

An Indexical Approach to Architecture

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Time past and time future

Allow but a little consciousness.

To be conscious is not to be in time

But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,

The moment in the draughty church at smokefall

Be remembered; involved with past and future.

Only through time time is conquered.

T. S. Elliot, *Four Quartets*

In the past two hundred years, from the 'neos' through the 'modern' and the 'posts', there always have been architects who sought the essence of architecture at a fundamentally human and experiential level. It is significant that in a period that wavered between eclectic relativism and rigid objectivism, a situation still felt today, the experience of architecture was consistently considered as an essential means to architecture. Phenomenological interpretations of architecture have largely contributed to reveal how meaning unfolds between the experience of the observer, the architecture and the context in which they are situated. Nonetheless, the fact that phenomenology by and large begins with the individual's relation with the world has attracted criticism.¹ For one, Foucault concludes his valuation of Bachelard's work by saying that his phenomenological 'analyses, however fundamental to contemporary thought, are primarily concerned with inner space.'² In other words, the question of intersubjectivity remains an issue. Though phenomenology fundamentally considers consciousness

to be already with objects, the terms in which this community of being can be comprehended constantly need to be addressed. Because phenomenology is rooted in our individual experience of the world, there is always the danger of losing sight of the phenomenology's primary object: to describe a common ground for meaning and action.

The question 'how does meaning arise' is generally approached with the assumption that there exists a certain convention that precedes any communication. As the contemporary semiotician Jean-Marie Klinkenberg argues in his *Précis de sémiotique générale*, the flaw of this conception is that it only begins with the convention, and not with what might have contributed to establish that convention.³ To seek out what might have happened before the convention was established, the question is rather: how does meaning arise from experience? The responses to this reformulated question tend to be either empirical or idealist – either meaning is conceptually created and therefore driven by the subject, or it is the existence of objects that gives rise to concepts. Between these two ways of thinking, phenomenologists have elaborated ways of conceiving of the objective and subjective realms interactively rather than independently. This interaction accepts a double movement between the world and our experience of it. In effect, interactive approaches to meaning describe how it emerges 'in-between'. This in-between, which acts both as background and link between human beings, is fundamental but very difficult to delineate. Because

by nature it is defined by what is adjacent to it, it is difficult to grasp the notion in its own term. Yet, if the intention is to comprehend better how architecture can be built meaningfully, it is precisely to the definition of the in-between that we must turn.

Arendt's conception of action and reification: an architectural perspective

The philosopher Hannah Arendt distinguishes between *vita activa*, life as lived in the worldly reality, and *vita contemplativa*, the life of the mind. On a broad historical scale, she describes the shift through which *vita contemplativa*, traditionally regarded as superior, is now considered secondary to the *vita activa*. Labour, work, and action, the three activities of our active life, now are placed above thinking, willing and judging. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that a second Copernican revolution has occurred within the *vita activa*. The hierarchy within active life traditionally prioritised political action over work, and the concern with labour came last. Characterised by growth, metabolism and decay, labour is the cyclical process which assures human survival and the life of the species. Work has to do with our worldliness and is characterised by the artificial world of the things that we produce and through which we seek some form of permanence. Traditionally privileged, action is directly related to living among others, it is the only activity which goes on directly between human beings.

According to Arendt, the work of *homo faber* was the first to rise to the position previously occupied by the *vita contemplativa*.⁴ However, as the fabricated objects lost their durability, the emphasis shifted from the object produced to the means of production. The value of durability decreased, and the amount of pain or pleasure experienced in the production or consumption of objects now granted meaning to the objects. Labour had risen over work and action. Arendt denounces the 'reification' of the products of *homo faber*, pointing to the cyclical and

individual ambition of the *homo laborans*, who posits his own personal survival as an end in itself.⁵ 'Reification' comes from the Latin *res* – thing, and *facere* – to make. It was attested in 1912 as a synonym of the French *chosification*, and mostly employed in political economy to translate Marx's use of the term *Verdinglichung*. This term designated in a critical manner the process through which a social reality or an individual subject are negated in themselves and reduced to the state of things, notably, the transformation of human activity into merchandise.⁶

The French philosopher Julia Kristeva describes how, behind the reversal diagnosed within the *vita activa*, Arendt was more generally tackling the problem of reification:

