Architecture’s Appearance and The Practices of Imagination

1. The power to create images would be a good partial definition of architecture’s competence, if the performance of that power is understood to be a disclosure of truths about the world by giving appearance to them. This disclosure should not be understood in a straightforward representational sense, even less so in a propositional one. Architecture is not a language. Rather, architecture summons into appearance ways of thinking about the world that are otherwise unavailable; it is a particular mode of thought, one irreducible to other ways of thinking. And its images of thought have no lesser claim on the real than those of philosophy. This mode is not representation, then, but emanation – a showing forth of a world that exists but is not yet actualized.

So appeared architecture for Adolf Loos: “If we find in the forest a mound, six feet long and three feet wide, raised by a shovel to form a pyramid, we turn serious and something in us says: here someone lies buried. That is architecture.” Let us unpack this hypothetical event. First, there is an unanticipated encounter with an empirical object – If we find in the forest a mound – the apprehension of which produces an almost immediate categorical response: That is architecture. Prior to our encounter, it is presumed, someone used a shovel to form a pyramid. Thus, technique is involved, but it is far from the most important aspect of the encounter. The pyramid as form is not identical to what is apprehended by our senses; what is sensible remains contingent and variable, notwithstanding its defined shape. The material of the mound and its indexical relation to the shovel, no matter how intense the impression they may make on us, are just sensuous qualities and associated features of the encountered object. They are not the real thing; they are not the That.

We can say this another way. The real object of architecture is autonomous from our encounter with it. If we close

our eyes, the visible object that is the mound disappears, but
the real object of architecture remains. So That is an in-
stantiation of architecture that exists before and after our
encounter with the mound, an architecture that is always al-
ready there, where “always already” entails prior conditions
that are brought into existence by their own outcomes. For
us to recognize That as architecture, architecture – not the
mound – must always already be there.

There is an epistemological claim made in Loos’s apho-
rism: we know something about the world through the archi-
tectural event. Through the appearance of architecture, we
recognize the ritual of burial and the need for memorializa-
tion – here someone lies buried – and it affects us. But there is
also an ontological claim: That is architecture. The necessary
anteriority of the architecture instantiated by That explains
why we can imagine architectures that are never built.

Cognition is required to reproduce the form, or type, of
the pyramid, indeed removing much of what is perceived –
the material, the technique, even the site – to isolate what is
essential to the form of the pyramid. We schematize, we men-
tally organize, we design the type form. And then and there,
we enter the architectural imagination. We proceed from the
initial appearance, through the imagination, to the symbolic
order – that is, to the category and concept of architecture.
For this, preparation is required; we must have some sort of
education or prior instruction in order to produce concepts.
The pronouncement That is architecture is not a simple expe-
rience, not only intuition or cognition, but a recognition: an
understanding built from prior encounters, memories, and
reflected conceptualizations. The authority of the symbolic
rule imposes itself on the imagination and determines it, regu-
lates it, legitimizes it. The imagination operates in accordance
with rule unwittingly, without expressly observing it, but the
symbolic must be in play. Through its interaction with the
symbolic, the imagination gains the power to both register
and overcome the limits of experience. Only when the imagi-
nation mediates between the sensible and the understanding,
with the symbolic order of the understanding presiding, is
That architecture.

2. My description of the architectural imagination as essen-
tially interpretive, as well as cognitively productive, borrows
from Immanuel Kant’s theory of the schema and its role in
reflective judgment developed in his third Critique.² For Kant,
a schema of the imagination is not quite a concept and yet is something more than an ordinary image. A schema is something like a script for producing images in accordance with the symbolic order—a synthetic operator between the sensible and the understanding.

In Kant’s architectonic, the imagination must coordinate with the two other faculties—the intuition and the understanding—to construct its practical-empirical role out of machinic parts. The intuition synthesizes sensory experience. The understanding spontaneously deploys concepts and categories. But intuitions are purely sensible, and the understanding cannot scan sensible objects. So we need a way of relating and connecting these two separate faculties. “There must be a third thing,” Kant writes, “which must stand in homogeneity with the category on the one hand and the appearance on the other, and make possible the application of the former to the latter. This mediating representation must be pure (without anything empirical) and yet intellectual on the one hand and sensible on the other.” This third thing is a product of the imagination; it is the schema. The function of the schema is to subsume the uncoded array of sensations, the empirical objects of intuition, and convert them into images that can be processed by the understanding.

But a schema is not itself an image in an ordinary sense, because it is not a thing. Rather, a schema is a rule for an image that is produced in the act, or procedure, of schematization, a dynamic process that takes place in the imagination. Kant gives the instructive example of a triangle: “In fact it is not images of objects but schemata that ground our pure sensible concepts. No image of a triangle would ever be adequate to the concept of it. For it would not attain the generality of the concept, which makes this valid for all triangles, right or acute, etc. . . . The schema of a triangle can never exist anywhere except in thought, and signifies a rule of the synthesis of the imagination with regard to pure shapes in space.”

