

THE EVERYDAY AESTHETICS OF ARCHITECTURE

Architecture has always retained a special place in the world of aesthetics. While Plato resists abolishing architecture from his Republic, his sole intervention is to reduce building and architecture to a science and skill of exactitude in *Philebus*.¹ Aristotle goes beyond in declaring that “the true object of architecture is not bricks, mortar, or timber, but the house.”² It is he who introduces the idea of architecture as an aesthetic object beyond all prospect of simply being the objectivist manifestation of some work of science. Architecture, unlike a scientific object, was greater than the sum of its constituents. It was upon this intervention that Vitruvius would have built his *De Architectura* on.³ However, for all of Vitruvius’s maxim of *firmitas, utilitas et venustas* [firmness, utility, and delight], he “leaves the constituent parts of architecture like the list of ingredients of a recipe.”⁴

The importance of the aesthetics of the everyday can only be exercised in light of understanding the orientation of architecture. The very reason that architecture can find root and prosper is that built worlds inhabit a special status that is contingent upon our daily interaction with it. It is simultaneously public and private in orientation, and at its extremity, it is a work of art. However, what it lacks as a public art is the social contract of viewership. The Social Contract in the tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau was contingent upon consent, but architecture is non-consenting in its inherent orientation as an everyday feature.

However, for most aestheticians and theorists of architecture, like Sir Roger Scruton, the aesthetics of the everyday did not factor into considerations of the significance of architecture apart from a cursory recognition of its heavily abstracted importance.⁵ Hegel goes even further in suggesting in all but name that architecture was so deeply spiritual and inherently tied to a religious telos that his description of architecture in the arts could only be adapted to religious architecture — architecture only remained the supreme manifestation of the turgid manner of symbolic art, with little else to spare save for being the pedestal for sculpture.⁶

The pragmatic reality of architecture, however, is far more banal than the world of palazzos and basilicas. To examine the *real* aesthetics of architecture is to pare built worlds down to their origin — the home.

¹ Plato. *Philebus*, translated and edited by J.C.B. Gosling. The Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1975, 56a, p. 57. “Building on the other hand uses a great many measures and tools, and these things, which give it considerable precision, make it more scientific than most branches of knowledge.”

² Aristotle. *On the Parts of Animals*. Translated by William Ogle, Oxford University Press, 1912, *eBooks@Adelaide*, ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/parts/index.html.

³ Pollio, Vitruvius. *Ten Books on Architecture*. Translated by Ingrid D. Rowland, Commentary by Thomas Noble Howe, Cambridge University Press, 2007. Introduction, p. 5. Vitruvius is shown to be aware of the intricacies of Greek philosophy and physiology at the time. For more, see the section entitled ‘Philosophy and Physiology (1.1.17)’ in ‘Commentary: Book 1’, p. 136.

⁴ Winters, Edward. “Architecture.” *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, edited by Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2005, pp. 655–668. p. 656.

⁵ Scruton, Roger. *The Aesthetics of Architecture*. Princeton University Press, 2013, pg 15.

⁶ Perhaps the best example of the Hegelian notion of architecture as espoused in the following source is that of a cathedral like St. Peter’s, the façade of which would simply be a symbolic manifestation of the spirit and serves as the base for the row of sculptures atop the façade. Hegel, G.W.F. “Introduction.” *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, translated by T.M. Knox. 1975, p. 158.

The house that haunts the imagination and awakens in a primordial manner⁷ is the house that becomes a home that transcends the Corbusieresque “machine for living in.”⁸ It is only suitable that the aesthetic experience of built spaces be expanded in scope to include the plurality of experiences within such spaces. Christopher Alexander terms this a search for the “real nature of human feeling”⁹ — a search that leads to an architectural praxis cognisant of that which “belongs to the ninety percent of our feeling, where our feelings are all the same.”¹⁰ That is the same view that architectural aesthetics must espouse.¹¹

That architecture functioned on a paradigm of aesthetic and functional duality is best espoused by Kant. He argues for the recognition of the “*sensible truth*” in the plastic arts (as opposed to “*sensible illusion*” in painting) creates an architectural aesthetic contingent upon the functional purposiveness of the object.¹² The beauty within architecture, for Kant, is one that is dependent upon the fulfilment of the function; however, function and aesthetic value cannot be differentiated insofar as the object itself has properties of both. Even the progenitor of functionalism as an aesthetic category within architecture, Louis Sullivan, who famously proclaimed the maxim of “form follows function”, did not engage with austere functionalism, where decoration was taboo — he pushed for functionalism to be recognised as an essential value in architectural praxes, and for that to be articulated within a framework of formal devices.