*Arendt sets out to assign greater value, to 'valorise,' the active life, arguing that activity means life. Nonetheless, The Human Condition also leads her to an unprecedented refraction of the notion of 'life' as the nihilistic value par excellence. Vitalist activism – which brings homo faber to an apotheosis, but which also imprisons him within the robotization of a kind of knowledge that 'calculates' without 'thinking' – is strongly denounced. Thus, echoing Augustine's thoughts on the 'negligible' life, a life not engaged in beate vivere and summum esse, Arendt vituperates against a consumerism that swallows up human life, when that life has lost sight of what is lasting. She denounces the cult of 'individual life,' and even more the 'life of the species' which tries to impose itself as the supreme modern good, but without having recourse to any aspiration to immortality. The vital 'process' replaces the search for immortality: this notion is raised up as a fundamental nihilistic value. ... In opposition to those currents of thought, Arendt offers a life that is 'specifically human': the expression designates the 'moment between birth and death,' as long as it can be represented by a narrative, and shared with other men.*⁷

Kristeva argues that Arendt sought to replace the lost tangibility of the objects of production and consumption with the real intangibility of our action in the polis.⁸ Arendt is keen to re-cast acting in a way that is political, 'shared with *other men*', alive and immortal by virtue of being rooted in human mortality. She defines action as 'concerned with this in-between [something which *inter-est*] which varies with each group of people so that most words and deeds are about some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent. [...] [F]or all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things which we visibly have in common.'⁹

Arendt's definition of action is crucial as it points to the potential intersection between the life of the mind, and that in-between others. In this respect, three aspects merit further attention. The first is that in the description of action, Arendt presents the products of actions as words and deeds, implying an intangibility which would be opposed to the solidity of things, to the production of material things. How can the ways in which action challenges reification be circumscribed better? The second aspect that deserves further discussion is the suggestion that these intangible 'products' of action relate to 'some worldly objective reality' and are a 'disclosure of the acting and speaking agent'. Here, there underlies a desire to set action as the encounter of a speaking subject and an objective external reality, but both these terms would benefit from further definition. What makes up this 'subject', how is the worldly reality 'objective'?¹⁰ Finally, in relation to a mode of sharing which is not visible (visibility and tangibility belonging to the world of things), it may be pertinent to distinguish further between a world 'shared' tangibly and visibly, and another way of operating in-between, mediating through 'intangible and invisible' actions. What concerns us here is the evaluation of the incidence of these questions in architectural practice and theory.

These three questions have to do with representation. Dalibor Vesely defines our times as the age of divided representation. According to Vesely, the roots of the crisis in representation are the 'tensions and conflicts between experience based on the continuity of tradition, and artificially constructed systems'.¹¹ Governed by economic imperatives, architecture is subjected to reification and produced like a consumer good. With respect to architecture, reification is best applied to the tendency of transforming architecture into a consumer product. It is precisely with this phenomenon that Arendt is concerned. She denounces the 'reification' of the products of *homo faber* and deplores the cyclical and individual ambition of the *homo laborans*. In a world governed by economic imperatives, buildings are produced like consumer goods, likely to be quickly replaced when something better comes along.

In architecture, reification paradoxically arises from the dematerialisation of the architectural creation. Apparently reneging its role as a safe keeper of culture, architecture is subsumed in the rapidity of changes and dematerialised into an ephemeral surface. Since Alberti's dual consideration of architecture as ornament and structure, architects have approached architecture through a polarisation between function and form. After half a century of elaborate theories on the nature of ornaments, modern architects chose to theoretically do away with ornament and form to strictly consider structure and function. Recently however, it is rather the opposite phenomenon that appears to be at work: architecture now often surrenders its structural essence to reside entirely in its ornamental surface.

This reversal can be compared with the ways in which different generations of architects continually recast their position with respect to time. During the nineteenth-century, which we may also refer to as the first age of historicism, ornamental theories were

developed as a primary tool to redefine an appropriate language, and, by extension, to achieve a new balance between the structure and the surface of architecture. Historicism is a tendency to look back at history as a sort of container from which one may pick out examples according to one's needs – may they be technical, moral, religious or strictly formal– and use them at one's will. Historicism is strongly relative, which does not mean that most architects did not have very definite reason to go back to a particular period and style. For example, when A. W. N. Pugin pressed for a return to Gothic architecture, he did so on the basis of strong and unwavering moral beliefs. Other architects considered all styles equally valid. For example, in the context of architectural competitions, architects commonly submitted a single plan and a number of interchangeable elevations. For these architects, each style, understood to have emerged from the particular conditions of its times, was considered distinct yet equally valid. While seemingly contrary, these two attitudes stemmed from the architect's acute awareness of the past and the increasing knowledge of history. In the first age of historicism, architects fragmented the past variously to uphold the superiority of Gothic architecture on moral or structural grounds, or that of Greek architecture as the purest expression of the unwavering principles upon which architecture should be built. But as the nineteenth century was drawing to its close, so was the tolerance to the prevailing relativist attitude.