Images remain attached to the senses, incommensurable with the concepts used by the understanding, while schemata regulate the abstraction of sensation into something the understanding can process. As one scholar put it, “The schema is the procedure of the imagination in providing an image for a concept. . . . Schemata must underlie all of our concepts if they are to be relevant to the realm of empirical experience.” A schema is a necessary component of perception itself, but also a requirement for practical and theoretical knowledge, as well as reflective interpretation.

4. Ibid., 273 (B180/A141).
If Kant’s formulation of the schema should feel familiar to architects, this is perhaps because it is very similar to Quatremère de Quincy’s definition of the architectural type: “The word ‘type’ does not represent so much the image of something that must be copied or imitated perfectly, as the idea of an element that must itself serve as a rule for the model. . . . The model, understood from the point of view of the practical execution of art, is an object that must be repeated such as it is; [the] type, on the contrary, is an object on the basis of which everyone can conceive of works that may not resemble each other at all.” What has not been sufficiently noticed in discussions of type is the freedom of relationships among sensation, memory, and imagination that this formulation allows, at the same time that it insists on harmony and resonance across component parts. While one model of the schema could construe its effects as rigidly stabilizing, it is also

possible to find liberating hints at different modes of becoming in the constructive and autonomous act of the imagination.

Indeed, the schematic imagination, as articulated in Kant’s philosophy, is deeply embedded in architectural historiography. Countless historians have been influenced by Kant – Paul Frankl, Heinrich Wölfflin, Emil Kaufmann, Erwin Panofsky, and Wilhelm Worringer among them. But it is Rudolf Wittkower, in his 1944 drawing “Schematized Plans of Eleven of Palladio’s Villas,” who gives us the most vivid graphic expression of a schematizing machine. As part of his survey of Palladio’s Veneto villas republished in Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism (1949) – in which he utterly suppresses site, material, technology, decoration, patrons, clients, and even program (many of the villas were in fact working farmhouses, complete with barchesse and dovecotes) – Wittkower “designs” a schema that totalizes the villa type as the geometric–mathematical systematization of the ground plan. That Wittkower’s Architectural Principles was as compelling as it was tendentious is evidenced not only by its widespread and decades-long influence but also by its practical instrumentalization by scholars and designers alike. In 1947, Colin Rowe extended Wittkower’s analysis to the villas of Le Corbusier; in 1967, Peter Eisenman used the same schema as a generative structure to begin his seminal house series; and in 1998, Greg Lynn defined his own counterposition of animate geometry and continuous differentiation as a decisive departure from the schema of Wittkower, Rowe, and Eisenman. The architectural imagination is action prone and highly connective; it is promiscuous.

3.

In the half century since Wittkower’s powerful demonstration of the schematic imagination at work in interpretive practice, scholars have grown skeptical of the transcendental formalism of models like his, turning their attention instead toward methods able to accommodate newly conceived issues of multiplicity, potentiality, virtuality, and becoming, as well as various materialist tendencies. New practices of the imagination began to develop in the 1970s and 1980s, primarily following the work of Manfredo Tafuri but also influenced generally by exchanges across various critical disciplines that accepted Marxism and psychoanalysis as common metalinguages and tended to use methods derived from ideology critique and deconstruction. Since the 1990s, the works of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze have been the dominant

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influences on architectural interpretation. In particular, Foucault’s diagram of the architecture of the 19th-century panopticon and Deleuze’s reading of that diagram as a cartography of an entire social and historical field have authorized new modes of architecture’s appearance and new constructions of the architectural imagination.\(^9\)

Foucault is concerned with how the apparatus of power and knowledge configures a domain of visible matter (the “seeable”) that is shaped by the articulable functions (organized utterances and discourse, or the “sayable”) into various disciplinary forms like the panopticon. In his study of Foucault, Deleuze focuses on the relation of the visible (which is not reduced to a thing seen but comprises “multisensorial complexes,” processes, actions, and reactions) and the articulable (or discursive formation), rendering their interaction as an agon of Kantian sensibility and conceptuality. “Between the visible and the articulable we must maintain all the following aspects at the same time: the heterogeneity of the two forms, their difference in nature or anisomorphism; a mutual presupposition between the two, a mutual grappling and capture; the well-determined primacy of the one over the other.”\(^10\) The visible, like Kant’s intuition, is passive and determined, while the articulable, like Kant’s understanding, is spontaneous and determining. But just as Kant needs the schema, Foucault needs a third agency, a mediator of the confrontation, but one in a space removed from the visible and the articulable, “in a different dimension to that of their respective forms.”\(^11\) This nonplaced operator is what Deleuze, reading Foucault, calls the \textit{diagram}.

The schematic imagination is an imposition of order on a stratum of sensible and conceptual knowledge that has no exterior, on an assemblage that is autonomous and closed. The schematic centers, territorializes, and patterns sensation in accordance with categories and concepts already present (even though they can be known only retrospectively), whereas the diagrammatic draws the center of the assemblage together with peripheral force fields and operations exterior to the assemblage proper; the diagrammatic is concerned with deteritorializing and reterritorializing. If the schema is a template, the diagram is a frame and a connector. The diagrammatic imagination comprises functions that trace and map a region captured from a larger field, thereby also creating an outside. Deleuze resorts to prose poetry to define the outside: “The outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that


\(^10\) Deleuze, \textit{Foucault}, 67–68.