THE HOME & THE WORLD¹³

The totalising orientation of architecture is best seen through the housing market. The illusion of choice within the market exists insofar as the resident¹⁴ is able to choose a residence from a limited set of options that exist within normative standards prescribed for the archetypal region, leading to the creation of houses that differ trivially.¹⁵

⁷ “It is necessary that *associated bodies* be awakened along with my body, “others,” who are not my congeners, as the zoologist says, but others who haunt me and whom I haunt; “others” along with whom I haunt a single, present, and actual Being as no animal has ever haunted the others of his own species, territory, or habitat.” Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. “Eye and Mind.” *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, edited by Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, Northwestern University Press, 2007, pp. 351–378. p. 352.

⁸ Corbusier, Le. *Toward an Architecture*, translated by John Goodman. Getty Research Institute, 2007, pg 87–88.

⁹ Alexander, Christopher. *The Nature of Order: The Phenomenon of Life*, The Center for Environmental Structure, 2002, pg 4.

¹⁰ Alexander, Christopher. *The Nature of Order: The Phenomenon of Life*, The Center for Environmental Structure, 2002, pg 5.

¹¹ The sentiment being expressed here is not for the abrogation of the study of the architectural historical canon, which maps onto the grand, the large, and the exceptional altogether, but for consideration of what ‘normal’ spaces look like.

¹² “*Architecture* is the art of exhibiting concepts of things that are possible *only through art*, things whose form does not have nature as its determining basis but instead has a chosen purpose, and of doing so in order to carry out that aim and yet also with aesthetic purposiveness. In architecture the main concern is what *use* is to be made of the artistic object, and this use is a condition to which the aesthetic ideas are confined. ... [one] may even add to this all household furnishings (such as the work of the cabinet maker and other such things that are meant to be used). For what is essential in a *work of architecture* is the product’s adequacy for a certain use.” I also like the Kantian definition of an architecture because it is all-encompassing to some extent and reflects this Baroque intervention of the Unification of the Visual Arts which enables us to look at both the interior and exterior as built architectural spaces in our pursuit of its aesthetic qualities and judgements. Kant, Immanuel. “§51: On the Division of the Fine Arts.” *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar Hackett, 1987. pg 191–2.

¹³ The title of this section is borrowed from the English title of Rabindranath Tagore’s 1916 novel, *Ghare Bhaire*.

¹⁴ I use the word resident to erase the difference between an owner and a leasee.

¹⁵ I use house in this section to denote a physical, built structure, that can only be transformed into a home through conscious aesthetic intervention.



Figure 1: Levittown, Long Island, New York.

Take, for example, this photograph from Levittown, Long Island, New York.¹⁶ Starting in 1947, William Levitt built entire neighbourhoods with little or no variance in their forms.¹⁷ It is here that the totalising nature of the aesthetic intervention of the architect can be seen, for it is the architect who designs a standard house that is mechanically reproduced with insignificant change for form or orientation.

The effects of mass production of such housing can also be seen in the status of these houses as aesthetic objects. As Benjamin argues, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.”¹⁸ This does not mean that the house is not an aesthetic object — it has simply lost its aura as one. This important existentialist view championed by Cedric Price — architecture is what architects do — is essential because the converse means going down the slippery slope of rendering only some architectural works aesthetic objects, creating a multiclass structure that leaves the plurality of built

¹⁶ Mathosian, Mark. “Levittown, L.I. N.Y.” *Flickr*, Yahoo!, 2 June 2019, www.flickr.com/photos/markgregory/albums/72157630764289084/with/8087087647/.

