

# From object to site: returning philosophy to architecture

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When architectural design was organised by the investigation and release of potentialities within software programs, a particular domain of research was identified. That identification delineated one way that the interconnection between architecture and philosophy was then understood. Developed as a result was what could be described as an ontology of techniques. That project need not be abandoned in its entirety. Rather what has occurred is a twofold limitation that can now be imposed on the assumed centrality of that approach. Maintaining an ontology of techniques is no longer the only way of construing the relationship between philosophy and architecture (where that relationship informs architectural theory). Even though interconnected the limitations come from two directions. Firstly, there is the recognition that the use of software to explore the development and manipulation of volumes was reductive. It defined architecture in terms of objects. Form was all. Innovation was equated with appearance. In addition, progress and the progressive were restricted to the appearance of single and singular objects. The second is the impact on both philosophy and design of the climate crisis.

## *DISTANCING THE OBJECT*

As a result of digitally driven design, scaleless objects indifferent to programmatic concerns – objects that were present as much on paper as materially – became the major focus of architectural theory. Once it had been possible to argue (albeit polemically) that the same algorithm allowed as much for generating a teapot as it did a building, where the move from the former to the latter had a seamless quality, the object status of architecture was secured. A status that can then be retroactively applied. The history of architecture became the history of objects. Objects demanded a mode of thought where accounts of both their effectuation and presence predominated. There can be no naivety here. Architecture will always have a fundamental connection to object creation. And yet, there are other possibilities. They exist in how the move from the position that demands the centrality of the object is to be understood while necessitating overcoming that impoverishment of philosophy in which it is orientated by an exclusive concern with objects.

The departures in question, begin with incorporating an object into what can provisionally be called a 'field'. The object takes on a different quality. It is not incorporated into a field to provide a form of contextualisation. Indeed, the separation allowing for contextualisation is part of what is being refused. In fact the contrary is the case: the object takes on the quality of an *after-effect* and has to be understood as resulting from a process of individuation within that field. The field individuates the object. The object – the building – is an *after-effect* of a network of relations. What matters therefore is twofold. Firstly, there is the primacy of the relation between object and field. Secondly, the question of how the field is to be conceived. This means, in addition, that a rethinking of the field opens up how the possibilities that inhere in the object/field relation are to be worked out. In each instance what is presupposed is the primacy of the relation – object/field. This means that the primacy of the object has ceded its place to the primacy of the relation.

While the move to the primacy of the relation is the position that has to be explicated, the term 'field' blurs distinctions. It can be easily replaced. Within the philosophical it can be substituted by 'place'; in more strictly architectural terms by 'site'. And yet, neither captures the full force of moving from the centrality of the object to the position in which objects are the *after-effects* of a network of relations. From within philosophy 'place' names the locus of human being. Aristotle's insight is that human being is defined, essentially, as *being-in-place*. (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a9). The placedness of a human being provides, within and for philosophy, a provisional description of that which is essential for the development of a philosophical anthropology. There is a clear connection between the conception of place as it occurs in Aristotle's and Arendt's claim, made in *The Human Condition*, that to be is to appear. The truth of such propositions is not in doubt. What remains unquestioned however is 'place' itself. This is the difficulty that has to be addressed in order to return philosophy to architecture.

There have never been just places. Places have always been loci of contestation. (In the Australian context, the Mabo Decision made by the High Court in 1992 and which overturned what had been the legal doctrine of *terra nullis*

confirms this claim.) Contestation marks the ground; marks may be effaced or recalled – they can be inscribed within processes of design or refused absolutely. The ineliminability of contestation allows lines to be drawn between colonisation, the clearing of areas of the inner city to facilitate gentrification and the expansion of suburbs in ways that ignore environmental considerations by naturalising the demands made by the logic of capital. In fact, ‘place’ as a term while naming the locus of contested and contestable processes of territorialisation – which is the inscription of place within relations of power – runs the risk of becoming an unproductive abstraction. For this precise reason it is better to argue that human being as *being-in-place* is positioned and repositioned within and by processes of territorialisation. The body is not just subject to a series of biopolitical constraints it is equally subject to bioterritorial ones.