\(^11\) Ibid., 69.
together make up an inside” – that is, an inside of thought. “Thinking involves the transmission of particular features: it is a dice-throw. What the dice-throw represents is that thinking always comes from the outside (that outside which was already engulfed in the interstice [between seeing and saying] or which constituted the common limit).” He asks, “If the outside, farther away than any external world, is also closer than any internal world, is this not a sign that thought affects itself, by revealing the outside to be its own unthought element?”12 The outside is the unthought other; it is difference itself. The outside is the virtual; and the virtual is history. But it is not the history of architecture’s actual unfolding; it is not the archive. The virtual is, rather, absolute history – the constitutive outside that, across an implicating membrane, disturbs the identity of the inside, the actual, and is nevertheless both a prerequisite for the actual’s constitution and a record of its existence. Virtuality is the source of resistance.

Near the end of his Foucault study, Deleuze inserts an illustration of the diagram. It depicts the “line of the outside,” an indefinitely unfurling plane with an atmosphere above – itself populated with condensed particles and intersections of forces tossed about – and a sedimented “strata” below (more packed and stacked, having been archived). Between the two lies a “strategic zone,” a zone of negotiation between the formed strata and the unformed outside. The left-side strata are archives of visual knowledge, and the right is a kind of sound cloud of articulable knowledge: “the two irreducible forms of knowledge, Light and Language, two vast environments of exteriority where visibilities and statements are respectively deposited.”13 Together the two archives delineate a band of forms of content and forms of expression that can be taken to determine the limits of actual, concrete historical formations of knowledge and power. Deleuze calls this the concrete assemblage, in contradistinction to the abstract machine of the diagram itself. In between the two archives is a striking enfolding of the line of the outside, pulled down into a pouch, a pocket, an implication “constantly reconstituting

12. Ibid., 96–97, 117–18.
13. Ibid., 121.
itself by changing direction, tracing an inside space but coextensive with the whole line of the outside” — a “zone of subjectivation,” as Deleuze labels it — the place of thought itself.\footnote{Ibid., 123.}

4.

Let us now consider how this diagrammatic version of the architectural imagination works in interpreting an architectural project. Architecture is both an artifact of culture and a sociopolitical act; hence, the architectural project does not simply reproduce the contexts that are its sponsors but rather connects to their fields and forces in complex and often contradictory ways, drawing up the threads of the real into a fabric whose weaving operations may be modeled as much on dreams and prayers as on maps and machines. Architecture is the constant making and remaking of the world — the territorialization and reterritorialization of the concrete assemblage through architecture’s particular diagram. So it must be recognized that any project of architecture is not merely informed by ideology — by its patrons, its designers, or its audiences — it is ideological in its own right. The diagrammatic imagination accounts for the fact that architecture is entangled within a complex of social, technological, and historical forces, which are deep-seated, perhaps repressed, and yet shifting and contradictory. It is these forces that close formal readings of architectural projects seek to deconceal. What the diagrammatic model does not allow is an uncritical collapse of the architectural project into its context, as if it were completely determined by its context. Architecture necessarily remains in dialectical tension with its own historical moment. It is not capable of sublating art and life, but neither can the discursive and institutional authorities completely control and exhaust architecture. Architecture retains the power to negate certain dimensions of historical social life and expose undiscovered spaces, expanding the territory on which we dwell. “It is here that two forms of realization diverge or become differentiated,” Deleuze instructs, “a form of expression and a form of content, a discursive and a non-discursive form, the form of the visible and the form of the articulable. . . . Between the visible and the articulable a gap or disjunction opens up. . . . The concrete assemblages are therefore opened up by a crack that determines how the abstract machine [the diagram] performs.”\footnote{Ibid., 38.} The seeable and sayable are not contextually given forms but rather spaces of emergence inextricably linked to historical discourses, which they also help to organize. The social and historical context may determine the

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visible, but the visible pushes back on the expressible to enable what in turn underwrites conditions of visibility. The discontinuity between the visible and the articulable, the irreducibility of the one to the other, is the crux here. For this is the moment around which the differences between a symptomatic reading and a merely suspicious reading turn. The recognition that architecture still entails an active, engaged, and critical imagination rather than an inert and compliant object.

The diagrammatic model of the architectural imagination enables us to retain from Kantian aesthetics and the architectural historiography that it influenced the notion that architecture is characterized by a certain degree of formal autonomy. But it mediates this with an emphasis on the social and intellectual importance of form and the corollary of a deep historicity. Finally, we achieve a materialist emphasis on architecture's embeddedness in heterogeneous networks of other forms and forces, interconnected constellations that will not resolve or reduce into a single structure because each constellation connects to the others through events rather than passages determined by one or the other. The architectural imagination has historically demonstrated the capacity to structure perceptions and experiences while remaining outside any single structure's absolute control. This explains why great architecture always exceeds description and theory. It explains architecture's power for disturbance and transformation rather than inert passivity. Architecture associates the intensity of sensation with the rigor of structure and then transfers that intensity into other disciplines and practices, revealing not only their limits but also their openness to change.