

PART ONE

The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses, Fourth Edition. Juhani Pallasmaa.
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‘The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress’.
*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*¹

‘The dancer has his ear in his toes’.
*Friedrich Nietzsche*²

‘If the body had been easier to understand, nobody would have thought that we had a mind’.
*Richard Rorty*³

‘The taste of the apple [. . .] lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself; in a similar way [. . .] poetry lies in the meeting of poem and reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on the pages of a book. What is essential is the aesthetic act, the thrill, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading’.
*Jorge Luis Borges*⁴

‘How would the painter or poet express anything other than his encounter with the world?’
*Maurice Merleau-Ponty*⁵

Vision and Knowledge

In Western culture, sight has historically been regarded as the most important and noble of the senses, and thinking and understanding are thought of in terms of seeing. Already in classical Greek thought, certainty was based on vision and visibility. 'The eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears', wrote Heraclitus in one of his fragments.⁶ Plato regarded vision as humanity's greatest gift,⁷ and he insisted that ethical universals must be accessible to 'the mind's eye'.⁸ Aristotle, likewise, considered sight as the most noble of the senses 'because it approximates the intellect most closely by virtue of the relative immateriality of its knowing'.⁹

Since the Greeks, philosophical writings of all times have abounded with ocular metaphors to the point that knowledge has become analogous with clear vision, and light is regarded as the metaphor for truth. Aquinas even applies the notion of sight to other sensory realms as well as to intellectual cognition.

The impact of the sense of vision on philosophy is well summed up by Peter Sloterdijk: 'The eyes are the organic prototype of philosophy. Their enigma is that they not only can see but are also able to see themselves seeing. This gives them a prominence among the body's cognitive organs. A good part of philosophical thinking is actually only eye reflex, eye dialectic, seeing-oneseelf-see'.¹⁰ During the Renaissance, the five senses were understood to form a hierarchical system from the highest sense of vision down to touch; this had already been the hierarchy of the senses in Aristotle's thinking. The Renaissance system of the senses was related to the image of the cosmic body; vision was correlated to fire and light, hearing to air, smell to vapour, taste to water and touch to earth.¹¹

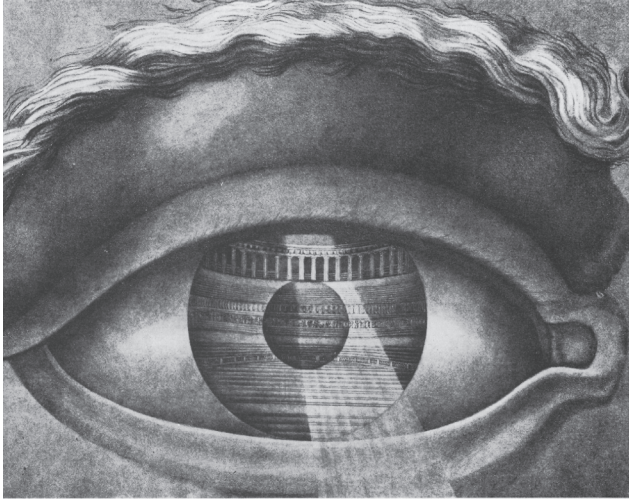
The invention of perspectival representation by architect Filippo Brunelleschi made the eye the centre point of the perceptual world as well as of the concept of the self. Perspectival representation itself turned into a symbolic form, one which not only describes but also conditions perception.

There is no doubt that our technological culture has ordered and separated the senses even more distinctly. Vision and hearing are now the privileged sociable senses, whereas the other three are considered as archaic sensory remnants with a merely private function, and they are usually suppressed by the code of culture. Only sensations such as the olfactory enjoyment of a meal, fragrance of flowers and responses to temperature are allowed to draw collective awareness in our ocularcentric and obsessively hygienic code of culture.

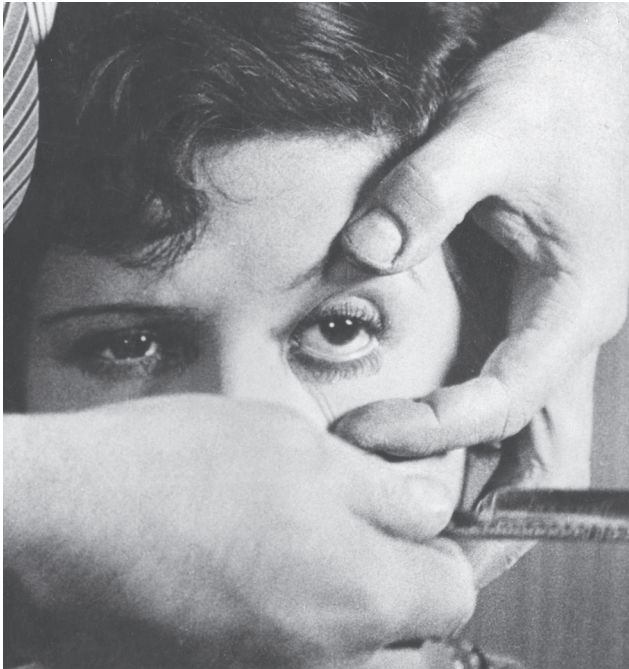
The dominance of vision over the other senses – and the consequent bias in cognition – has been observed by many philosophers. A collection of philosophical essays entitled *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, edited by David Michael Lewin, argues that ‘beginning with the ancient Greeks, Western culture has been dominated by an ocularcentric paradigm, a vision-generated, vision-centred interpretation of knowledge, truth, and reality’.¹² This thought-provoking book analyses ‘historical connections between vision and knowledge, vision and ontology, vision and power, vision and ethics’.¹³