While this description allows for a rethinking of place in terms of territory within the philosophical it does not provide an automatic point of entry into the architectural. The term that needs to figure is ‘site’. What, however, is meant by site? Literally site refers to a ground plane as conceived by a set of legal determinations. Equally, both context and the environment are necessary to site. While all these elements pertain such a conception of site equates it with the legally determined ground. Site is then no more than the literal ground. This is far from sufficient. What has to occur is the incorporation into any thinking of site is the move from the givenness of the object to the affirmation of the primacy of relationality. And yet, what is at work within such a move? The first part of any answer depends upon the recognition that the reconfiguration of place as territory is one where relationality and contestability play a fundamental role. The second element is the presence of architecture. Neither architecture as building, nor architecture as the history of built form. Rather, architecture as a practice and activity; thus architecture as a locus of design. If there is another definition of site, one that breaks with any possible reduction of site to its literal presence, then it necessitates the transformation of the literal into a locus of design. Integral to this process is both the move from place to territory, and the one from the centrality of the static object to the always potentially dynamic quality of relationality.

### **ARCHITECTURAL RESPONSIBILITY**

The second element opening up a way of returning philosophy to architecture is located in the demands made by the climate crisis. For philosophy, two ways in which the impact of this crisis figures are the following. Firstly, there is the need to rethink what is at stake in understanding the earth as the locus of human dwelling. The second is the need to rethink concepts such as ‘responsibility’ in order that they are no longer defined by short term or pragmatic considerations. If there is a way of rethinking responsibility, then the latter has to be thought in terms of the temporality of the intergenerational. The question of acting responsibly is not foreign to architecture. And yet, it is invariably positioned in terms of an almost unavoidable ‘presentism’ that makes any thinking of and for the future impossible. A number of philosophers have drawn on the work of Jacques Derrida to overcome this limitation. In *Specters of Marx*, and elsewhere, Derrida evokes

the possibility of justice for ‘those who are not there’. A responsibility for the dead as well as, and equally, for those who are yet to be born. Justice and responsibility refer both backward and forward. For Derrida both justice and responsibility are positioned by the ‘future’ (*l’avenir*) as that which is ‘to come’ (*à venir*). The intergenerational defines time. The object of responsibility – and here that object is the Earth – and those for whom or in relation to whom responsible actions are undertaken have to be thought in terms of this temporality. While such a set up does not determine activity in any direct singular sense, it does provide that in terms of which judgement is actually possible.

What then of architecture? What matters here is the recognition of certain questions, rather than others, as having insistence. The question of responsibility in architecture has to be reconfigured in terms of architecture’s relation to both intergenerational responsibility and intergenerational justice. Arguments for sustainability only have any force if the more urgent questions of what is being sustained, and for whom, are addressed. Answering them refers as much to the earth as the locus of human dwelling as it does territory as naming sites of contestation. For example, the current burning of the Amazon rainforests necessitates that the Amazon be rethought as a territory in the precise sense that its destruction cannot be prevented as a result of the exercise of either national sovereignty or national law but only by the possible application of international law and thus the development of another sense of sovereignty.

As is clear from the example of the Amazon to identify the presence of contestability is not to identify an open and neutral field on which contestation unfolds. Contestability works within a setting in which dominant logics prevail. Networks of relations that work at an urban scale become the reiteration of these logics. If it can be argued that this reiteration sustains that which allows for the climate crisis to continue, then it can be conjectured that architectural responsibility is connected to possible design activities whose project is forestalling the reiteration of these logics or at the very least minimising their destructive force. Once the primacy of relationality can be maintained, and in which relationality is understood as sustaining both relations of power with their own organisational logics, then design takes on another possibility. It holds open the possibility of *autonomy-within-relationality*. The full development this position would draw as much from philosophical writings on autonomy, thus conceived, as it would begin with the urban projects of Oswald Matthias Ungers, specifically the *Berlin as Green Archipelago* project of 1977.

Relationality involves a repositioning of the architectural. It describes the given, however it does so in ways that open up on the level of design the possibility of an interruption of the logics that sustains the given. Working beyond the object and with the primacy of relationality – within a setting that assumes the ineliminable presence of the climate crisis – allows and demands another staging of the relationship between philosophy and architecture.

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