

# The Performative in Architecture

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**Molar and Molecular.** Architecture, in the traditional accounts of its origins, begins with performance. At stages of human development where shelter is minimal, adopted from natural resources lying close at hand, architecture begins with ritual centers combining functions of divination, sacrifice, marriage, and burial. Poetry, music, and dance combined with the theatricality of ritual to make these early spaces both cosmic in their spirituality and intensely architectural in their use of space and time. From these early clearings, Ester Böserup documents the evolution of agriculture.<sup>1</sup> Paul Wheatley adds the evidence that they become places for legal transactions, mercantile trade, language translation, governance, and collective religion.<sup>2</sup>

As secular cultural functions developed from such complex places, their original syncretic nature was preserved both spatially and temporally. Typically, the boundary of the settlement was maintained through ritual renewal; the use of gates was formalized and often surrounded by magic safeguards; the center of the settlement was defined in terms of symbolic use that preserved ritual relationships between human authority and the divine; certain spaces were defined as sacred, others as prohibited. Time became the means for re-assigning secular spaces to periodic religious functions. Festivals, observed on a strict seasonal timetable, defined the year in terms of days and even minutes that were set aside from ordinary activities. During these special times, the space of the settlement itself was redefined. Decorations transformed the appearance of built structures and open spaces. Special illumination effects were used. Banners, trophies, bunting, garlands, swags, and other decorative devices dressed up the secular surfaces.

Festival architecture is such an obvious component of the contemporary built environment that we tend to take this radical function for granted and forget that, in architecture's antiquity, it was dominant. The materiality of architecture itself cannot ignore this double nature. In addition to — or, rather, *at the base of* — architecture's "secular" functional service to everyday life, there is a substrate of performative meanings, some collective, some individual. It is not inaccurate to refer to this substrate as an "architectural unconscious," or to demand that architecture history and theory be reconstructed around this central and original relationship.

The performative may be taken in two main ways. First, because of the relation of the performative to architectural origins and development, performance is clearly a main component of architectural history and the critical interpretation of architecture's relationship to culture, technology, and the other arts and sciences. Second, this "objective" view compels an ac-

count of a more "subjective" or phenomenological-existential-psychoanalytic account of architecture as a component of experience, taken collectively or individually. The second view could be called "molecular" because of its scale; the first in contrast could be termed "molar." While the first, "objective," view is more anthropological and historical — involving the comparison of physical records of buildings, cities, and landscapes in multiple cultures over multiple scales of time — the subjective view allows for the ways in which objective frames of geography and history are made irrelevant by the very nature of the subject and the subject's diverse encounters with the world, taken in the full range from the trivial to the most universal kinds of experience. Here, no less than in the objective historical-cultural account, the performative is intensely involved. Just as one could argue from a strict Aristotelian position, that no one kind of cause can be excluded arbitrarily from the other three in his system of material, formal, final, and efficient cause, a performative critical system insists, *per necessitas*, that what works in the "objective" formation of architecture within cultural frameworks must be an equally fundamental component of individual, immediate experience. "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," as the popular maxim goes. But, for performative criticism, the crossover between collective ("objective") and individual ("subjective") is a complex that inscribes each into the other at all occasions and scales. The performative is never exclusively a historical-cultural "meta-phenomenon," nor is it an existential subjective operator outside of objective history. It is both, on any and all occasions, but the proportion changes.

**The Uncanny.** Many modern commentators locate the phenomenon of the uncanny in the times of the French Revolution, when industrialization, social reorganization, and the organization of capital on global scales coupled with technology and exploration to undermine the Medieval mentality more radically than had the Renaissance. There are good reasons to pick this particular moment, if only because the trauma of the French *terroire* and subsequent rapid conquests of Napoleon showed religion and conventional politics to be powerless in the face of the crowd psychology. The Gothic novel (*Castle of Otranto*, *Frankenstein*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, etc.) portrayed a radically isolated subjectivity swept up in blind, random events. Warfare had become horrendous. Mechanization had, as Siegfried Geidion put it, "taken command" in every aspect of collective and personal life.<sup>3</sup> The uncanny was a sign of the loss of old religious assurances and stable social orders, no matter how inadequate and unjust these had been. But, it was also, in an important sense, a replacement of these assurances and orders: a

re-casting of psychological forces that had been the bedrock components of institutions, such as religion, whose outward form was no longer acceptable in the regime of the modern.

This *plus ça change* aspect of the uncanny led Mladen Dolar to point out that the proper origins of the uncanny is in the human mind and culture, from their origins through to present times — that only the modality has changed, not the primary forms.<sup>4</sup> The uncanny is one of the most briefly though thoroughly considered ideas. Inspired in part by Ernst Jentsch's 1908 essay, Sigmund Freud wrote his famous review of the subject. Jentsch had emphasized the blurring of the boundary between life and death (the living person with an element of death and the object or dead person with a demonic element of life).<sup>5</sup> Freud incorporated his own study of E. T. A. Hoffman's story, "The Sandman," to see the uncanny not in terms of its effects but rather its causes. Citing the etymology of the word *Unheimlich* itself, Freud noted that the uncanny "began at home," with the concealment of something that had ought to have remained concealed but which had come to light. Although Freud pushed this meaning in the direction of identity (the theme of the double, for example) and optics (the unlocatable gaze, the evil eye, etc.), no clearer connection could there be than that between the uncanny and the universal custom of securing houses, public buildings, and even cities and nations, through sacrifices that establish connections with the dead.

In short, what could be called a primary invariant of human culture and individual mentality

has its origins and continued expression in architecture! Where the factors that differentiate and disaggregate buildings in terms of their functions, styles, historical relations, and materials are the secular particulars that lead to categories that claim to be a causal framework defining architectural production and buildings themselves, these are superficial qualifiers that are, in a manner of speaking, added after the primary quality of architecture — its relation to the dead — has been established. Here, the issue of performativity can be restated. The Vitruvian account of architectural origins (the warmth of fire compels social cohesion; out of this grows the collective impulse to support and elaborate this collective good) is thus correct but backwards.

It is the fire's relation to the dead, its function in ritual, that is primary.<sup>6</sup> This relation is radically identical to the uncanny, as evidenced in the universality of the use of houses and other buildings and cities as portals to the Underworld. Thus, it is not fire's warmth but its fascinating horror that is extended to secular functions that, in a sense, are sworn to keep the secret of this horror, to protect it and make it invisible but to nonetheless preserve its forms, its (ineffable) significance, and its demonstrable powers to secure. This preservation is accomplished through a performativity that combines ritual renewal, festival embellishment, and a "psychological integration" that dissolves the distinction between the individual and the collective.

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1. Esther Böserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change under Population Pressure* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965).
2. Paul Wheatley, *Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (New York: Aldine, 1971).
3. Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948).
4. Mladen Dolar, "'I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding Night,' Lacan and the Uncanny," *October*, Vol. 58, *Rendering the Real* (Autumn, 1991): 5-23.
5. Ernst Jentsch, "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen," *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8, 22(1908): 195-98 and 8, 23: 203-05. Translated 1995, R. Sellars, *Angelaki*, 2, 1.
6. Donald Kunze, "The Missing Guest: The Twisted Topology of Hospitality," in *Eating Architecture*, ed. P. Singley and J. Horwitz (Cambridge: MIT, 2004), pp. 169-190.