As the ocularcentric paradigm of our relation to the world and of our concept of knowledge – the epistemological privileging of vision – has been revealed by philosophers, it is also important to survey critically the role of vision in relation to the other senses in our understanding and practice of the art of architecture. Architecture, as with all art, is fundamentally confronted with questions of human existence in space and time; it expresses and relates man’s being in the world. Architecture is deeply engaged in the metaphysical questions of the self and the world, interiority and exteriority, time and duration and life and death. ‘Aesthetic and cultural practices are peculiarly susceptible to the changing experience of space and time precisely because they entail the construction of spatial representations and artefacts out of the flow of human experience’, writes David Harvey.¹⁴ Architecture is our primary instrument for relating us with space and time and giving these dimensions a human measure and meaning. It domesticates limitless and shapeless space and endless time to be experienced, inhabited and understood by humankind. Architecture turns nameless and meaningless physical space into experiential and habitable places, the human domicile. We do not live in abstract space; we exist in nameable places and related situations. We become part of the place, and it becomes part of us, while space is doomed to remain as a conceptual abstraction. As a consequence of this interdependence of place, space and time, the dialectics of external and internal space, physical and spiritual, material and mental and unconscious and conscious priorities concerning the senses as well as their relative roles and interactions, have an essential impact on the nature of the arts and architecture. Architecture is fundamentally an art of relatedness.

David Michael Levin motivates the philosophical critique of the dominance of the eye with the following words: ‘I think it is appropriate to challenge the hegemony of vision – the ocularcentrism of our culture. And I think we need to examine very critically the character of vision that predominates today in our world.’



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OCULARCENTRISM AND THE VIOLATION OF THE EYE

1 Architecture has been regarded as an art form of the eye.

Eye Reflecting the Interior of the Theatre of Besançon (detail), engraving after Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. The theatre was built from 1775 to 1784.

2 Vision is regarded as the most noble of the senses, and the loss of eyesight as the ultimate physical loss.

Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, *Un Chien Andalou* (*Andalusian Dog*), 1929. The shocking scene in which the heroine's eye is sliced with a razor blade.

We urgently need a diagnosis of the psychosocial pathologies of everyday seeing – and a critical understanding of ourselves, as visionary beings'.¹⁵ It is also essential to understand how we have been and increasingly are extending our senses through technological devices and, on the other hand, how these technological extensions alter our natural senses developed by processes of timeless evolution. Our technological inventions also change our ways of thinking, understanding and feeling, and these changes even have ethical consequences.

Levin points out the autonomy drive and aggressiveness of vision, and 'the specters of patriarchal rule' that haunt our ocularcentric culture:

The will to power is very strong in vision. There is a very strong tendency in vision to grasp and fixate, to reify and totalise: a tendency to dominate, secure, and control, which eventually, because it was so extensively promoted, assumed a certain uncontested hegemony over our culture and its philosophical discourse, establishing, in keeping with the instrumental rationality of our culture and the technological character of our society, an ocularcentric metaphysics of presence.¹⁶

I believe that many aspects of the pathology of everyday architecture today can likewise be understood through an analysis of the epistemology of the senses and a critique of the ocular bias of our culture at large, and of architecture in particular. The inhumanity of contemporary architecture and cities can be understood as the consequence of the neglect of the body and the

senses and an imbalance in our sensory and value system. The growing experiences of alienation, detachment and solitude in the technological world today, for instance, may be related to a certain obsessive orientation in today's technologies. It is thought-provoking that this sense of estrangement and detachment is often evoked most clearly by the technologically most advanced settings, such as hospitals and airports. The dominance of the eye and the suppression of the other senses tend to push us into detachment, isolation and outsidership. The art of the eye has certainly produced imposing, thought-provoking and poetic structures and images, but it has not facilitated human rootedness in the world. The fact that the Modernist idiom has not generally been able to penetrate the surface of popular taste and values seems to be due to its one-sided intellectual and visual emphasis; Modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless.

Critics of Ocularcentrism

The ocularcentric tradition and the consequent spectator theory of knowledge in Western thinking already had their critics among philosophers before today's concerns. René Descartes, for instance, regarded vision as the most universal and noble of the senses, and his objectifying philosophy is consequently grounded in the privileging of vision. However, he also equated vision with touch, a sense which he considered to be 'more certain and less vulnerable to error than vision'.¹⁷

Friedrich Nietzsche attempted to subvert the authority of ocular thinking in seeming contradiction with the general line of his thought. He criticised the 'eye outside of time and history'¹⁸ presumed by many philosophers. He even accused philosophers of a 'treacherous and blind hostility towards the senses'.¹⁹ Max Scheler bluntly calls this attitude the 'hatred of the body'.²⁰

The forcefully critical 'anti-ocularcentric' view of Western ocularcentric perception and thinking, which developed in the 20th-century French intellectual tradition, is thoroughly surveyed by Martin Jay in his book *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*.²¹ The writer traces the development of the modern vision-centred culture through such diverse fields as the invention of the printing press, artificial illumination, photography, visual poetry and the new experience of time. On the other hand, he analyses the anti-ocular positions of many of the seminal French writers, such as Henri Bergson, Georges Bataille, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Guy Debord, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-François Lyotard.

