

Transparency and Value

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I. THE VITRINE: THE BOX

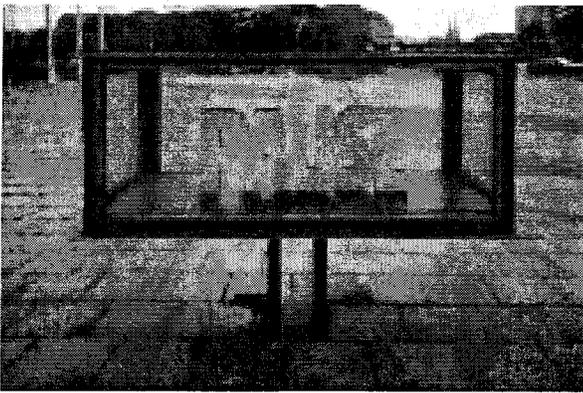


Fig.1 *Vitrine Box, Alexanderplatz, Berlin*

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Prefacing their article "Literal and Phenomenal Transparency" with the dictionary definitions of both transparency and transparent, Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky found compelling starting points for their landmark essay. Definitions serve as neutral, sanctioned limits for the meanings of words. In 1996, a new definition for 'transparent' emerged:

Transparent: 7. *Computers*. (of a process or software) operating in such a way as to not be perceived by users.

This meaning is applied to software which runs invisibly, omnipresently, undetected. The new implies an extension or deepening of the possibilities of transparency. Possibilities arise for misused, hidden, or disguised transparencies, transparencies which evade sensory detection, along with the potential for dark transparency, figured by an operation antithetical to previous definitions of transparency. It is the purpose of this paper to suggest that transparency goes beyond phenomenon and perception, and that as an agent of value it actively refigures the valuation of subject and object.

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The vitrine constitutes the spatial *Ursprung* of transparency. A vitrine is a transparent box made to display objects. Vitrines are found in a variety of instances. In a museum, a vitrine may display an-

cient coins, vases or other artifacts. In a storefront, it may display objects such as scarves, purses and jewelry. A vitrine may even display living things. (terraria, aquaria etc.) In each of these instances, the vitrine can be said to perform two functions: 1) It displays by means of transparency and 2) It contains and protects. Not insignificantly, the vitrine produces a relationship between inside and outside based in the requirement that display and containment be offered simultaneously.



Fig. 2 *Vitrine containing cosmetics*

Coinage of the word 'vitrine' coincides geographically and temporally with the elaboration of plate glass production in France. Cylinder processed plate glass of the mid 19th century made the production of greater surface areas of glass possible. The use of glass in Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace of 1851, in which 900,000 square feet of glass were required, was unprecedented and signaled a fundamental change in the way humans interact with the built environment.

According to Webster's etymology for the word, the vitrine's origins can be traced to 1870s France, the time of the industrial revolution, the space of the Paris arcades, the scene of the emergence of the bourgeoisie in Europe and the ascendance of mass production. The vitrine became a principal protagonist in the development of the new interior streets. In the moment of its appearance, the vitrine represented a triumphant new use of a newly available construction material, a material once reserved for use only in cathedrals and palaces; the vitrine was a case, an invisible container, a propagator of light into dark interiors, a conceit in transparency.

What changes with the introduction of the vitrine is introduced? The vitrine simultaneously presents

and protects, it shows and separates. In this it distinguishes itself. The vitrine improves on the simple closed box, its predecessor, by demonstrating the presence of its contents. It improves on its other predecessor the open shelf, by protecting its contents. Other than the fact that the vitrine combines the visual immediacy of the open shelf with the protection of the closed box, nothing new is suggested about the way that the object is contained.

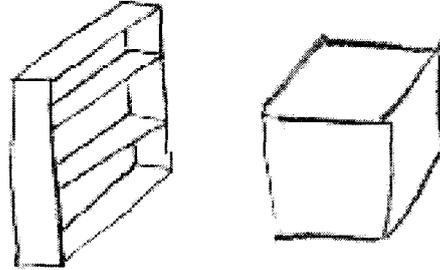


Fig. 3 *Open Shelf and Simple Closed Box*

And yet the object is transformed: one of the fundamental principles of the vitrine's operation is that making the container transparent makes the object more valuable; the new value is not necessarily pecuniary but is rather a value we perceive in the moment that one object is isolated from other, similar objects which are not encased in glass. Early home computers behind glass at the Museum of Modern Art in New York do not raise their market value but they do increase their historical worth. The transformation is effected by the object's isolation in a transparent container. The fundamental principle under which vitrines operate is that transparent containers create value independent of the characteristics of the object.



