

# Aesthetic Investigations

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Special Issue

*Special Issue – Architecture beyond the building*

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## Architecture beyond the building

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**Abstract:** Introduction to the Special Issue: Architecture beyond the building

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This issue focuses on the philosophy of architecture. What does that mean? Obviously, it depends on what is meant by ‘philosophy’ and by ‘architecture’. Both terms have to be understood broadly to make the topic interesting and important, and both are taken broadly by the essays included here. If philosophy is understood as above all the theory of meaning and reference, then philosophy of architecture might end up being confined to Nelson Goodman’s question, ‘how do buildings mean?’ or, ‘what kind of symbol-system is architecture?’ If architecture is understood, as John Ruskin suggested, not as the whole art of building but as the art of decorating buildings, then philosophy of architecture might end up as a narrow theory of the beauty or beautification of buildings, ‘aesthetics’ in the popular sense rather than in the sense of a philosophical discipline. But to limit philosophy to a theory of meaning, therefore to limit aesthetics to a theory of meaning in art, but also to limit aesthetics to a theory of beauty, would be an excessively narrow approach to philosophy. And to limit the role of architecture to the beautification of

buildings would be a very narrow conception of architecture. To get anything like its full potential out of the philosophy of architecture we need a broader conception of philosophy and a broader conception of architecture and its aims.

Without prejudice for or against any of its recent methodologies, whether analytic, phenomenological, or otherwise, philosophy can be understood as reflection at the deepest or most abstract level – whichever metaphor might be preferred – on the fundamental concepts and principles of any and all of the areas of human thought, practice, and experience, from the nature of speech and communication in general, to formal reasoning as in mathematics and logic, empirical investigation in natural scientific and historical inquiry, systems of moral obligations and virtues, political organisation including judicial and penal systems, the creation, experience, and comprehension of art, and more, such as the nature of religious belief and practice for those to whom that is important.

Architecture, too, can and should be broadly understood, to include the design and construction of a wide range of the built environment, including not just particular building-types such as single- and multifamily dwellings, office buildings, shopping malls, and distribution facilities, public facilities from courthouses to stadiums, but also many works of civil engineering such as highways and bridges, landscape architecture, city planning, and more – in real life, as we know, most works of architecture are the products of collaboration among many disciplines, not only exterior and interior designers but also structural engineers, lighting and HVAC engineers, landscape architects, zoning and environmental experts, and more; although the licensed architect often gets all the glory, in the case of almost all large-scale building projects today, he or she ought to be thought of as more like the lead author on a scientific paper that involved the efforts of many specialists. The word ‘architect’, although grammatically singular, should now typically be taken as the name for a group, like ‘Bourbaki’ was really the name for a group of mathematicians. Further, unlike other disciplines that often leave their history only in memory, perhaps aided by written records, architecture produces physical objects that typically endure for a long time, intact or in many different stages of decline, and even the remains of earlier works in all of these categories, thus ancient and recent ruins, can also count as architecture and as subject to the reflections of philosophy of architecture.

If both philosophy and architecture are so broadly understood, the philosophy of architecture will necessarily become a broad inquiry into the nature of the goals of architecture, both the practical and aesthetic dimensions of the experience of architecture, and the interaction between these or the constraints that one of these might exercise upon another. The philosophy of architecture can and should be the effort to understand in all the ways available to us architecture in all its complexity – although again at a high level of

abstraction, so that it is not identical with either the history of architecture or architectural theory, understood as the discourse or rhetoric advocating a particular style or a way of building, even though it might draw upon these.

The essays included in this special issue all both depend upon and illustrate this broad approach to the philosophy of architecture. My own essay focuses on the treatment of architecture by the now relatively neglected mid-twentieth century American philosopher Susanne Langer, who cast her philosophy as a whole as a theory of symbols, yet she understood symbolism more broadly than Nelson Goodman did, and her interest was by no means restricted to anything like a semantics of architecture. Rather, her concepts of ‘virtual space’ and ‘ethnic domains’ led her to explore the ways in which aesthetic, functional and cultural considerations interact in the case of architecture. Elizabeth Scarbrough’s essay ‘Contemporary Urban Ruins’ discusses a variety of recent theories of the aesthetics of ruins, and brings them to bear in a case study of both aesthetic and political issues concerning a derelict sports facility in Miami. Saul Fisher’s paper explores the interplay between architecture and politics. Fisher argues against excessively ideological claims that all architecture is political, since much architecture is public, often subject to political considerations, it is hardly all political in intent or meaning. By contrast, Rossen Ventzislavov’s paper is focused more on purely aesthetic issues, yet he gains insight about architecture in a surprising comparison with performance art. Likewise focused on the aesthetic status of architecture, Jörg Gleiter’s contribution proposes the idea of a “surplus of form” as a way of conceptualising the aesthetic aspect of architecture. All of these papers illustrate the merits of an open-minded, pluralistic approach to the values at play in architecture.

Finally, two pieces on our theme are included in the ‘Arts and Artists’ section of this issue. Sue Spaid’s piece on the ‘Bilbao effect’ of Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum Bilbao explores the impact of architecture on tourism, but then, through a common comparison of Gehry’s buildings in Bilbao and elsewhere to bouquets or corsages of flowers, turns to a discussion of the environmental impact of the cut-flower industry and flower shows. She concludes with a discussion of the model for environmentally-conscious development planning afford by Floriade Expo 2022 in Almere, NL. Spaid’s piece shows how useful broad conceptions of both architecture and philosophy can be. The other piece in ‘Arts and Artists’ is an interview that I conducted with my cousin Laure van Heijenoort, who after a childhood started in Greenwich Village, New York, made her career as a labour and health care lawyer in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Including this interview might seem like sheer nepotism, but Laure had the extraordinary experience in between New York and New Mexico of living and going to school in buildings by two great twentieth-century architects, Mies van der Rohe and Eliel Saarinen. Her thoughtful reminiscences of those years in her life provide a sample of the

kind of experiential data that broad-minded philosophers of architecture can use to their advantage.

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