Sartre was outspokenly hostile to the sense of vision to the point of ophthalmophobia; his oeuvre has been estimated to contain 7000 references to 'the look'.²² He was concerned with 'the objectifying look of the other, and the "medusa glance" [which] "petrifies" everything that it comes in contact with'.²³ In his view, space has taken over time in human consciousness as a consequence of ophthalmocentrism.²⁴ This change is also clear in the development of Western literature, which was dominated by the dimension of time, but became engaged primarily in issues of space around the beginning of the 20th century. This reversal of the relative significance accorded to the notions of space and time has important repercussions on our understanding of physical and historical processes. The prevailing concepts of space and time and their interrelations form an essential paradigm for architecture, as Sigfried Giedion established in his seminal ideological history of modern architecture, *Space, Time and Architecture*.²⁵ Giedion quotes the mathematician Hermann Minkowsky's credo: 'Henceforth, space alone or time alone is doomed to fade into a mere shadow: only a kind of union of both will preserve their existence'.²⁶ This view surely applies in physics, but not in the experiential art of architecture, which is grounded in our sensory, mental and experiential realities. Simply, architecture is not a scientific practise, it is an art of human existential mediation, which includes numerous aspects of science.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty launched a ceaseless critique of the 'Cartesian perspectivalist scopic regime' and 'its privileging of an ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied subject entirely outside of the world'.²⁷ His entire philosophical work focuses on perception in general, and vision in particular. But instead of the Cartesian eye of the outside spectator, Merleau-Ponty's sense of sight is an embodied vision that is an incarnate part of the 'flesh of the world':²⁸ 'Our body is both an object among objects and that which sees and touches them'.²⁹ The philosopher saw an osmotic relation between the self and the world – they interpenetrate and mutually define each other – and he emphasised the simultaneity and interaction of the senses. 'My perception is [therefore] not a sum of visual, tactile and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once', he writes.³⁰

Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have all argued that the thought and culture of modernity have not only continued the historical privileging of sight but furthered its negative tendencies. Each, in their own separate ways, has regarded the sight-dominance of the modern era as distinctly different from that of earlier times. The hegemony of vision has

been reinforced in our time by a multitude of technological inventions and the endless multiplication and production of images – ‘an unending rainfall of images’, as Italo Calvino calls it.³¹ ‘The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture’, writes Heidegger.³² The philosopher’s speculation has certainly materialised in our age of the fabricated, mass-produced and manipulated image.

The technologically expanded and strengthened eye today penetrates deep into matter and space and enables man to cast a simultaneous look on the opposite sides of the globe. The experiences of space and time have become fused into each other by speed (David Harvey uses the notion of ‘time–space compression’³³), and as a consequence, we are witnessing a distinct reversal of the two dimensions – a temporalisation of space and a spatialisation of time. The only sense that is fast enough to keep pace with the astounding increase of speed in the technological world is sight. But the world of the eye is causing us to live increasingly in a perpetual present, flattened by speed, lack of depth and simultaneity. Visual images have become commodities, as Harvey points out: ‘A rush of images from different spaces almost simultaneously, collapsing the world’s spaces into a series of images on a television screen [. . .] The image of places and spaces become as open to production and ephemeral use as any other [commodity]’.³⁴

The dramatic shattering of the inherited experiential construction of reality in recent decades has undoubtedly resulted in a crisis of identity and representation. We can even identify a certain panicked hysteria of representation in the arts of our time.

The Narcissistic and Nihilistic Eye

The hegemony of sight first brought forth glorious visions, in Heidegger’s view, but it has turned increasingly nihilistic in modern times. Heidegger’s observation of a nihilistic eye is particularly thought-provoking today; many of the architectural projects of the past 20 years, celebrated by the international architectural press, express both narcissism and nihilism.

The hegemonic eye seeks domination over all fields of cultural production, and it seems to weaken our capacity for empathy, compassion and participation with the world. The narcissistic eye views architecture solely as a means of self-expression and as an intellectual–artistic game detached from essential mental and societal connections and meanings, whereas the nihilistic eye deliberately advances sensory and mental detachment and alienation. Instead of reinforcing one’s body-centred and integrated experience of the world, nihilistic architecture disengages and

isolates the body, and instead of attempting to reconstruct cultural order, it makes a reading of collective signification impossible. The world becomes a hedonistic but meaningless visual journey. It is clear that only the distancing and detaching sense of vision is capable of a nihilistic attitude; it is impossible to think of a nihilistic sense of touch, for instance, because of the unavoidable nearness, intimacy, veracity and identification that the sense of touch carries. A sadistic as well as a masochistic eye also exists, and their instruments in the fields of contemporary arts and architecture can also be identified.