Fig. 4 *Department Store Vitrine*

Considered as a construction of glass and a metal frame, the vitrine is a small architecture: it contains, it houses. From a constructional point of view we may compare our fundamental assumptions about the construction of vitrines and apply them to buildings. There is a more subtle, more invasive set of considerations which explore the construction of transparency as a role-casting of a subject, object and an unnoticed glass. Considered abstractly then, the vitrine is an analogue for the operation of transparency in architecture. As a strategy for display and containment, an examination of the vitrine may help to reveal the extent and nature of our reliance on the phenomenon. It will be argued that transparency is an important yet forgotten (and essentially invisible) agent in the mediation of value.



Fig.5 Clear beer

II. VITRINISATION OF THE EVERYDAY

Our world is influenced by the logic of the vitrine. Transparency in everyday household objects transmit messages of purity, hygiene, technological sophistication, and ultimately, of value. In the world of soap dispensers and cell phones, transparent housings and packaging occur more often than not. The transparency of the package rivals and surpasses the form of the package. We may even equate the transparent package with a better buy. In some cases, transparency penetrates even deeper. Here, products themselves, as if infected by this spreading tendency, become transparent, as in Neutrogena soap, Panola Hot Sauce and Zima beer, a beer whose primary selling point is its colorlessness. The confusion of the object and the container creates the enticing possibility that the product may yet yield further depth.

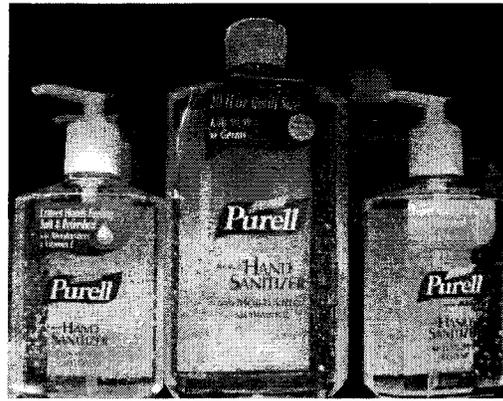


Fig.6 Clear soap

Division Concealed

As a spatial strategy for glass, the vitrine is seen to operate at scales ranging from the hand held object, the display case, the house, even the building as urban object. Each of the instances employs transparency in such a way that contained object is revealed. And yet we must permit a corollary to this: at the same time that objects are shown, there is an implicit acknowledgement of separation between inside and out. The division of space prefigures transparency. We may restate this by saying that transparencies are instances of spatial divisions being concealed, of distances obscured. We remind ourselves: the object contained is still out of reach; in as much as vitrines reveal, they conceal the means by which they divide.

The Controlled Object

The glass has not made the object more available, it has just made us desire it more. Vitrines divide the outside world, which we participate in from an interior world of organized, composed objects. To some degree, the object placed in a vitrine increases in value, becomes more desirable. The kind of object put behind glass is now unlimited. The objects appear to have a new shine, a clarified cleanliness. Curiously enough, transparency does not prove that the soap cleans better, that the razor shaves sharper, or that the IMac works faster. And yet we permit transparency to transmit desirability almost as if considerations of actual use did not matter. This principle may be tested by remembering first-generation Macintosh computers at the MOMA. Duchamp's Readymades were startling for the fact that there was no glass. The viewer was forced to

confront the object with no indication of an intended value. The glass causes the object to restate its value; as viewers, we are compelled to agree.

Content of Object is Neutralized

Vitrine transparency is an active visual operation. It is constructed of three pieces: a viewer, a contained object, and the transparent container. The role of vitrine in the work of Damien Hirst demonstrates the neutralization of a gruesome act, the act of dissection. Hirst places sections of sharks, pigs, cows in a series of formaldehyde-filled, white, metal and glass vitrines that display the flesh and insides of the animals to the viewer.

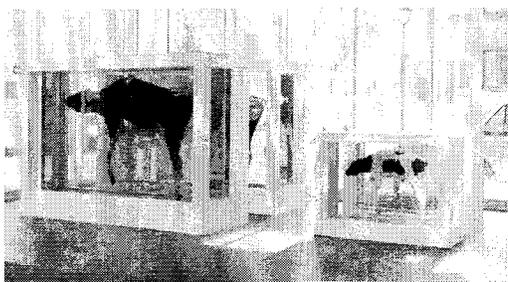


Fig.7 Damien Hirst's *Prodigal Son*, created in 1994

The viewer can walk in between and along the narrow vitrines to see the slices of animal. The transparency of the vitrines allows the cut animals to exist in a neutralized and safe way inside the space of the gallery. To a degree the identity, horror, beauty of the object contained is secondary to the fact that it is remote from the viewer by the separation of the glass. Transparency in vitrines acts to isolate and neutralize. In such cases the vitrine acts to counter the ideological content of objects, to suppress their potency and focus the provocation. It is through transparency that Hirst's pieces are intellectually offensive without being sensorily offensive.

