselves in the positions of every one else, as the result of a mere abstraction from the limitations which contingently affect our own estimate.²³

The fact that it is the possible, and not the actual, judgement of others is what differentiates the *sensus communis* from mere common sense. Thus aesthetic judgement, contingent as it is upon the felt harmony of the faculties of imagination and understanding, is communicable not through *a priori* concepts, but through the recognition that others share the same modes of representation. Rather than separating individuals by highlighting their subjective and personal conditions, the felt pleasure of aesthetic experience is what brings people together.

Imagination and Hermeneutics

Recognition of this intersubjective role for the imagination

has recently led Rudolf Makkreel to argue for the hermeneutical importance of Kant's work.²⁴ According to Makkreel, the imagination gives rise to a “reflective interpretation” of the world, in which the interpreting subject is seen to be included in the hermeneutical circle. He does so by showing that the feeling of pleasure in association with aesthetic experience is what provides our sense of “orientation” in the metaphorically spatial world of thought. Referring to Kant's essay “What is Orientation in Thinking?” he explains that a horizon in nature is experienced with reference to the body — we build up a picture of our horizon by relating what is given in our limited field of view to what is not using the physical distinction between our left and right hands. In doing so, we not only orient ourselves to the horizon, but also orient ourselves from it. The metaphor is then applied by Kant to the supersensible: Just as we must orient ourselves physically in relation to the space of nature, so too do we orient ourselves mentally in relation to the transcendental realm. More than the traditional relation of good and evil with right and left, Kant takes this orientation as a form of guidance for reason. As Makkreel explains: “To orient myself in thought is to allow myself to be guided by a subjective principle of reason when objective principles are not obtainable.”²⁵

The feeling that is analogous to our physical awareness is the “feeling of life,” and what the pleasure of aesthetic experience creates is a feeling of furtherance of our life.²⁶ Just as our orientation in space relates us to nature as a whole, so our judgements of things around us relate us to the feeling of life as a whole. As Makkreel explains, “The play of the imagination in the judgement of beauty serves to intensify the activity of our mental life in general.”²⁷ Moreover, because the pleasure is disinterested, the object which gives rise to it “could as well be [...] purely imaginary,” since it is not the empirical purpose of the object that matters, but its effect on enhancing the feeling of life.

The feeling of pleasure enables us to connect not only with the transcendental conditions of our own life, but also to the lives of others with whom we share the *sensus communis*. The sense of orientation through which we relate the purposiveness of our own faculties to the life-world is complemented by an orientation through which we relate to the shared purposes of our common humanity.²⁸ Interpretation of culture, as the manifestations of common human purposes, thus occur through the use of reflective judgement. Makkreel describes this interplay between self and culture as “reflective interpretation,” the effect of which is to acknowledge the presence of the interpreting subject within the hermeneutical circle. He explains it as follows:

By applying Kant's spatial metaphor of orientation to the hermeneutic circle, we can transform a dyadic relation of part to whole [of object to horizon, or text to context] to a triadic relation which includes the subject. My spatial horizon must have not only the focal point of some object before me but also my feeling of orientation towards it as focussed in my subject. By means of the relation of these two reference

*points to each other and to the horizon, I can gain a kind of reflective leverage on the world, which is precisely what is needed in hermeneutics as well.*²⁹

For Makkreel, this inclusion serves to remind us that while interpretation takes into account the way an object is oriented by its horizon, it must also account for the orientation of the interpreter to both object and horizon. Interpretations of an object which take into account the cultural and historical traditions which gave rise to it must also take into account the influences that these traditions have on the interpreting subject. This is particularly necessary when the very existence of the object depends upon the exercise of the productive function of the imagination by the interpreting subject, acting as author, artist, or designer. Here it is not so much the presence of the subject, but the imaginary presence of the object that provides the reflective leverage necessary for interpretation. The subject, recognizing themselves as part of the context being interpreted, is able to orient themselves more fully by completing the triadic relationship, imagining the presence of an object near to hand. The play of imagination can then be seen as a way of exploring our own position in relation to the horizon, a way of moving from the directly to the indirectly given.