¹⁷ “...the name Levittown became synonymous with suburban tract housing, in which entire neighborhoods were built to either a single plan or a mere handful of designs.” OpenStax, *The American Dream*. OpenStax CNX. Oct 15, 2018 <http://cnx.org/contents/cd49de70-c479-461b-8bfd-d5c70f5aad4e@7>.

¹⁸ Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Translated by Harry Zohn, *Marxists Internet Archive*, Marxists Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm. §II, ¶4.

worlds outside the ambit of aesthetic theorisation and concern. In itself, the phrase ‘work of architecture’ is “a curious abstraction, ... a highly gerrymandered class.”¹⁹ To conflate the diminished ‘aura’ of mass-produced architecture as an aesthetic object with the nonexistence of aesthetic principles is to write the house out of any consideration as both an aesthetic object and a site of aesthetic intervention. Furthermore, the diminished ‘aura’ of the exterior through the built manifestation of the architect as a visible aesthetic object in relation to the street — the façade — is still integral to the aesthetic intervention of architecture. A study done by the neuroscientist Collin Ellard for BMW CityLab compiled data from New York, Berlin, and Bombay to show that across continents, the façade remained both the most immediate site of aesthetic experience and most determinant of the aesthetic judgement following the initial encounter, a trend seen in both visitors and residents alike.²⁰

This aesthetic intervention, however, must be examined in light of making the house a home. A home has two aesthetic orientations — one that is a function of the interior and one that is a function of the exterior. For the house to exist as a home, these two orientations must converge so that the home becomes indexical and foundational to the community. If this convergence does not exist, the house remains a retreat instead of a space for living due to the abrogation of the role of the individual as the definitional block for community.²¹ The public orientation of architecture is predetermined and presupposed for the resident to a great degree, and the few personal choices that can be made as aesthetic interventions into the unitary fabric of the neighbourhood’s aesthetic is bound significantly between that which is permissible by the neighbourhood residential governing body and by uncodified but exceedingly important societal norms. That dictates the limit of the exterior as a site of aesthetic intervention (but not its importance as a place for aesthetic judgement), though this notion of the house existing solely as itself needs to be expanded to accommodate advances in aesthetic approaches toward both urban planning and architecture — the aesthetic interventions of the street as both part of the home (but not the house in the formalist sense) would mean that built structures can have a twofold property — it can be the site of an aesthetic intervention *by* the community, but it can also be the site of projecting the aesthetic intervention of the self *onto* the community.

This relegates the majority of the aesthetic intervention to the interior orientation of architecture. Mass-produced architecture is produced for the resident but not imposed upon it because it gives the resident significant leeway to intervene and take on the role of the architect.²² That the resident takes on the architect role is best seen through Kant’s expansion of works of architecture to include furniture and

¹⁹ Carlson, Allen. “Reconsidering the Aesthetics of Architecture.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1986, pp. 21–27. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3332592, p. 22.

²⁰ Ellard, Collin, and Charles Montgomery. “Testing, Testing: A Psychological Study on City Spaces and How They Affect Our Bodies and Minds.” *BMW Guggenheim Lab*, BMW, 2013, www.bmwguggenheimlab.org/testing-testing-mumbai.

²¹ The idea of the city for the people was defined by Jane Jacobs in opposition to Robert Moses’ “homogenising clarity” which articulated a city as defined solely by buildings. [I use this sentence further on in the essay in reference to my test case]. Jane Jacobs in Tyrnauer, Matt, director. *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City*. Sundance Selects, 2016.

²² The resident is the architect of the *home*. The architect here remains that of the *house*.

other things that reside within built spaces, and not just the spaces in an in themselves.²³ This is where the Pareto principle can be modified and applied — in the interior of the standard mass-produced house, 20% of the work is done by the architect, causing and leaving 80% of the interventions in the interior to the resident. The interior forms the site of personalisation as a conscious intervention in the historiographic lexis of mass-produced housing as well. The recognition of the imposed nature of a significant portion of the architecture of the everyday, however, does not tend to the fascist aesthetic precisely because of the agency that the public and the individual have in determining the orientation of these built spaces, largely through the interior function. The existence and exercise of aesthetic intervention is the determinant factor in ensuring that while people are subject to architecture, they are also subjects of it insofar as they maintain the ability to affect change upon it. This is contrast to the fascist aesthetic, which is best surmised as the people being solely subject *to* architecture and in no way being subjects *of* it.