When Nikolaus Pevsner describes the pioneers of modern architecture, he looks for these architects who were dedicated to a single principle. Starting with an unwavering dedication to one mode of looking at the past, the relation to time progressed to a certain understanding of the present to be finally driven by a way of envisioning the future. The shift in the relation to time did not simply resolve in a rejection of tradition but by and large, when modern architects discarded the surface at the beginning of the twentieth century, they also abandoned the

past. Indeed, the modern conception of history emerged from a general disillusion in our capacity to apprehend the world through our senses, and an accepted credo that we thus can only know what we make. In this conception of history, things are not considered for their capacity to endure, but rather for their ability to lead to something else, to something other and better. Memory becomes a weight that must be unloaded.¹²

Today, the revived interest not only in the ornamental surface but also in the ephemeral building – that is, the building as ornament – is concomitant with a post-modern interest in a multiplicity of times. Unlike the architects of the nineteenth century, the architects of the second age of historicism are not concerned with distinct historical times. The times they are preoccupied with are the distinct presents embodied by each individual's experience. Historicism no longer applies to the relative roads each individual follows to build within history, it is predominantly concerned with the recognition of the plurality of the subjective experiences that form the basis of each individual's relation to the lived world.

The first age of historicism is not so far apart from our post-modernist ways of fragmenting history. What is common to both is a certain level of relativisation. While the same relativity prevails, the modes in which it can be opposed have shifted. In the first period of historical relativity, the architects who sought to preserve some form of tradition faced the dilemma of negotiating a space for the experience of the subject in an objectified history. Particularly enlightening in this respect is the work of the architect Charles Robert Cockerell (1788-1863), who, in different ways, sought to open up historical time to make space for the time of experience. In his most famous representation of history, 'The Professor's Dream' (1848), he offered a gap for the viewers to enter, presenting superimposed layers of buildings in a semi-panoramic drawing that called for further involvement. In his archaeological drawings, he

also saved the observers from the task of having to imagine, collapsing the time of encounter, the fragmented building and a restoration to be completed by the viewer. In his buildings, he used historical ornaments in such a way that they could actually become sited questions. As users move through his buildings, ornaments are brought forward from the surface, not only inviting questions, but also actually interrogating the viewers.¹³

After the recognition of the failure of history as a grand narrative, it has become imperative to fragment the past and make space for a plurality of histories. Pushed to its limit, this attitude means that any way in which one chooses to look at the past may be considered equally valid. The important question that arises is whether there remains a shared space in which communication is possible. One avenue is to attempt to operate beyond the categories of the objective and the relative, beyond the divide between subject and object. If in a nineteenth century marked by historicism, historical time had to be opened up in order to create a space for the individual, it seems as though today, the ambient relativism can be counteracted by opening the subjective experience onto an awareness of history. Rachel Whiteread's work is paradigmatic of this shift. Two projects in particular force the passer-by to move from the direct encounter (the personal time of experience) to the larger context (a shared history). The first project is HOUSE, a cast of a low-income house slotted for demolition in Hackney, close to the centre of London, in 1993. The project is grounded, local, and specific. Occupying the space vacated by an expropriated family, HOUSE stood as the material impact of the beautifying policies of the official instances. This awkward trace of inhabitation compelled its presence onto the passer-by who was then pressed to face the history of the site. Who had lived there? Where had the walls gone? Why had this been demolished? What is happening to our city and its people? Who makes these decisions?

Another project by Whiteread, the *Monument for the Austrian Jews in Vienna*, presents itself as a cast of the interior space contained within the envelope of a by-gone library [fig. 1]. As visitors dwell on this negative space – the cast being a negative imprint of what would have positively been there – they realise that the spines of the books are shown as positive. It is a cast of non-existent books, the negative of an absence. The monument effectively materialises emptiness and confronts the viewers with the issues of presence and absence through questions that are formulated through the direct encounter. The personal experience becomes the vehicle for the recognition of history, not only a past history, but also aborted histories.

We are now dealing with a number of different polarities that are inherently connected. The play between essence and surface is intrinsically related to the relation between the solidity of tradition and the ephemeral experience, between the objective and the subjective, between history and human temporality. If we consider the two eras of relativism that frame the apparently stable moment of modernity, we can start to trace how some of these dualities have been subjected to significant reversals. In the nineteenth century, the ground for meaning had to be negotiated as some form of resistance to historical relativity. In the twenty-first century, architects concerned with building a common ground for meaning have to devise ways of fending off relative historicity. Nineteenth-century architects sought to open a codified history through an ornamental surface that could be activated in the time of experience; contemporary architects now attempt to re-centre the plurality of experience through an ornamental mass where a shared history gravitates.