The current industrial mass production of visual imagery tends to alienate vision from emotional involvement and identification and turn imagery into a mesmerising flow without focus or participation. Michel de Certeau perceives the expansion of the ocular realm negatively indeed: 'From television to newspapers, from advertising to all sorts of mercantile epiphanies, our society is characterised by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown, and transmuting communication into a visual journey'.³⁵ The cancerous spread of superficial architectural imagery today, devoid of tectonic logic and a sense of materiality and empathy, is clearly part of this process.

Oral Versus Visual Space

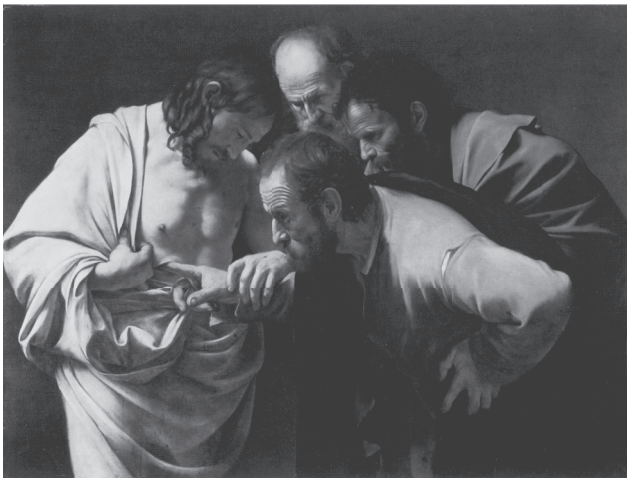
But man has not always been dominated by vision. In fact, a primordial dominance of hearing has only gradually been replaced by that of vision. Anthropological literature describes numerous cultures in which our private senses of smell, taste and touch continue to have collective importance in behaviour and communication. The roles of the senses in the utilisation of collective and personal space in various cultures were the subject matter of Edward T Hall's seminal book *The Hidden Dimension*, which, regrettably, seems to have been forgotten by architects.³⁶ Hall's proxemic studies of personal space offer important insights into instinctual and unconscious aspects of our relation to space and our unconscious use of space in behavioural communication. Hall's insights can serve as the basis for the design of intimate, bio-culturally functional and meaningful spaces.

Walter J Ong analyses the transition from oral to written culture and its impact on human consciousness and the sense of the collective in his book *Orality and Literacy*.³⁷ He points out that 'the shift from oral to written speech was essentially a shift from sound to visual space',³⁸ and that 'print replaced the lingering hearing-dominance in the world of thought and expression with the sight-dominance which had its beginning in writing'.³⁹ In Ong's view, '[t]his is an insistent world of cold, non-human facts'.⁴⁰

Ong analyses the changes that the shift from the primordial oral culture to the culture of the written (and eventually the printed) word has caused in



3



4

THE POWER AND THE WEAKNESS OF THE EYE

3 Particularly in modern times, vision has been strengthened by numerous technological inventions. We are now able to see deep into both the secrets of matter and the immensities of outer space.

The eye of the camera, detail from the film *The Man with a Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov, 1929.

4 Regardless of our prioritisation of the eye, visual observation is often confirmed by our touch.

Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (detail), 1601–2, Sanssouci Picture Gallery, Potsdam.

human consciousness, memory and understanding of space. He argues that as hearing–dominance has yielded to sight–dominance, situational thinking has been replaced by abstract thinking. This fundamental change in the perception and understanding of the world seems irreversible to the writer: ‘Though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever [. . .] a literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what the word is to purely oral people’.⁴¹

In fact, the unchallenged hegemony of the eye may be a fairly recent phenomenon regardless of its origins in Greek thought and optics. In Lucien Febvre’s view: ‘The sixteenth century did not see first: it heard and smelled, it sniffed the air and caught sounds. It was only later that it seriously and actively became engaged in geometry, focusing attention on the world of forms with Kepler (1571–1630) and Desargues of Lyon (1593–1662). It was then that vision was unleashed in the world of science as it was in the world of physical sensations, and the world of beauty as well’.⁴² Robert Mandrou makes a parallel argument: ‘The hierarchy [of the senses] was not the same [as in the twentieth century] because the eye, which rules today, found itself in third place, behind hearing and touch, and far after them. The eye that organises, classifies and orders was not the favoured organ of a time that preferred hearing’.⁴³

The gradually growing hegemony of the eye seems to be parallel with the development of Western ego–consciousness and the gradually increasing separation of the self and the world; vision separates us from the world, whereas the other senses unite us with it.

Artistic expression is engaged with pre-verbal meanings of the world, meanings that are incorporated and lived rather than simply intellectually understood. In my view, poetry has the capacity to bring us momentarily back to the oral and enveloping world. The re-oralised word of poetry brings us back to the centre of an interior world. The poet speaks not only 'on the threshold of being', as Gaston Bachelard notes,⁴⁴ but also on the threshold of language. Equally, the task of art and architecture in general is to reconstruct the experience of an undifferentiated interior world, in which we are not mere spectators, but to which we inseparably belong. In artistic works, existential understanding arises from our very encounter with the world and our being-in-the-world – it is not conceptualised or intellectualised.

