Architecture and Its Unbinding
Aaron Eldridge

Reflecting on the *craft* of architecture, Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddimah* writes:

> This is the first and oldest craft of sedentary civilization. It is the knowledge of how to go about using houses and mansions for cover and shelter. This is because man has the natural disposition to reflect upon the outcome of things. Thus, it is unavoidable that he must reflect upon how to avert the harm arising from heat and cold by using houses which have walls and roofs to intervene between him and those things on all sides. This natural disposition to think, which is the real meaning of humanity, exists among (men) in different degrees. (Khaldun 515)

Ibn Khaldun numbers architecture among the fundamental crafts of human life and as the first craft of civilization. Yet the English translation here somewhat misses the mark by assimilating the Arabic term عمران (*'umran*) into *civilization*. In opposition to the Latin *civicus*, *'umran* is a term for the act of building, deriving from a root عمر (*'amara*), which marks inhabitation or dwelling. In that sense Ibn Khaldun is consonant with Aristotelian formulations of architecture as a *techne* and even intensifies the latent relationship present in the Greek theoreticians between civilization and building. Building as dwelling is the movement of civilization itself, that unique space where the craft can properly exist and consequently be perfected.

Architecture hence occupies a pivotal and somewhat paradoxical position within the *Muqaddimah*. If architecture is dwelling and building as the ontological ground of progressive (i.e., civilizational) crafts, then it comes to occupy, much like the set of all sets in Russell's Paradox, a space of undecidability vis-à-vis its position within the total set of crafts. Neither exception nor example, architecture is both within the set of crafts and its intimate outside. This curious fact, that architecture is in some way beside itself as a craft, implies a privation within architecture, an unavailability for knowledge or purposive thought. This unavailability is especially present in the figure of the ruin, which catalyzes the problem of regression. If architecture foregrounds a certain undecidability in itself, then what can one make of its unbinding? How does countenancing the ruin, the privation of architecture, manifest?

Indeed, the aforementioned section of the *Muqaddimah* indicates a particular resolution of this tension. Architecture, as an *act* of crafting is assimilated, without remainder, under the heading of purpose. The house or the mansion is a craft that is purposively *used* to achieve a certain end (shelter). The citation of use already puts in place an intentional, agentive subject who precedes the act of building/dwelling that founds it.

Unsurprisingly, then, the text privileges the craft of architecture as the sum of the outcome of an act of thinking; architecture emerges from a "natural disposition" toward purposive thought. Just as for Aristotle's *oikodomos* the architect has *in mind* the house that they seek to build, the act of thinking—the form of the house—precedes its actualization in the world as matter. Consequently, the place whence the architect acts is paradoxically self-founded. The latent privation of architecture is here resolved, as it were, on the side of a pure *act*. There is of course, another itinerary that could track the impasse bound up within architecture. It seems clear that a focus on the labour of the builder—in building what in capitalism is now certainly never their own place of habitation—and its divorce from the abstract labour of the architect would yield much for thinking. But whereas this analytic might take this impasse to be the result of external alienation, and hence of the irresolution of the Lord-Bondsman dialectic, here the attempt is to think this unknowability as a recalcitrance within labour *itself*, one that cannot be compassed by the dialectic.

One witnesses this paradigm reaching a previously unseen level of theorization in the high Gothic architecture of Europe. This is, of course, a reference to Erwin Panofsky's long essay on the relationship between Gothic Architecture and High Scholastic theology. For Panofsky, the mental habit of the time, its *modus operandi*, finds material realization in architecture. As he notes, "what he who 'devised the form of the building while not himself manipulating its matter' could and did apply, directly and *qua* architect, was rather that peculiar method of procedure which must have been the first thing to impress upon the mind of the layman whenever it came in touch with that of the schoolman" (Panofsky 28). A *modus operandi* born of a *modus essendi*. The total and transparent articulation of form into material.

Importantly, the aim of this mode in High Scholasticism is nothing less than the establishment of "the unity of truth." Establishment, which is conceptually rendered as *manifestatio*, in both text and edifice, implies a number of scholastic procedures: nesting logical elucidations of sufficiency, homology, and cogency, which are integrated both as whole and as part. The philosophical and theological techniques that arose for first (and this step is often forgotten but must be seen as equally decisive and distinct) *establishing* contradiction and subsequently resolving it finds its purest expression in the procedure of *videtur quod—sed contra—respondeo dicendum.* Like the Schoolmen, the Gothic architect found in this dialectical procedure a means of establishing and resolving contradictions: "of two apparently contradictory motifs [Romanesque and Baroque], both of them sanctioned by authority, one could not simply be rejected in favour of the other. They had to be worked through to the limit and they had to be reconciled in the end; much as a saying of St. Augustine had ultimately to be reconciled with one of St. Ambrose" (Panofsky 69).

What is of interest here is not so much the particular way that a mode of thinking becomes tethered to the production of architecture—i.e., the problem of parallelism— but the quite overlooked fact that architecture here manifests as an extrinsic relationship between thought and its product. The potential of thinking and its realization in the work itself. Indeed, the problem of parallelism is already indicative of this paradigm, that always initiated and re-sutured

break between creator/thought and creation/manifestation. Establishing contradiction in order to repair it.