A TEST CASE: THE PRUITT-IGOE HOUSING PROJECT, ST. LOUIS



Figure 2: The Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project, courtesy of *ArchDaily*.

The Pruitt-Igoe housing complex was completed in 1954 in St. Louis, Missouri, under the aegis of the architect Minoru Yamasaki.²⁴ It was laid out as an elevator high-rise intended to fill a significant gap in low-income housing needs for St. Louis through the redevelopment of the DeSotto-Carr neighbourhood. It was a manifestation of the Corbusieresque “machine for living in” that pushed

²³ Kant, Immanuel. “§51: On the Division of the Fine Arts.” *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar Hackett, 1987. pg 191–2.

²⁴ Fiederer, Luke. “AD Classics: Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project / Minoru Yamasaki.” *ArchDaily*, ArchDaily, 15 May 2017, www.archdaily.com/870685/ad-classics-pruitt-igoe-housing-project-minoru-yamasaki-st-louis-usa-modernism.

housing to its extremity.²⁵ The ethos of the project was guided by the “reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms.”²⁶ This reductivist tendency removed the key differentiator between the fascist and the imposing orientation of architecture for it reduced the agency to a simple act of machinised existence. It engaged in the denial of the aestheticization of the house to the home by removing the continuum upon which aesthetic intervention was based — one where the inside and the outside were so sharply delineated and posited in oppositional terms that the very paradigm of the home ceased to exist.

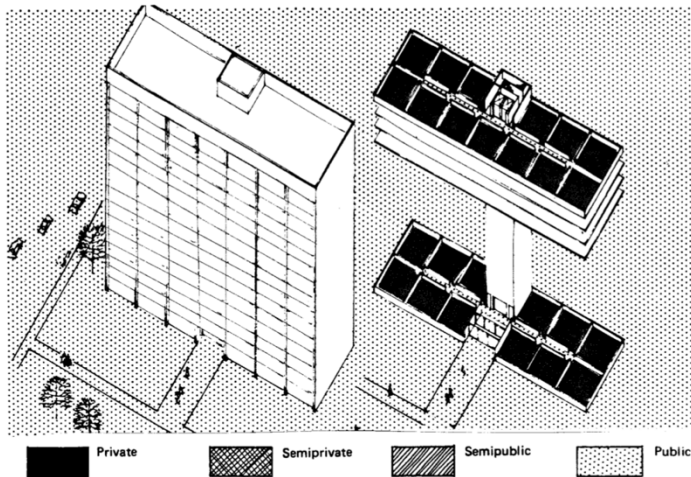


Figure 3: The nature of space at Pruitt-Igoe, courtesy of Oscar Newman.

In *Creating Defensible Spaces*, architect Oscar Newman gives a visualisation of the property of the nature of space within Pruitt-Igoe.²⁷ The project in essence killed the street upon which the architectural aesthetics of the everyday was so contingent upon that there was no ownership or communal action on public spaces. Alleyways and corridors became sites of crime precisely because the project reduced assumed that inherent personalisation and aestheticization could exist without a space for the self. The house became the world, instead of being the building block of the

world, and the floors became spaces for mandated interaction between residents of the complex that had little else in common save for a need for ingress and egress.

The demolition of the complex in 1972 is representative of the failure of Robert Moses’ “homogenising clarity” which articulated a city as defined solely by buildings that was at the crux of the urban revival movement.²⁸ Yamasaki left the complex in a netherworld where the resident was treated in a contemptuous manner, where he intended to build a better set of built spaces for those who needed it, but in his own version of modernist planning fervour, condemned a pliable continuum upon which the house was aestheticized into the home to a dangerous dichotomy insistent upon the binary designation of space as either public or private.