Retinal Architecture and the Loss of Plasticity

It is evident that the architecture of traditional cultures is also essentially connected with the tacit wisdom of the body, instead of being visually and conceptually structured and dominated. Construction in traditional cultures is guided by the body – not only the individual body but also the societal and cultural bodies – in the same way that a bird shapes its nest by movements of its body. Indigenous clay and mud architectures in various parts of the world seem to be born of the muscular and haptic senses more than the eye. We can even identify the transition of indigenous construction from the haptic realm into the control of vision as a loss of plasticity and intimacy and of the sense of total fusion characteristic in the settings of indigenous cultures.

The dominance of the sense of vision pointed out in philosophical thought is equally evident in the development of Western architecture. Greek architecture, with its elaborate systems of optical corrections, was already ultimately refined for the pleasure of the eye. However, the privileging of sight does not necessarily imply a rejection of the other senses, as the haptic sensibility, materiality and authoritative weight of Greek architecture prove; the eye invites and stimulates muscular and tactile sensations. The sense of sight may incorporate, and even reinforce, other sense modalities; the unconscious tactile ingredient in vision is particularly important and strongly present in historical architecture, but badly neglected in the architecture of our time.

Western architectural theory since Leon Battista Alberti has been primarily engaged with questions of visual perception, harmony and proportion. Alberti's statement that 'painting is nothing but the intersection of the visual pyramid following a given distance, a fixed centre and a certain lighting'

outlines the perspectival paradigm, which also became the instrument of architectural thinking.⁴⁵ Again, it has to be emphasised that the conscious focusing on the mechanics of vision did not automatically result in the decisive and deliberate rejection of other senses before our own era of the omnipresent manipulating visual image. The eye conquers its hegemonic role in architectural practice, both consciously and unconsciously, only gradually with the emergence of the idea of a bodiless observer. The observer becomes detached from an incarnate and existential relation with the environment through the suppression of the other senses, in particular by means of technological extensions of the eye, and the proliferation of images. As Marx W Wartofsky argues, 'the human vision is itself an artifact, produced by other artifacts, namely pictures'.⁴⁶

The dominant sense of vision figures strongly in the writings of the Modernists. Statements by Le Corbusier – such as: 'I exist in life only if I can see';⁴⁷ 'I am and I remain an impenitent visual – everything is in the visual';⁴⁸ 'One needs to see clearly in order to understand';⁴⁹ 'I urge you to *open your eyes*. Do you open your eyes? Are you trained to open your eyes? Do you know how to open your eyes, do you open them often, always, well?';⁵⁰ 'Man looks at the creation of architecture with his eyes, which are 5 feet 6 inches from the ground'⁵¹ and, 'Architecture is a plastic thing. I mean by "plastic" what is seen and measured by the eyes'⁵² – make the privileging of the eye in early Modernist theory very clear. Further declarations by Walter Gropius – 'He [the designer] has to adapt knowledge of the scientific facts of optics and thus obtain a theoretical ground that will guide the hand giving shape, and create an objective basis'⁵³ and by László Moholy-Nagy: 'The hygiene of the optical, the health of the visible is slowly filtering through'⁵⁴ – confirm the central role of vision in Modernist thought.

Le Corbusier's famous credo, 'Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light',⁵⁵ unquestionably defines an architecture of the eye. Le Corbusier, however, was a great artistic talent with a moulding hand and a tremendous sense of materiality, plasticity and gravity, all of which prevented his architecture from turning into sensory reductivism. Regardless of Le Corbusier's Cartesian ocularcentric exclamations, the hand had a similar fetishistic role in his work as the eye. A vigorous element of tactility is present in Le Corbusier's sketches and paintings, and this haptic sensibility is incorporated into his regard for architecture. However, the reductive bias becomes devastating in his urbanistic projects and the uncritical acceptance of his theorizing.



5



6

THE SUPPRESSION OF VISION – THE FUSION OF VISION AND TACTILITY

5 In heightened emotional states and deep thought, vision is usually repressed.

René Magritte, *The Lovers* (detail), 1928, Museum of Modern Art, New York (gift of Richard S Zeisler).

6 Vision and the tactile sense are fused in actual lived experience.

Herbert Bayer, *Lonely Metropolitan*, 1932 (detail), Buhl Collection.

In Mies van der Rohe's architecture, a frontal perspectival perception predominates, but his unique sense of order, structure, weight, detail and craft decisively enriches the visual paradigm. Moreover, an architectural work is great precisely because of the oppositional and contradictory intentions and allusions it succeeds in fusing together. A tension between conscious intentions and unconscious drives is necessary for a work in order to open up the emotional participation of the observer. 'In every case one must achieve a simultaneous solution of opposites', as Alvar Aalto wrote.⁵⁶ The verbal statements of artists and architects should not usually be taken at their face value, as they often merely represent a conscious surface rationalisation, or an intellectualised defence, that may well be in sharp contradiction with the deeper unconscious intentions giving the work its very life force.

With equal clarity, the visual paradigm is the prevailing condition in city planning, from the idealised town plans of the Renaissance to the Functionalist principles of zoning and planning that reflect the 'hygiene of the optical'. In particular, the contemporary city is increasingly the city of the eye, detached from the body by rapid motorised movement, or through the overall aerial grasp from an aeroplane. The processes of planning have favoured the idealising and disembodied Cartesian eye of control and detachment; city plans are highly idealised and schematised visions seen through *le regard surplombant* (the look from above), as defined by Jean Starobinski,⁵⁷ or through 'the mind's eye' of Plato.