In her essay on the concept of history, Arendt draws attention to the fact that at its inception, history was closely related to memory. The task of the historiographer, akin to that of the poet, was that

of the *homo faber*, a making which had the ambition of bringing man, who was mortal, closer to the divine making of nature, which was immortal. In the writing of history, the futility of human works, deeds and words were granted a capacity to endure:

*All things that owe their existence to men, such as works, deeds, and words, are perishable, infected as it were, by the mortality of their authors. However, if mortals succeeded in endowing their works, deeds, and words with some permanence and in arresting their perishability, then these things would, to a degree at least, enter and be at home in the world of everlastingness, and the mortals themselves would find their place in the cosmos, where everything is immortal except man. The human capacity to accomplish this was remembrance, Mnemosyne, which therefore was regarded as the mother of all the other muses.*¹⁴

Appealing to memory and history, Arendt emphasises the public nature of the actions remembered – works, deeds, and words. The break in the continuum of history is the space where human beings think: ‘Only insofar as he thinks [...] does man in the full actuality of his concrete being lives in this gap of time between past and future’.¹⁵ Arendt’s re-casting of action within the *vita activa* is echoed by a redefinition of history as the space within which one acts. Here, memory and history may dwell close to one another, but in a much different way as they did in Antiquity. Now, as action seems to be summoned to operate in-between the life of the mind and the ‘worldly objective reality’, memory may rest closer to a consciousness of being and becoming than a capacity to endure. We may not be able to produce immortal works, deeds and words anymore, but we may be able to recognise the depth of our experiences, and acknowledge that our actions occur not in a homogeneous time, but in the thickness of time.¹⁶ This space is thus measured by our actions and our thoughts. At the level of history, Arendt’s comments encourage the conception of the being

living ‘historically’ as one who acts in the plural, one who moves in the *inter-esse*. Meaning resides in this in-between, in the temporary space of the transaction that takes place between architecture and how we experience it. Essentially, Arendt’s conception of the imperative to act in the face of reification confirms the need to approach architecture as a point of meaningful encounter, in this double movement between the world and our experience of it.

The rapprochement that Arendt establishes between action and reification offers possible ways to redefine a ground for meaning in the contemporary world. Recognising the depth of our experience is to recognise that architecture’s possibility to signify is not confined to its ability to adjust to new means and new tools, nor is it to the exploration of the potential of new materials. In the face of the devaluation of anything that would last long enough to constitute a common ground and in consideration of the tendency of our world to subsume most products through reification, action does emerge as a rather concrete possibility. Following Arendt, we are interested in describing how this intangible action can constitute a very real in-between. In architecture, action translates in a space of encounter that can temporarily solidify a shared ground between a dematerialised architectural presence and a variety of individual experiences.

Peirce’s index and the possibility of meaning in architecture

Thrown back to the necessity of defining not ‘how meaning arises’ but ‘how meaning arises from experience’, we can be guided by Charles S. Peirce’s notion of the index. The architectural historian George Didi-Huberman has suggested that the notion of the index forces the interpretant to think of the conceptual signification together with the sensible experience.¹⁷ Taking Didi-Huberman’s suggestion to architecture, our contention is that this capacity to unite the visible and the tangible is principally played out through confronting the

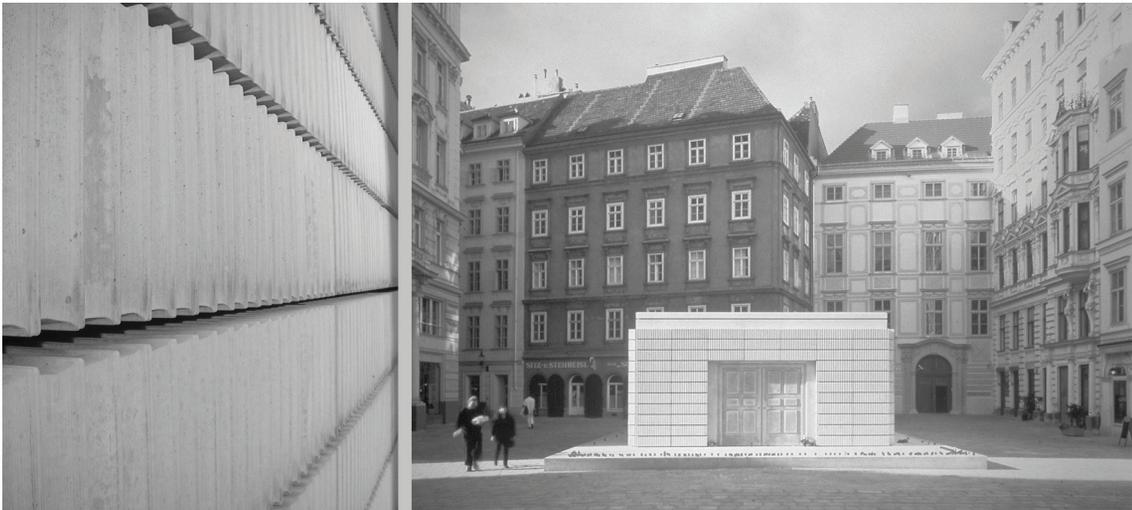


Fig. 1: Rachel Whiteread, Holocaust Memorial, Judenplatz, Vienna, 2000. Image courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

observer with time. The use of the index enables the consideration of architecture at the level of the immediate encounter, as something that unfolds in time, but which already has a history.