III. SOLD! FARNSWORTH HOUSE AS CASE

The Farnsworth House, built as a weekend home in Plano, Illinois 1946-1951, is a single room structure. The building hovers above ground in a wooded area near a river. Its steel structure is painted white and the large expanses of glass between further creates the impression that the house sits lightly in the landscape. Its pavilion-like quality isolates

the house from its surroundings. The house was meant for viewing out into the surroundings. The house attains a quality of invisibility through the use of glass. From inside, the occupant leaves the realm of the house and in wonder, moves out into its context.

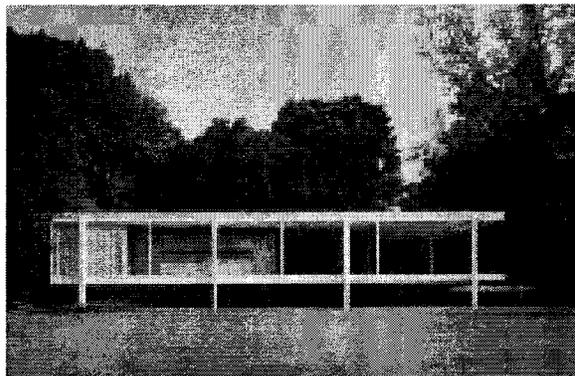


Fig.8 Elevation view of Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois

And yet, the building as architectural icon is understood more easily from the outside. From outside, the interior is completely open to view. And yet we do not look in. The building lives less as house to the architectural public than as an iconic image of glass that possesses all the classic properties of transparency, it serves to separate the life within the house and the gazes that fall upon it. Objects within it are remote and precious. The Farnsworth House is presented as a vitrine. The house is thus condensed to the most fundamental of the spatial potentials of transparency: glass box.

As an icon, the Farnsworth House becomes infallible and, ironically, impenetrable. Unquestioned, it achieves the status of something permanent, fixed, perfect, iconic. The Farnsworth House does not rely on its transparency to become iconic. It is rather an extreme reversal of the means by which it operates which causes this: the object to view out of becomes the object viewed into. These two aspects are irreconcilable and operate exclusive of one another. The fact of their separation is an important factor in the tantalizing aspect of the desire to be outside of or inside of. The house is less house-like and more vitrine-like the less it can be imagined to be inhabited.

The original client, Dr. Edith Farnsworth, commissioned Mies van der Rohe to build the house. It was completed in 1951 at a cost of 73,000 dollars.

The Farnsworth House was sold in an auction on December 12, 2003 for 7.5 million dollars to the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois and the National Trust for Historic Places.²

As the value of the house has risen, the role of transparency has changed. In this case, transparency has played an active role. The house is viewed from the outside. We are not permitted to enter. The Farnsworth House has become something to be viewed. Its role has migrated from being a means to view the landscape, to being a means to view the objects inside it, and finally to becoming a view of the vitrine itself. As a result of the value it achieved as icon we see the Farnsworth House as object; it is no longer a vitrine to be seen into nor a glass box to see out of.

IV. VITRINE AS BUILDING STRATEGY

The vitrine as an increasingly influential conceptual strategy for building. What causes our fascination with transparency. Why has modern architecture become so influenced by the pursuit of buildings which float, are transparent? Why should architecture accede its dematerialization so readily? Causality of the Vitrine phenomenon is still unproven. One possible interpretation of the Vitrine's continual reappearance is that architectural thinking has been so permeated by the ideology of the mass produced commodity as to assume "display" or "exhibit" as one of the primary roles of architecture.

A new collection of buildings built in the city of Dresden by the Volkswagen AG for the purpose of providing an event like atmosphere as families and couples purchase their new automobiles from one of their many automotive groups. This program of exhibition, tourism, car fanaticism, family activity allows for an occasion to experience car buying as a weekend event. One sees the cars stacked in a vitrine like building several stories tall already from the many access roads, at the end of the tall slab of cars is a tower with spiraling ramps full of the newest and latest model vehicles. The collection of buildings are configured to attract the eyes through the façade and at the colorful cars within them.

It could be said that transparency is the ultimate strategy by which architecture expresses its identity as ideology. Almost as if it were a new iteration of formalism, the architecture pretends to disappear. Taniguchi stated recently that if a good amount of money should be raised for his projected extension

of the MOMA, it will be a great building but if a great amount of money could be raised he could make the project disappear. Invisibility is the key word here and is a common goal in architecture. It is with invisibility that architecture can bow humbly to its contents, its programs, etc. But it is by means of the same strategy that architecture occludes its identity most seamlessly as a mechanism of consumer ideology. The Volkswagen AG complex in Dresden is a powerful example.