Until recently, architectural theory and criticism have been almost exclusively engaged with the mechanisms of vision and visual expression. The perception and experience of architectural form has most frequently been analysed through the Gestalt laws of visual perception. Educational philosophy has likewise understood architecture primarily in terms of vision, emphasising the construction of three-dimensional visual images in space.

An Architecture of Visual Images

The ocular bias has never been more apparent in the art of architecture than in the past half century, as a type of architecture, aimed at a striking and memorable visual image, has predominated. Instead of an existentially grounded plastic and spatial experience, architecture has adopted the psychological strategy of advertising and instant persuasion; buildings have turned into image products detached from existential depth, veracity and sincerity. Instead of mediating and fusing the multitude of aspects of the environments, the architecture of the modern era has tended to separate and isolate. Instead of aspiring for harmony, contrasts have been sought.

David Harvey relates 'the loss of temporality and the search for instantaneous impact' in contemporary expression to the loss of experiential depth.⁵⁸ Fredric Jameson uses the notion of 'contrived depthlessness' to describe the contemporary cultural condition and 'its fixation with appearances, surfaces and instant impacts that have no sustaining power over time'.⁵⁹ The experiential depth arises from the fusion of conscious, focused vision and unconscious, unfocused peripheral expressions, as well as the dialogue between the work and the world.

Artistic and architectural meaning is always relational and mediating. It expresses our relation with the world rather than itself. Maurice Merleau-Ponty expresses this fundamental relatedness of art succinctly: 'We come to see not the work of art, but the world according to the work'.⁶⁰

As a consequence of the current deluge of images, architecture of our time most often appears as mere retinal art, thus completing an epistemological cycle that began in Greek thought and architecture. But the change goes beyond mere visual dominance; instead of being a situational bodily encounter, architecture has become an art of the printed image fixed by the hurried eye of the camera. In our culture of pictures, the gaze itself flattens into a picture and loses its plasticity. Instead of experiencing our being in the world, we behold it from outside as spectators of images projected on the surface of the retina. David Michael Levin uses the term 'frontal ontology' to describe the prevailing frontal, fixated and focused vision.⁶¹

Susan Sontag has made perceptive remarks on the role of the photographed image in our perception of the world. She writes, for instance, of a 'mentality which looks at the world as a set of potential photographs',⁶² and argues that 'the reality has come to seem more and more what we are shown by camera',⁶³ and that 'the omnipresence of photographs has an incalculable effect on our ethical sensibility. By furnishing this already crowded world with a duplicate one of images, photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is'.⁶⁴

As buildings lose their plasticity and their connection with the language and wisdom of the body, they become isolated in the cool and distant realm of vision. With the loss of tactility, measures and details crafted for the human body – and particularly for the hand – architectural structures become

repulsively flat, sharp-edged, immaterial and unreal. The detachment of construction from the realities of matter and craft further turns architecture into stage sets for the eye, into a scenography devoid of the authenticity of matter and construction. The sense of 'aura', the authority of presence, that Walter Benjamin regards as a necessary quality for an authentic piece of art, has been lost. These products of instrumentalised technology conceal their processes of construction, appearing as ghostlike apparitions. The increasing use of reflective glass in architecture reinforces the dreamlike sense of unreality and alienation. The contradictory, opaque transparency of these buildings reflects the gaze back unaffected and unmoved; we are unable to see or imagine life behind these absent walls. The architectural mirror, that returns our gaze and doubles the world, is an enigmatic and frightening device.

Materiality and Time

The flatness of today's standard construction is strengthened by a weakened sense of materiality. Natural materials – stone, brick and wood – allow our vision to penetrate their surfaces and enable us to become convinced of the veracity of matter. Natural materials express their age, as well as the story of their biological origins and their history of human manufacture and timeless use. All matter exists in the continuum of time; the patina of wear adds the enriching experience of time to the materials of construction. But the machine-made materials of today – scaleless sheets of glass, enamelled metals and synthetic plastics – tend to present their unyielding surfaces to the eye without conveying their material essence or age. Buildings of this technological era usually deliberately aim at ageless perfection, and they do not incorporate the dimension of time, or the unavoidable and mentally significant processes of ageing. This fear of the traces of wear and age is surely related to our unconscious uneasiness with or fear of death. The relation of our culture 'of reason' to death is becoming increasingly problematic in comparison to traditional societies whose relation to the unavoidability of decay and death was less problematic.

Transparency and sensations of weightlessness and flotation are central themes in modern art and architecture. In recent decades, a new architectural imagery has emerged, which employs reflection, gradations of transparency, overlay and juxtaposition to create a sense of spatial thickness, as well as subtle and changing sensations of movement and light. This new sensibility promises an architecture that can turn the relative immateriality and weightlessness of recent technological construction into a positive experience of place and meaning. The weakening of the experience of time in today's environments has devastating mental effects. In the words of the American therapist Gotthard Booth, 'nothing gives man fuller satisfaction than participation in processes that supersede the span of individual life'.⁶⁵ We have a mental need to grasp that we are rooted in the continuity of time, and in the man-made world it is the task of architecture to facilitate this temporal experience. Architecture domesticates and names limitless

space and enables us to inhabit it, but it should likewise domesticate endless time and enable us to inhabit the continuum of time. The earliest human construction was not a construction, but a recognition and marking of a place, and, much later, naming a place; by marking and naming we take possession of things.