What this reveals is a view of interpretation as fundamentally imaginative, a view which is not at odds with Gadamer's work. While Gadamer is quick to denounce the "aesthetic myth of freely creative imagination" and the "cult of genius belonging to that myth" as an exaggeration that "does not stand up to reality," he does so in reaction to the use of these terms following Kant.³⁰ Yet his description of the to-and-fro nature of interpretation shows it to be a kind of play, most easily recognized in the play of art. And while he argues for the historical conditioning of the experience of art, he also describes it as a mode of self-interpretation in its context: "The player, sculptor, or viewer is never simply swept away into a strange world of magic, of intoxication, of dream; rather, it is always his own world, and he comes to belong to it more fully by recognizing himself more profoundly in it."³¹

What is rejected, then, is the idea that the artist stands apart from the world, putting their freely creative imagination to work inventing art which is then 'placed in' the world. But recognizing that artist and audience are both in the world does not preclude the operation of imagination. In fact, it suggests that both the creation and experience of the work require the exercise of the imagination, in either its productive or reproductive capacities. These are simply variations of the way in which an interpreting subject engages with the world, recognizing themselves more profoundly in it through continuous reorientation.

The world to which we belong is not so much the physical world, a world of determinant judgements, but the metaphoric world of shared cultural concepts and interpretations. This is the world of Kant's *sensus communis*, where we experience the feeling of life through aesthetic experiences, which reveal our faculties

as a point of commonality with others. The imagination, instead of transporting us to a subjective dream world, gives us access to this shared world, and makes us feel as though we belong to it. The interpreting subject becomes grounded in this world, oriented by the triadic relation between the self, imaginative objects, and the interpretive horizon.

Design and the Play of Imagination

What hermeneutics provides is an alternative means of describing design that is not reliant upon mechanistic metaphors of process. It reminds us of the importance of the historicity of designers and their work, and of the debt to tradition that this entails. It also reminds us of the relevance to design of interpretive modes of understanding; the use of metaphor, and the interrelation of part and whole. These consequences arise when we recognize that design, and by extension other creative arts, are essentially interpretive in nature. But Gadamer's work invites us to acknowledge a more fundamental point: that *interpretation is essentially creative*.

By using the play of art to develop the intersubjective nature of interpretation, he shows that it is the play, and not the players (artist, actors, or audience), that brings a work to presentation. The work comes about not through the direct effort or intention of those involved, but because they surrender to the play. The creation of the work is not the result of a single, subjective imagination, but arises from the surrender of both artist and audience, allowing the play to present itself. The play cannot be controlled, but must be allowed to continue.³² In the same way, interpretation comes to presentation as the interpreter surrenders to the engagement with the text, allowing the text to be brought to life.

This surrender necessitates the exercise of the imagination — not as the source of subjective ideas, but as the capacity to imagine the play as real. Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" can here be seen as an invitation to remove the constraints that would prevent the imaginative engagement with the work of art. Imagination is necessary for all players — artist, actors, and audience — to be transported to the world of play, and thus to allow the work to come to presentation from that world. This imaginative engagement is necessary if interpretation is to take place at all.

To encourage the play of imagination may seem anathema to the seriousness — professional, functional, and pedagogic — of architectural practice. But it is only through the imagination that we can connect with others by appealing to our Kantian "common sense," the *sensus communis*. It is through the imagination that we are able to interpret our common traditions, keeping them alive as we continue find relevance for them in our present situation. The imagination allows us to orient ourselves, so that we can, in Makkreel's terms, "maintain our critical bearings" as we interpret these traditions in relation to the overall life-world.³³ The play of imagination is what allows us to explore possibilities that can be shared with others.³⁴ It does not obviate seriousness, but gives access to perhaps most serious part of architectural practice — the ethical consideration of those for whom we design.