In Peirce's semiotics, meaning is also sought at the level of interactions. Unlike Saussure's semiology, Peirce's semiotics is not binary (signifier-signified) but triadic (sign, object, interpretant). As the third and essential part of Peirce's semiotics, the interpretant can be described as the mediating instance between what is represented and how it is represented.¹⁸ The recognition of a mediating instance, in the passage from a binary to a triadic semiotics, allows for a shift from a semantic perspective to a pragmatic perspective. What is of further interest is that Peirce deals with representations and not directly thoughts. The Peirce scholar Joseph Ransdell argues that this makes Peirce's logic eminently public: 'it is of the essence of thought to be public rather than private. In other words, the problem becomes that of explaining how the privacy of thought is possible, not how its publicity is possible'.¹⁹ Hence, while phenomenology may be construed as moving from the personal to the shared, Peirce's logic progresses from the public to the private. Given that the publicity of the world is encountered in triadic relations, Peirce's semiotics is not limited to the strict consideration of architecture as representation (architecture as sign and what it signifies), but rather opens up to the community of agents at play in the interpretation of architecture: the user, the architecture and the larger context within which the relation unfolds. Our contention is that Peirce's prioritisation of the public can inform a phenomenological approach to architecture. His triadic semiotics can take the description of architecture away from a systematic construction of a semiotics of products (representation, reification, structure) to focus on how human beings relate to their world (communication, dialogism, movement, action). Particularly, we will focus on how the notion of the index offers ways to describe the interactions

that take place 'in-between' human beings and their world.

According to Peirce, a sign stands for something (its object); it stands for something to somebody (its interpretant); finally, it stands for something to somebody in some respect (this being referred to as its ground).²⁰ All three elements are involved in representations, but what is most relevant in relation to the praxis of architecture is the ground (how it is represented). The ground describes the type of relation that takes place between the interpretant and the representation. Peirce identifies three different grounds: the icon, the index and the symbol. The icon signifies through resemblance and identification. For example, one would iconically move from a portrait to the physical person that it represents. The index implies a physical presence and requires the tracing of links between potential causes and actual effects. Examples of index are the footsteps of someone who has walked in the mud, or smoke for fire. The symbol hinges on the recognition of a convention, whether a learned code or a lived culture.²¹ Typically, a driver that stops at a red light is symbolically aware of an existing convention. Of these three different grounds, the index interests us particularly. Because the index is related to a physical presence, it can be described as a dynamical object, an 'intersubjective item'.²² The index necessarily implies that the sign is situated. What is communicated indexically between object and interpretant is rooted in an active apprehension of the sign in a particular situation.²³

The fact that the index is embedded in the very materiality of the world makes it particularly appealing to the consideration of architecture. To put it in the simplest terms, the index is like an index that points. It indicates, but of course, to make sense, it must point to something, for someone who is so situated that he or she can make out what the index is pointing to. Given the index's precondition of movement and its inherent ties to an action – whether



Fig. 2: Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, Monument against Fascism 1986/1996, Hamburg. Images courtesy of Gerz Studio; photographer: Kulturbehörde, Hamburg.

a questioning or a displacement – to approach architecture indexically is to root comprehension in participation. Movement becomes the prime mean to comprehend architecture, the key to architecture's communicative role. The fundamental role that indexicality plays within Peirce's interpretation of phenomenon given in triadic relations challenges the conception that space can be grasped from a single static viewpoint. Experiences of representations, constructions and situations unfold through questions and movements – in other words, in time. The necessary consideration of time is what ties the index to what could otherwise be approached as two realms – the world and our experience of it. In allowing the interlacing of these two realms, the index, and by extension Peirce's semiotics, can heighten our awareness of how meaning arises from a double movement – between world and subject, between subject and world. Nor subject based nor object driven, the significance of this interactive way of approaching meaning is that it involves time – it deals with human corporeality and historicity.²⁴

In the Harburg Monument Against War and Fascism, it is possible to discuss some of the ways in which the index can call time into play. Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz designed the Harburg Monument rather as a counter-monument – not a glorious sculpture raised on a pedestal in a prominent place in the centre of the city, but a disappearing column in an average suburb thirty minutes away from the city of Hamburg.²⁵ It constitutes a forty-foot-high and three-foot-square hollow aluminium column, plated with a thin layer of lead [fig. 2]. Originally, an inscription invited the passer-by to inscribe their names on the column. Over the course of seven years, a period during which many individuals did inscribe their name in the thin layer of soft lead, the column was gradually lowered into the ground. First unveiled in 1986, the column totally disappeared into the ground on 10 November 1993. Its exposed top was covered with a burial stone marked: 'Harburg's Monument Against Fascism'.