The current overemphasis on the intellectual and conceptual dimensions of architecture contributes to the disappearance of its physical, sensual and embodied essences. Contemporary architecture posing as the avant-garde is more often engaged with the architectural discourse itself and mapping the possible marginal territories of the art than with responding to genuine human existential questions. This reductive focus gives rise to a sense of architectural autism, an internalised and autonomous discourse that is not grounded in our shared existential reality and desire.

Beyond architecture, contemporary culture at large drifts towards a distancing, a kind of chilling de-sensualisation and de-eroticisation of the human relation to reality. Painting and sculpture also seem to be losing their sensuality; instead of inviting a sensory intimacy, contemporary works of art frequently signal a distancing rejection of sensuous curiosity and pleasure. These works speak to the intellect and to the conceptualising capacities instead of addressing the senses and the undifferentiated embodied responses. The ceaseless bombardment of unrelated imagery leads to a gradual emptying of images of their emotional content. Images are converted into endless commodities manufactured to postpone boredom; humans in turn are commodified, consuming themselves nonchalantly without having the courage or even the possibility of confronting their very existential reality. We are now made to live in fabricated dream worlds.

I do not wish to express a conservative view of contemporary art in the tone of Hans Sedlmayr's thought-provoking but disturbing book *Art in Crisis*.⁶⁶ I merely suggest that a distinct change has occurred in our sensory and perceptual

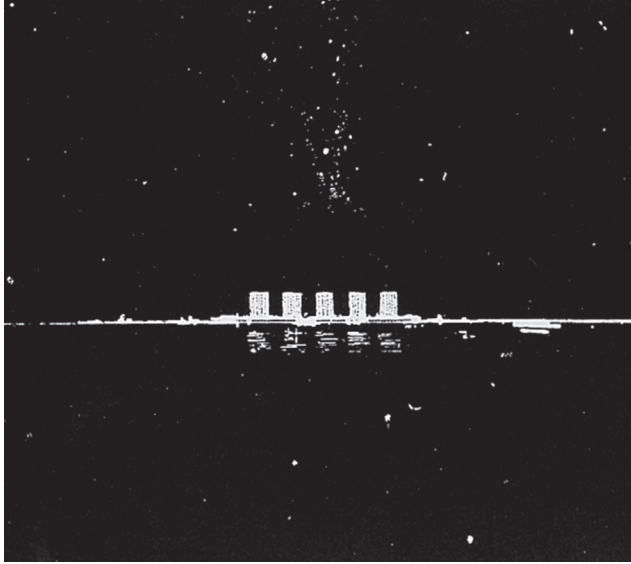
THE CITY OF THE EYE – THE HAPTIC CITY

7 The contemporary city is the city of the eye, one of distance and exteriority.

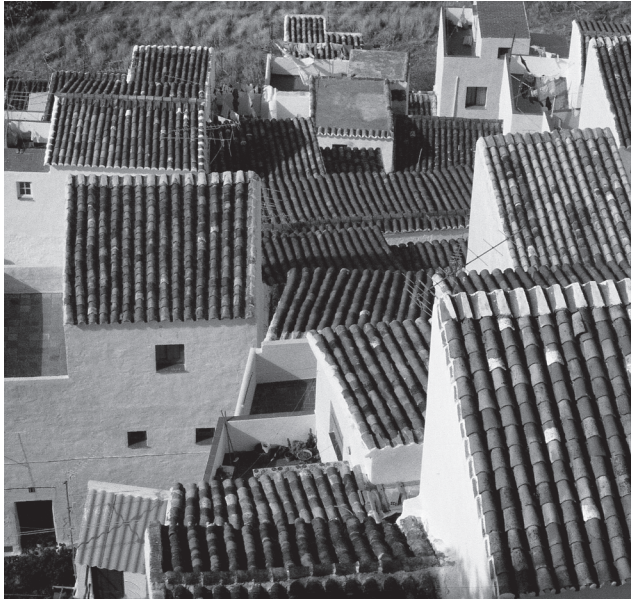
Le Corbusier's proposed skyline for Buenos Aires – a sketch from a lecture given in Buenos Aires in 1929.

8 The haptic city is the city of interiority and nearness.

The hill town of Casares, southern Spain.
Photo: Juhani Pallasmaa



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experience of the world, one that is reflected in art and architecture. If we desire architecture to have an emancipating or healing role, instead of reinforcing the erosion of existential meaning, we must reflect on the multitude of secret ways in which the art of architecture is tied to the cultural and mental reality of its time. We should also be aware of the ways in which the feasibility of architecture is being threatened or marginalised by current political, cultural, economic, cognitive and perceptual developments. Architecture has become an endangered art form.

The Rejection of Alberti's Window

The eye itself has not, of course, remained in the monocular, fixed construction defined by Renaissance theories of perspective. The hegemonic eye has conquered new ground for visual perception and expression. The paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel, for instance, invite a participatory eye to travel across the scenes of multiple events. The 17th-century Dutch paintings of bourgeois life present casual scenes and objects of everyday use which expand beyond the boundaries of the Albertian window. Baroque paintings open up vision with hazy edges, soft focus and multiple perspectives, presenting a distinct, tactile invitation and enticing the body to travel through the illusory space.