The foundation of this mode has much to do with the specificities of the operative division of nature and supernature—the incumbent coordination of (contradictory) nature with the truth of supernature. This division, it seems, would not be purely translatable into the terms of transcendence and immanence as such (i.e., Deleuze's influential reading of thaumaturgy). Assimilating nature/supernature into the division of immanence/transcendence is perhaps to too easily elide the specific genealogies of nature and supernature in Western European Christian practice and thought. Nor is it inconsequential that, as others have noted (see Agamben), the citation of the architect as *creator* is a through-line within this genealogy. In many ways the architect here is indistinguishable from the scholastic God, who, as uncaused cause, creates the world continually in a pure purposive act. To this point, and in his own invocation of Panofsky, Christos Yannaras writes: "it is typical that in the horizontal layout of the medieval European city religion breaks in from on high in a vertical fashion, expressed by gothic architecture which thus embodies the authority of the transcendent within human life" (134). The same division of thinking and acting, is nested into a vision of Divine action and creation. The creator and created exists in a sundered relation that is sutured in the act of the architectural *manifestatio*.

From this memorable topological image, it is possible to elaborate the nature of the relationship between the pure act of the architect and the vision that both institutes and enables it. It is, specifically, the intensification and hegemony of a *realist* perspective, one premised on *perspectival unity* of the subject (as *sub-jectum*: that which lies beneath), which enables the place from which the repair of contradiction— the manifestation of truth *in* nature—might take place. In a decisive essay on realism, "Reverse Perspective", Pavel Florensky explores the gradual formation in the Renaissance of a unitary, supposedly natural human perspective. This realist vision is touted as a discovery that promises release from the infantile and regressive forms of reverse perspective. Counterposed to this narrative, Florensky shows the dominant feature of perspectival realism to be its machinic quality. With its numerous technologies for modifying the human eye, to the point of abandoning it all together, realism appears as a highly rarified *way* of seeing, which corresponds to the increasing hegemony of natural space.

Indeed, this hegemony is shown to be key to a larger set of humanist sensibilities emerging in Renaissance Europe. The possibilities of rectilinear projection, and with it the representation of any form into a series of two-dimensional points, results, as Florensky demonstrates, in the disruption of the relation of form to itself. The 'flattening' of forms into the universal language of mathematical representation retains the content of things but not their (gestural) organization; form seemingly melts into air in the face of that always excessive figure of 'real', objective space. This Euclidian and later Kantian geometric paradigm of homogenous space, however, while neutralizing form also produces a paradoxically privileged position for the creator (human or divine). While, "all positions in space…[are] essentially lacking in quality and are equally devoid of colour," there remains, "the single exception of this absolutely dominant one, because in it resides the optical centre of the artist's right eye. This position is declared to be the centre of the

world; it claims to reflect spatially the Kantian absolute, gnoseological significance of the artist" (Florensky 262). From the architect's eye, infinite, homogenous space is envisioned as the neutral scene of human living, one in which thinking *places* and hence *spatializes* itself, as the manifestation of truth. The natural world is a great canvas, punctured in the instant of (supernatural) creative action.

The singularity and stasis of realist vision is aptly capture in Florensky's most direct mention of architectural habitation:

> it must not be forgotten that a residence, no matter how frivolous its interiors, is still not a theatre, and that the inhabitant of a house is by no means as chained to his place and as confined in his life as is the spectator at the theatre. If the wall painting in some House of the Vettii complied with the rules of perspective accurately, it could claim successfully to be a deception or a playful joke only if the spectator did not move and, moreover, stood in a strictly defined place in the room. (213)

But this stasis is precisely the method by which realist paintings impart their effect. Even as the great religious painters of the Renaissance supposedly transgress Kantian space, the force of its premise is maintained. Numerous examples evince this, with the two noted in Florensky's essay being paintings of *The Last Judgment* and *Adoration of the Holy Name of Jesus* (photo below)*.* In order to produce the effect of thaumaturgic descent, they rely on creating dual natural perspectives within a single frame. While horizon lines converge in two distinct centres, one above and one below. As a result, spatialized representation produces, like the punctum of the Gothic cathedral, two distinct worlds, natural and supernatural. The rules of the natural world, the Euclidian space of the supposed perspective of the human, is hermetic, and, as it were, placed alongside the order of the supernatural. Of course, just as the horizon lines converge on a potential point, that is, one *beyond* the visible horizon of the painting, the inverse is also true. The subject of this natural vision is locked in place, able to envision another order alongside its own but only at the cost of its irrevocable separation. The monarchical point of view of the artist and architect marks a particular development in Western philosophy: the building and the thought, the natural and the supernatural, the created and the creator, maintained through a homogenization of space.

The pure act of the architect is only possible from this kind of vision that also institutes a self-founding *subject* (indeed, could one not think of Kant's transcendental ego as the absolute point of departure for a kind of epistemological architecture?) that is paradoxically constituted by the division of noumena and phenomena. The same vantage that enables a relationship to architecture that is pure activity, that is, one that is self-founding in the moment of acting, is likewise what grounds a realist perspective. Realist perspective founds a singular vantage—the inverse potential lines that extend, as it were, toward the subject—whence the subject of the painting, or the architect, may act.