This trace, or index of a process which has taken place, stands alone in the now empty site for the monument, actualising what it had announced on a temporary inscription: 'One day [this 12 meter tall lead column] will have disappeared completely, and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice'.²⁶ What is the indexical nature of this project? Coming to the place today, we find a platform and in this platform there is a square inscribed into the ground. Our movements about the scene define a time of experience. We are anticipating an explanation, looking for other cues. As we start to make out the significance of the square on the ground, we are thrown back to different times: the times in which the column was lowered into the ground, over the course of seven years; the time of each single inscription which was scratched onto its skin, times of which its hidden surface must still bear the traces; and of course, the times of the events it commemorates, a time marked by a number of violently broken life-times. We move back and forth between different times, going back to a tall column – a recent past – and its present future – the column being buried. We look at the square at our feet and think of the Square itself, what it commemorates. Our movements and questions about this index call into play a sense of time which is not conceived as a unidirectional vector. Past, present and future are summoned, not necessarily in this order, and possibly all at once. Indeed, we could say of this index, following Levinas's observation on the trace, that it is the insertion of *times* in space. It confronts the viewer to different pasts and their possible or impossible futures.

Architectural index could be fragments of a by-gone monument, traces of a building to come or the imprints of a removed formwork. These are fairly static phenomena speaking of processes that have taken place in time – ruination, construction or pouring and curing the concrete. What happens when an intention is engrafted through these proc-



Fig. 3: Herzog & de Meuron, Eberswalde Library, Germany.

esses? In this respect, the work of Herzog & de Meuron is particularly interesting. In their Library at Eberswalde, they have played with indexicality at a number of levels. For this project, commissioned by the State of Brandenburg in 1994, Herzog & de Meuron proposed a simple rectangular form with alternating bands of glass and concrete.²⁷ Adapting the technique of the sgraffito, a method used for the ornamentation of facades in Germany and Italy since the fourteenth century, they have unified these continuous bands by treating them equally as surfaces onto which images were repeated, like fifteen negatives that repeat themselves sixty-six times around the building [fig. 3]. Three series of evenly spaced windows punctuate three of the concrete bands. Sole elements left unadorned, these windows are located at the users' height on the three floors of the Library. Only through these relatively small openings can the readers inside or the viewers outside get an unfiltered view onto the exterior and the interior respectively. The glass bands, acting as three large continuous strips of clerestory windows, only let light in through the images the photographer Thomas Ruff had been commissioned to select for the building. On the first strip of glass, there is Lotto's *Venus and Cupid*; the middle glass strip displays a vanitas by Pieter Potter; the top one becomes the support for Eduard Ender's *Alexander von Humboldt in South America with the Botanical Expert Aimé Bonpland*. The images selected for the concrete panels were equally varied, giving technological, political, historical and scientific cues. According to the architectural historian Gerhard Mack, the images selected 'portray history and science in a skeptical light'.²⁸ Independently from our specific reading of the images' narrative however, the selection puzzles. While the consistent adaptation of the technique of the sgraffito does unify the form, the images, as they are perceived in their specificity, start to play one against the other. At the level of its very materiality, the building is also unsettling. Engrafted in the building envelope, the images distort our perception of common materials.

A similar paradox is created in how the building is grounded. Coming in contact with the ground in the same abrupt way that it touches the sky, with the thin edge of its paneled skin, the Library defies our sense of gravity. Further playing with our perception of what is up or down, the lowest band is covered with the repeated picture of a group of young women on a rooftop, while the top band displays a series of beetles.

Minimally using a very simple form, a single technique of image transfer and a palette of three materials, the building indexically questions. It questions gravity; it plays with what is transparent (the punched windows), filtered (the clerestory glass panels) and textured (the concrete panels); it takes on different lives according to whether it is day or night, whether one is inside or outside. By masterfully scratching the surface of materials, Herzog & de Meuron manage to question the pure volume of the building and its grounding critically, as well as its program and its history. The concrete and the glass panels bear the traces of a process which speaks not only of an intended selection of images, but also of a skin-deep distortion that calls into play a set of relations which are fundamental to how we physically situate ourselves.