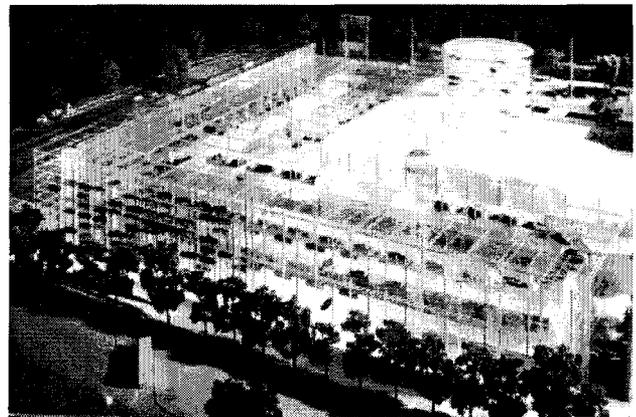


Fig.9 VW Model of the "Gläsernemanufaktur"

We can see that the vitrification of our world has extended to urban objects, including buildings, or even large urban collections of program and buildings. The logic applied from the vitrine is that of display, of an organized visual display in which the contents of a building, whether they be spaces, people, furniture, cars, become manifest, viewable.

V. DARK TRANSPARENCY

Transparency has been ascribed a number of meanings. By definition it is: 1) seeing that which is beyond and 2) seeing through because of a sheer or diaphanous quality. Rowe and Slutzky, by way of Gyorgy Kepes' *Language of Vision*, have added a third sense of transparency of "interpenetration without optical destruction." In their development of the notion of "phenomenal transparency," The ambiguity of overlapping planes, of a spatial simultaneity are qualities to which the authors' prescribed a new, experiential transparency.

Another entire development is theorized here as to the disappearance of all signs of that transparency. In other words, the delight in Mies' Farnsworth House as a viewing device is accompanied by the

same house's capacity as a glass box to look into, as a vitrine, a container. In this analysis, a paradox in the meaning of transparency is posited. Instead of transparent meaning "manifest," "clear," or "obvious" or even "simultaneous" or "phenomenal," a critical glance is cast on the notion of transparency with an attempt at a brief analysis of the conditions underlying its operation. Thus transparency attains its most divergent secondary meanings: "Hidden," "undetected," "invisible."

In dark transparency, it is not the optical qualities of the phenomenon that are most instrumental; rather, its operational qualities that are paramount. Form is less important. Contents are revealed. It's not the shape of the architecture that we respond to. This paper attempts to respond to the scene of transparency in which important assumptions of value are predetermined.



Fig. 10 Transparent Packaging

What is being proposed here is that transparency, understood as one of the distinguishers of the modern experience, should not be limited to the realm of apperception, of conscious experience. The discussion surrounding literal and phenomenal transparency rest on the assumption that transparency is primarily an optical quality. Transparency, according to Rowe and Slutzky, "ceases to be that which is

perfectly clear and becomes, instead, that which is clearly ambiguous." (p.161).³ Rowe and Slutzky rely on a viewer to ascertain a quality that is visual in nature. The suggestion here is that transparency fundamentally alters the way that we value things, as if our sense of valuation were refracted in the non-material zone of the vitrine.

The operational qualities of dark transparency are even more pervasive in architecture than in industrial design, making them even more difficult to perceive. Ultimately, architecture provokes a more difficult confrontation with transparency than the vitrine. This is at least partially caused by the difference in scale. We are less able to determine the limits of the transparent building than we are to determine the limits of small consumer objects. A comprehension of the entire scene of transparency is thus problematic. As participants we participate in transparency without having agreed to.

The difference in point of view generates this new meaning for transparency. The notion of dark transparency sees a generic, repeated set of instances in which transparency acts with caution and suspicion. The mass production of objects has created an equally great demand for the standardization of the encounters with these objects. The logic of transparency employed by the vitrine is repeated consistently in the presentation of a great variety of objects, from clear beer to hand soap. There is a pattern to be discerned in which transparency has agency. No one disagrees that the consumer object acts from behind the glass, yet no one remembers that origins of our relationship with things is one characterized by transaction and contract.

NOTES

¹ Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, New York: Random House 2001.

²Toomis, Shamus. "Preservationists win Farnsworth House auction." *Chicago Sun Times*. 14 Dec. 2003.

³ Rowe, Colin and Robert Slutzky. "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal.", *Perspecta 13/14*, 1971.