NOTES

- ¹ Adrian Snodgrass, and Richard Coyne, "Is Designing Hermeneutical?" Working Paper (Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney, October 1990); Idem, "Hermeneutics and the Application of Design Rules," Working Paper (Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney, 1991); Idem, "Models, Metaphors and the Hermeneutics of Designing," Working Paper (Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney, 1991); Idem, "Hermeneutics, Objectivity and Design Evaluation," Working Paper (Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney, 1991); Adrian Snodgrass, Richard Coyne, and David Martin, "Metaphors in the Design Studio," *JAE* 48/2, (1994); Adrian Snodgrass, "Can Design Assessment be Objective?" *Architecture Theory Review*, 1/1, (April 1996).
- ² "Hermeneutics is an *art* and not a mechanical process. Thus it brings its work, understanding, to completion like a work of art." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second Edition (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), p. 191.
- ³ For a detailed account of the significance of play in modern philosophy see Mihai Spairosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), esp. Part 1, "Play and Modern Philosophical Discourse."
- ⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Part I, Section II, "The Ontology of the Work of Art and its Hermeneutic Significance."
- ⁵ Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination, Toward a Postmodern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 368.
- ⁶ Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Trans. by R.F. C. Hull, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949).
- ⁷ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, passim.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 104.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 103.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 108.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 110.
- ¹³ Eugen Fink, "The Ontology of Play," in *Sport and the Body: A Philosophical Symposium*, eds. E. Gerber and W. Morgan, Second edition, (Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1979), p. 79.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ The distinction between *paidia*, as the free play of a child, and *ludus*, as rule governed play, is made by Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, Trans. by Meyer Barash (New York: Free Press, 1961).
- ¹⁶ Fink, "The Ontology of Play," p. 78.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ "Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly man when he is playing." Schiller, Friedrich, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, In a Series of Letters*, trans. by Reginald Snell (New York: Fredrick Ungar, 1965), p. 80.
- ¹⁹ "I call [the] change, in which human play comes to its true consummation in being art, *transformation into structure*. Only through this change does play achieve ideality, so that it can be intended and understood as play. Only now does it emerge as detached from the representing activities of the players and consist in the pure appearance (Erscheinung) of what they are playing." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 110.
- ²⁰ For a description of this trend, see Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993). A more direct application, with the term 'moral space', can be found in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- ²¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Introduction, IV. Translation used is by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).
- ²² These are two of the four 'moments' of the judgement of taste, as described in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, according to the categories of quality, quantity, relation, and modality. The first moment is the experience of the beautiful with disinterested pleasure. The second is where the object deemed to be beautiful is claimed to be universally so. The third moment is the recognition of finality (purposiveness) without purpose. And the fourth is the claim that the pleasure is free from concepts. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, *Analytic of the Beautiful*.
- ²³ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §40.
- ²⁴ Rudolf Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the Critique of Judgement* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- ²⁵ Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, p. 155.
- ²⁶ Ibid., Chapter 5.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 92.
- ²⁸ Thus Makkreel explains: "On the level of judgement it is then possible to propose two reflective counterparts to orientation in space and thought: namely, an aesthetic orientation that evaluates the world on the basis of the feeling of life and a teleological orientation that interprets culture on the basis of common sense or the *sensus communis*." *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, p. 156. The extension of the notion of orientation to include teleological judgement, addressed by Kant in the second part of the *Critique of Judgement*, can be found in Ibid, Chapter 7.
- ²⁹ Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, pp. 158-159.
- ³⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 133.
- ³¹ Ibid., pp. 133-134.
- ³² Snodgrass and Coyne describe this as follows: "The efficacy of the process depends on keeping it moving." See "Is Design Hermeneutical?", p. 14.
- ³³ Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, p. 171.
- ³⁴ "The imagination [...] needs to play because it is ethical - to ensure it is ethical in a liberating way, in a way which animates and enlarges our response to the other." Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, p. 366.