There are a number of successful architectural installations that work indexically. A less intellectualised example is 'sliding folding swing door' by the Chinese architect Yung Ho Chang (Feichang Jianzhu). In this project completed in 1996 in Beijing, a double slit in a wall plane indicates an architectural gesture that only comes to life through the users' interaction with it. As one physically questions this gap, the plane slides open revealing a folding door, which, folded open, becomes the frame of a swinging door [fig. 4]. In this case, the 'working out' of the indexical elements calls for one's immediate encounter with architecture. To understand what this slit indicates, the dwellers must participate in architecture – slide, fold and



Fig. 4: Yung Ho Chang, Sliding/Folding/Swing Door, Beijing. Images courtesy of Atelier FCJZ.

swing the door, question themselves on the intention behind this awkward articulation, on what was there and what was added, by whom and for whom. It is interesting that it should be a door, and indeed, there seems to be a tendency for most indexical elements to be joints, caught in the middle of two times, of two movements, of two moments – inside/outside, up/down, here/there. As such, windows, stairs, corridors and even wall sections can become key indexical elements that lead to a questioning of relationships may otherwise take for granted.

The consideration of architecture's indexicality presupposes the consideration of materiality together with movement. What happens when, intentionally, one addresses materials or liminal elements such as doors, windows, stairs or passages, in a way that directly confronts the user with architecture's materiality as experienced through movement? Are not details and ornaments great opportunities to communicate indexically? How are ornaments, details and joints created, what do they refer to? Is the facade itself ornament? Is the ornament a junction between one plane and another, between the building and its context, between the users and the program? Thinking around the notion of the index encourages the active consideration of architecture as representation. Its appeal is in how it takes us away from a strictly formal or idealised conception of architecture to the actual consideration of joints, architectural experiences and movements.

Translated to architecture, Peirce's triadic relation between interpretant, ground and object invites the consideration of our built environment as something apprehended in a dynamical relation that must be hinged on the context and that unfolds through collateral observations. The index makes it possible to talk about making and experiencing architecture from the knot of interactions through which meaning emerges. The materiality of architecture, its very physicality, acts as a hinge between two situated intentions – that of the architect and that of any

users or passers-by who get involved in the architecture. Both these intentions do not belong to the realm of an idealised form that can be grasped in a glance but is necessarily a comprehension that takes shape through movement, from a perception to an experience, that is, in time; in the space between what is seen and what is lived, between what is anticipated and the surprise, in the moment of interaction. An indexical approach to architecture allows us to approach meaning in architecture at the level of the immediate encounter, as something that unfolds in time, but always already has a history. On the one hand, the presence of the past is played out between the intentions of the architect and the building's immediate context – a context that is not a frozen picture but a complex world in motion. On the other hand, the relations staged and necessarily transformed can only be revealed through movements of perception, where every step already is an echo of some past.

Within the usual triads of signs – icons, symbols and index – the index emerges as the most hopeful avenue for the consideration of meaning in architecture. In a world that has doomed the original, the iconic has lost its most important thread, and without a conception of wholeness, symbolic considerations are inevitably thin. Because indexical conceptions are rooted in the immediate encounter, they specifically focus on the ways in which architecture can physically question the user – through traces, imprints, fragments, details, surfaces and ornaments. Precisely concerned with the insertion of times in space, the index retains this essential link between architecture in time. Making space for the interpenetration of personal and shared times, the translation of the index in architecture does not dictate meaning or reduce it to an endless play between signifier and signified: it throws the question back to the level of the embodied encounter and hence also prevails over the fearful futility of architectural reification.

Notes

1. The Peirce's scholar Joseph Ransdell criticises both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on the issue of intersubjectivity, arguing that the findings of the first were inapplicable to a community of beings, while the second focused on one's immediate experience of the world. In light of Husserl's numerous attempts at the definition of intersubjectivity through his concepts of the transcendental ego, the *lebenswelt* and the shared horizons, Ransdell's criticism seems debatable. Yet, that fact that Husserl always remained concerned with the issue indicates that there is a level at which phenomenology can be perceived to be self-referential. Joseph Ransdell, 'Is Peirce a phenomenologist?', paper published in a French translation by André DeTienne, 'Peirce est-il un phénoménologue?', *Études phénoménologiques* 9-10 (1989), pp. 51-75.
2. Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces, Utopias and Heterotopias', *Lotus International* 48-49 (1985-86), pp. 22-27.
3. See Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, *Précis de sémiotique générale* (Paris: Points Essais, 2000), pp. 100-01.
4. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 294.
5. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 65: Traditionally, if 'the property owner [chose] to enlarge his property instead of using it up in leading a political [active] life, it was as though he willingly sacrificed his freedom and became voluntarily what the slave was against his own will, a servant of necessity [labour].'
6. Le Robert, *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (Paris: Dictionnaires le Robert, 2000). In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, it is recorded in 1854 to mean 'convert mentally into a thing; to materialise'.
7. Kristeva, *Life Is a Narrative*, trans. by Frank Collins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 7.
8. Kristeva discusses acting between others, *inter-esse*, and describes 'Arendt's conception of human life as a political action revealed in the language of a narration (story and history).' She continues, elsewhere: 'Thus, the possibility of representing birth and death, to conceive of them in time and to explain them to others – that is, *the possibility of narrating* – grounds human life in what is specific to it, in what is non-animal about it, non-physiological'; '[...] the revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence.' Kristeva, *Life Is a Narrative*, pp. 9 and 13.
9. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 182
10. Arendt also emphasises the need to describe these realms better. She writes: 'Since this disclosure of the subject is an integral part of all, even the most 'objective' intercourse, the physical, worldly in-between along with its interest is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another. This second, subjective in-between is not tangible, since there are no tangible objects into which it could solidify; the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products'. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 182-83.
11. Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the age of divided representation, the question of creativity in the shadow of production* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), particularly pp. 175-90.
12. This modern conception of history is very different from the concept born in antiquity from a rather hopeful human desire to rise in the midst of what was immortal. See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 294-309.
13. See my unpublished thesis: 'Charles Robert Cockerell: Architecture, Time, History and Memory', Bartlett School of Graduate Studies, University College London, 2006.
14. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Cleveland; New York: Meridian Books 1963), p. 43.
15. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 7.
16. Benjamin's understandings of history and memory do not only intersect in shock, but also in the notion of *durée* common to both, the *Jetztzeit* or presence of the now. Arendt locates the capacity to think in the same gap, and Nietzsche speaks of our capacity to act in terms of our ability to 'settle on the threshold of the moment forgetful of the whole past'.