An essential line in the evolution of modernity has been the liberation of the eye from the Cartesian perspectival epistemology. The paintings of

ARCHITECTURE AND THE HUMAN FIGURE

9 We tend to interpret a building as an analogue to our body, and vice versa.

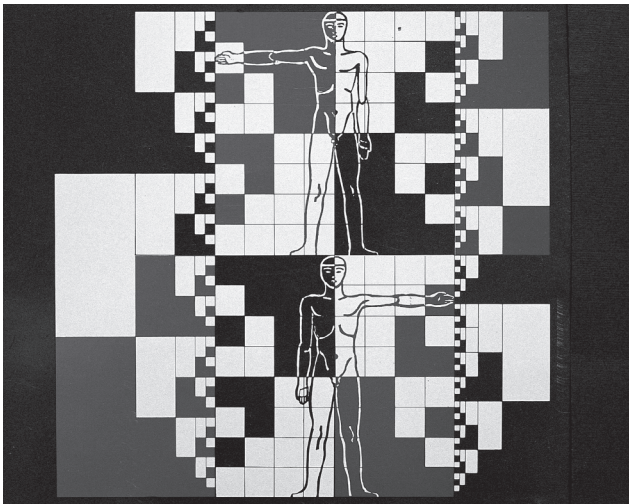
Caryatids of the Erechtheum on the Acropolis of Athens (421–405 BC), British Museum, London.

10 Since the dynasties of ancient Egypt, measures of the human body have been used in architecture. The anthropocentric tradition has been almost entirely forgotten in modern times.

Aulis Blomstedt's study of a proportional system for architecture based on the Pythagorean subdivision of a basic 180 cm measure (presumably from the early 1960s).



9



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Joseph Mallord William Turner continue the elimination of the picture frame and the vantage point begun in the Baroque era; the Impressionists abandon the boundary line, balanced framing and perspectival depth; Paul Cézanne aspires ‘to make visible how the world touches us’;⁶⁷ Cubists abandon the single focal point, reactivate peripheral vision and reinforce haptic experience, whereas the colour field painters reject illusory depth in order to reinforce the presence of the painting itself as an iconic artefact and an autonomous reality. Land artists fuse the reality of the work with the reality of the lived world, and finally, artists such as Richard Serra directly address the body as well as our experiences of horizontality and verticality, materiality, gravity and weight.

The same countercurrent against the hegemony of the perspectival eye has taken place in modern architecture regardless of the culturally privileged position of vision. The kinaesthetic and textural architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, the muscular and tactile buildings of Alvar Aalto and Louis Kahn’s architecture of geometry and gravitas are particularly significant examples of this.

A New Vision and Sensory Balance

Perhaps, freed of the implicit desire of the eye for control and power, it is precisely the unfocused vision of our time that is again capable of opening up new realms of vision and thought. The loss of focus brought about by the stream of images may emancipate the eye from its patriarchal domination and give rise to a participatory and empathetic gaze. The technological extensions of the senses have until now reinforced the primacy of vision, but the new technologies may also help ‘the body [. . .] to dethrone the disinterested gaze of the disincarnated Cartesian spectator’.⁶⁸

Martin Jay remarks: ‘In opposition to the lucid, linear, solid, fixed, planimetric, closed form of the Renaissance [. . .] the baroque was painterly, recessional, soft-focused, multiple, and open’.⁶⁹ He also argues that the ‘baroque visual experience has a strongly tactile or haptic quality, which prevents it from turning into the absolute ocularcentrism of its Cartesian perspectivalist rival’.⁷⁰

The haptic experience seems to be penetrating the ocular regime again through the tactile presence of modern visual imagery. In a music video, for instance, or the layered contemporary urban transparency, we cannot halt the flow of images for analytic observation; instead, we have to appreciate it as an enhanced haptic sensation, rather like a swimmer senses the flow of water against his/her skin.

In his thorough and thought-provoking book *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*, David Michael Levin differentiates between two modes of vision: ‘the assertoric gaze’ and ‘the alethic gaze’.⁷¹ In his view, the assertoric gaze is narrow, dogmatic, intolerant, rigid, fixed,

inflexible, exclusionary and unmoved, whereas the aletheic gaze, associated with the hermeneutic theory of truth, tends to see from a multiplicity of standpoints and perspectives, and is multiple, pluralistic, democratic, contextual, inclusionary, horizontal and caring.⁷² As suggested by Levin, there are signs that a new mode of looking is emerging.

Although the new technologies have strengthened the hegemony of vision, they may also help to re-balance the realms of the senses. In Walter Ong's view, 'with telephone, radio, television and various kinds of sound tape, electronic technology has brought us into the age of "secondary orality"'. This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of communal sense, its concentration on the present moment [. . .].⁷³

'We in the Western world are beginning to discover our neglected senses. This growing awareness represents something of an overdue insurgency against the painful deprivation of sensory experience we have suffered in our technologised world', writes the anthropologist Ashley Montagu.⁷⁴ This new awareness is forcefully projected by numerous architects around the world today who are attempting to re-sensualise architecture through a strengthened sense of materiality and hapticity, texture and weight, density of space and materialised light.