The Adoration of the Holy Name (Left) & The Last Judgement (Right)

This orientation to architecture, its spatialization and organization into a chronological form of contradiction and resolution, sheds light on the building practices in Beirut. There have been a series of projects of razing and reconstructing the city centre, undertaken previous to and, importantly, during the Lebanese Civil War (which lasted from 1975 to 1990). Indeed, it seems not an insignificant point that while wartime destruction was in full force the Lebanese government was concomitantly razing buildings in order to build them anew. Rebuilding in Lebanon post-war has been the topic of numerous studies, all of which highlight the singular importance of the venture of the now consolidated reconstruction project. Under the ambit of the infamous neo-liberal reconstruction group, Solidere, the centre of Beirut and its immediate environs have been increasingly transformed into a modern urban center with the requisite shops, tourist attractions, high-rise apartments, and government buildings. A site of intense contestation during the war, the city centre has been systematically demolished and rebuilt under the heading of a post-war reconstruction that seeks to restore the lauded status of the metropole during the French mandate.

Under this idiom, the ruin can only be countenanced as a contradiction that is subsequently resolved. Yet in a city centre like Beirut's, the ruin's assimilation and even anticipation become almost indistinguishable from the project of modernity itself. Far from being a mode solely endemic to a post-civil war city or neoliberal order, this rhythm of razing and construction has existed since the late Ottoman period, intensifying during the French mandate. And this, it seems, has everything to do with the spatialization that anchors a unitary perspective. It is not only the progressive temporality of rebuilding as an act of overcoming the past, but the fact that the vantage from which chronological time proceeds is singular and sovereign. Much like the

dialectical *modus operandi* of the scholastics which sought to reckon the Romanesque with the Baroque in the Gothic cathedral, the (re)building of the Beirut Souks, so it is announced, combines the Lebanese past styles (French, Ottoman, Phoenician) in order to produce the future history of the Lebanese nation— e.g., invoking the style of Souq, a central community market, that becomes a covered shopping mall. In the same stroke it brings supposed closure to the contradictory destruction of the civil war, establishing and resolving this contradiction in the act of (re)building a modern city. The construction of the post-colonial metropole is theatrically announced, much like the Divine power of the Gothic Cathedrals of Scholastic Europe, by the puncta of towering apartment buildings and skyscrapers.

Beirut's Reconstructed Center

It is likewise telling that these visual depictions of Lebanese state thaumaturgy—the juxtaposition of two spaces, the ruin and its restoration—are displayed within a single frame. Just as Renaissance paintings' organization of two centres of perspective implies and elides the fact that it constitutes and secures in that double motion a unitary subject, the juxtaposition of ruin and restoration constitutes a stable subject—the Lebanese nation (one now presumably immune to the corrosive effects of ruination). And just as the supernatural revelation mends contradiction as a descent into nature before the unitary eye of the subject, so too does the restored Beirut centre descend and redeem a ruinous world.

Depicting the downtown restored, Rafic Hariri International Airport, Beirut

The restored downtown descends on a ruinous world

In his contribution to the volume *Thinking the Ruin* Jalal Toufic writes, "I predict that when war-damaged buildings have vanished from Beirut's scape, some people will begin complaining to psychiatrists that they are apprehending even reconstructed buildings as ruins" (Gumpert et al. 38). The condition theoretically outlined by Toufic is *symptomatic* in the strict sense, rather than denoting particular pathology. In other words, the ruin is not merely a particular, historical trauma (a simple chronological *event*) that is repressed and returns as a spectre, but gestures to

the unavowable heart of architecture and hence its subject that participates in other, "labyrinthine" (as Toufic names them) times.

Is it possible to countenance the ruin without its assimilation and resolution into spatialized *chronos*? Here it serves to close with Ibn Khaldun's formulation of '*umran* at the point where it decidedly breaks with Aristotelian thought. For although, just as for the scholastics of Europe, architecture is that craft that manifests the mind of the architect as the matter of the building,

> the civilization of the city then recedes, and its inhabitants decrease in number. This entails a decrease in the crafts…the architecture of the city reverts to that of villages and hamlets. The mark of the desert shows in it. (The city) then gradually decays and falls into complete ruin, if it is thus destined for it. This is how God proceeds with His creatures. (Khaldun 454)

Those who deem Ibn Khaldun's thought dialectical perhaps too hastily assume a parallel to Idealist philosophies of history. Regression here is not resolved in the form of synthesis or intensification, nor is it contained in the teleological projection of the Absolute. The motion Ibn Khaldun describes is instead like that of the edge of a great sea, waves lapping upon its shore. The craft of architecture—although perhaps we now want to question if we are dealing with a

craft at all in architecture—and its unbinding is a possible site of Divine revelation. This revelation is not that of the supernatural *in* nature, i.e., the scholastic *manifestatio*, but the revelation and reception of a sign that always remains in part inscrutable; a Divinely ordained unbinding that is borne like the trace of the desert not simply within architecture but its subject.

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