17. George Didi-Huberman, *L'Empreinte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997), p. 113.
18. There are levels at which the interpretant could be considered to be non-living. So understood, Peirce's semiotics could do away with immediate experience – which is obviously not what we are seeking here. When we refer to the interpretant in the present text, we are strictly interested in those situations where the mediating instance is human experience. For descriptions of how Peirce's interpretant can be described in anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic ways, see Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 15-16; 68-72.
19. Detienne, 'Is Peirce a phenomenologist?', par. 12.
20. For introductions of Peirce's semiotics see Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuan and Co., 1977) and Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1979). See Charles Sanders Peirce, 'On a New List of Categories', 1868, for a basic text on Peirce's triadic semiotic.
21. There is an implied hierarchy between icon, index and symbol and this hierarchy can be compared to the levels in the development of Peirce's semiotics – from the object itself (icon), to the ground on which we relate to it (index) and the representation that we form (symbol). Within this hierarchy, the symbolic is the level at which the triadic relation is complete, i.e., where we can speak of signs or representations. Eventually, Peirce will come to consider only the symbol as inherent to his system of logic, that is, to his semiotics. This is as far as we will go with Peirce's categories, but it is important to understand this hierarchy because it allows the abstraction of the index from the constructions of semiotics proper. In fact, the index belongs to Peirce's phenomenology and it is within phenomenology that we consider it in the present paper.
22. This has been argued in Helmut Pape, 'Charles S. Peirce on Objects of Thought and Representation', *Nous*, 2-3 (1990), pp. 375-95. Describing more specifically the real or dynamical object as opposed to the immediate object or idea, Pape concludes: 'The dynamical object is the external object of the sign, an intersubjective item that different people at different times locate in their experience as the same as the object that these people have experienced before'. The index thus refers to what can be known 'by collateral observation in the context or circumstances of utterance, or putting forth, of the sign' (p. 382). It is important to recall that this is to be understood in the context of a triadic relation where 'the meaning of the sign is not conveyed until not merely the interpretant but also the object is recognized'.
23. 'Charles S. Peirce on Objects of Thought and Representation', pp. 381-82: 'the object of a sign is an interpretation used to unify contingent identities between different situations of indexical experience. Reference, therefore, is not a property of the sign-system itself but rather of its use'.
24. Klinkerberg describes how the double movement between the world and our experience of it is the double corporeality of the sign considered interactively. Thus meaning arises from experience but also leads to experience. From the following passage: 'Enfin, si le signe est une condition de la communication, on ne peut se contenter de le placer en amont de cette communication. Il faut aussi voir qu'il prolonge son action en aval. Les signes servent à quelque chose: ils permettent l'action. Ainsi, le sens émerge de l'expérience, mais il débouche aussi sur l'expérience. C'est là sa double corporéité'. Klinkerberg, *Précis*, p. 311.
25. See description in James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 127-39.
26. Young, *At Memory's Edge*, p. 130.
27. For a discussion of this project, see Gerhard Mack's article in Gerhard Mack, Valeria Liebermann, *Eberswalde Library, Herzog & de Meuron* (London: AA Publications, 2000), pp. 7-55.
28. Mack and Liebermann, *Eberswalde Library, Herzog & de Meuron*, p. 31.

Biography

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