²⁵ Corbusier, Le. *Toward an Architecture*, translated by John Goodman. Getty Research Institute, 2007, pp. 87–88.

²⁶ Simmel, Georg. *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. 1903.

²⁷ ‘Figure I-II’ from Newman, Oscar. *Creating Defensible Space*. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1996, p. 17.

²⁸ Tyrnauer, Matt, director. *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City*. Sundance Selects, 2016.



Figure 4: An interior hallway at Pruitt-Igoe, courtesy of Pruitt Igo Now.

The *béton brut*²⁹ of Pruitt-Igoe tended to brutalism in not just its formal stylistic attribution but also to the manner with which it approached the aesthetic quality of architecture itself. The brutality of the approach with which those houses handled the aesthetic considerations of the interior and exterior was concentrated upon a totalising imposition of rawness and sterility. While Alexander remarked that architecture “belongs to the ninety percent of our feeling, where our feelings are all the same”, he did not impose the structuralist similarity on the 10% that made man different for his aesthetic principles recognised man as a creature of difference as well.³⁰ It is this 10% that pushed the residents of Pruitt-Igoe to take over the architect function, and this manifested itself in the aesthetic interventions seen above. It is clear that the violence of the Yamasaki-imposed homogeneity is in conversation with the violence of the aesthetic interventions that the residents made to attempt to make their houses into a home: the graffiti and the vandalism are only reactionary attempts to reclaim a sense of the self in face of an imposition that affected the very fabric of their being. That architecture can ‘haunt’³¹ the primordial state of being can also manifest itself in a negative manner — crime prospered in complex at an unnatural rate. Newman describes the state of the buildings as:

“Because all the grounds were common and disassociated from the units, residents could not identify with them. The areas proved unsafe. The river of trees soon became a sewer of glass and garbage. The mail-boxes on the ground

²⁹ The aesthetics and ethics of *béton brut* and its applications began with public housing projects. It literally translates into ‘raw concrete’ and was first pushed by the architect Le Corbusier in his own public housing project, the Unité d’habitation in Marseilles, France.

³⁰ Alexander, Christopher. *The Nature of Order: The Phenomenon of Life*, The Center for Environmental Structure, 2002, pg 5.

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. “Eye and Mind.” *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, edited by Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, Northwestern University Press, 2007, pp. 351–378. p. 352.

floor were vandalized. The corridors, lobbies, elevators, and stairs were dangerous places to walk. They became covered with graffiti and littered with garbage and human waste.”³²

The Pruitt-Igoe complex was demolished in 1972. Only 600 families resided in the 10,000 units by then.³³

CONCLUSION

Winston Churchill famously remarked in the aftermath of the destruction of the chamber of the House of Commons in 1943 in a German bombing raid that “we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.”³⁴ The recognition of the everyday aesthetics of architecture and how it functions is vital to how we should cognise spatiality in relation to community, and the effects of deaestheticization manifest themselves in haunting terms. While aesthetic intervention is essential to the transformation of the house into a home, when it is denied, it transforms the house into a prison. The marginalisation of aesthetic needs of communities due to the “reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms” has pushed the ethical envelope on what responsibilities architects themselves have to their residents.³⁵ The aesthetics of architecture influence the very ethics of existence, as we see in the case of Pruitt-Igoe, which is no individual case of wanton imposition — it crosses the fine line between recognising the imposition of architecture in general and the imposition of the fascist aesthetic. The prescient dangers that lurk in the misrecognition of aesthetic properties of architecture produce a slippery slope into a world and existence devoid of any relationality.



³² Newman, Oscar. *Creating Defensible Space*. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1996, p. 10.

³³ Fiederer, Luke. “AD Classics: Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project / Minoru Yamasaki.” *ArchDaily*, ArchDaily, 15 May 2017, www.archdaily.com/870685/ad-classics-pruitt-igoe-housing-project-minoru-yamasaki-st-louis-usa-modernism.

³⁴ “Churchill and the Commons Chamber.” *UK Parliament*, Her Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom, www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/architecture/palacestructure/churchill/.

³⁵ Simmel, Georg. *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. 1903.

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