Time for Architecture

Time for Architecture:

On Modernity, Memory and Time in Architecture and Urban Design

By

Robert Adam

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For Sarah
without whose support
none of this would have been possible

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FOREWORD

TIME, ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN

We are born and we die. The passage from birth to death moves us through stages in life that take us unavoidably to our demise.

This fact lies at the core of our existence and our awareness of it is the foundation of our understanding of time. We see time in our everyday experience. All life shares our mortality, some for less time and some for more. We experience events that reliably repeat themselves: the sun marks out the days, the moon the months and the seasons the years. Light and darkness determine our activity. Seasons and tides have guided us as hunters, farmers and seafarers. Time regulates our lives, from the cosmos to the cells in our bodies.

Our journey through our surroundings takes place in time. Where we start will be in the past and where we are going will be in the future. As we move forward, we look back for guidance to past events. Our judgements are founded on the understanding that every event or movement has a cause that precedes it. From this we predict the likely outcome of changes in our surroundings and decide what our future actions should be.

Although it is in the essence of our being and understanding, time cannot be grasped independently of its effects. It can be seen only when something changes or

moves. And the pace of change can vary: lightning can strike in an instant; crops grow in a season and trees in decades; landscape changes almost imperceptibly; heavenly bodies move across the sky but seem never to change. Civilisation has brought us the means of managing these variations by dividing time into equal measurable parts: from the hour, to the minute, to the second and eventually to a unit of Planck Time (the speed of light across a Planck length - about 10^{-20} times the diameter of a proton).

However we divide it, the arrow of our time on earth flies in only one direction. Our lifetime may be finite, but our vision of the world is not. We know that the lives of our ancestors have come before us and we live with their inheritance. Our descendants will take our memory beyond our death, but still we seek immortality in deeds and religion. As the future becomes the past and relentlessly takes us to our grave, that knowledge leads us to the denial of time. In our imaginations, and fearful of the finality of death, we have created places without time where some hope that a spiritual essence of ourselves may live forever.

Science has taken us to measurements of space and time beyond anything we can experience and has led us to question time itself. As Albert Einstein demonstrated that time is relative to the speed and location of the observer, it followed that our present can be someone else's future and another's past. Perhaps then time has no direction, only relationships between different moments. As we theorise on the origin of the universe we come to a moment, the singularity, when not only the universe but all laws of physics, including time, seem to have come into existence.

****

Buildings are created, decay and eventually perish. Villages, towns and cities are founded, flourish, decline and sometime will disappear. This same mortal passage defines all life and perhaps all things in the universe. It lies at the centre, not only of biology, but also physics. As it is the fate of all human beings, it shapes our perception of life and the organisation of society and becomes a primary subject of philosophy, anthropology and sociology. Architecture and urban design not only share their mortality with the rest of the universe, they serve societies that are shaped by their understanding of time. A better understanding of the impact of time on architecture and urban design can be achieved with an understanding of time as revealed in science, ideas and social behaviour.

In contemporary architecture, a vision of the future lies at the centre of design theory. An ideal future is put forward that turns away from our past and gives us our concept of modernity. At its heart, this is a proposition for the adoption of a particular intellectual and social relationship between the past, present and future and so is a theory of how we should behave in relation to the passage of time. This idea of modernity is only one aspect of our experience of the present, how it is informed by the past and where it will take us in the future. This is such a fundamental feature of our negotiation with our surroundings that it has been widely explored in philosophy, sociology and anthropology, all of which can enrich our understanding and response to modernity.

As the future is only ever speculation, it must be based on our experience of the past. The past no longer exists, except as personal memory or the survival of past objects and practices. The buildings and places we experience,

individually and as a community, are physical reminders of the past and our understanding of them creates memories that are both personal and shared. These shared memories are how a community collectively identifies with a particular place. The design of new buildings and places affects this identity and affects how a community takes its past into the future. The way we remember, and the relationship between memory and identity, have widespread implications and are the subject of sociological, anthropological and perceptual analysis. These studies can help us manage the relationship between new buildings and existing places and respond to the memories and identities of those who will live with them.

As buildings and towns come into existence, change and pass away, we can measure the passage from creation to extinction with hours, years and centuries. As places change with the passage of time they do not do so at the same rate or evenly. Parts of buildings and places change rapidly and others survive for long periods of time. Seen as the measure of change, time moves at different speeds with different phenomena. This is well-recognised in geology and biology and has now been identified as a feature of historical change. Urban geographers see variable change as an essential part of the urban condition and more recently it has been recognised as a key aspect of sustainability. We see long-lasting phenomena in a different light to ephemeral events and an understanding of the unevenness of time and how it affects the ways we use and understand buildings and places can make design more relevant, flexible and enduring.

Most architects and urban designers understand that movement through a place takes time and is a progressive experience. As people enter and pass through a building or place, they will see their surroundings in a sequence and

that will be part of the way the place is designed. As this is repeated time after time, the perception of the place will change. It will change from newness to familiarity, and possibly from enthusiasm to apathy and even to dislike. This change in the way an identical object is regarded can take place over years or generations. While some things that go out of fashion are simply discarded, buildings and places often survive long after enthusiasm for them fades. Time changes our use and understanding of the things around us.

The way a building or place can, without any significant physical change, move from being admired to being despised is often so disconcerting to designers that it barely impinges on how they make these places. It is as if our buildings and places spring into an eternal present where decay, transformation and decline are banished in favour of a perpetually benign future. In common with the reassuring imagination of places where our souls can reside forever, there are propositions that some principles of design and beauty are perpetual and timeless. These share a very wide range of theories of the unreality of time from philosophy and cosmology to anthropology and myth.

Before any discussion of how to manage time in relation to the design of buildings and places can proceed, the first task must be to examine the idea that their design can be, in any respect, free from time itself.

I

TIMELESS

> … it is remarkable that mortals, once they had developed a passion for nobler things, grew concerned to construct buildings that would be permanent, and as far as possible immortal.
>
> Leon Battista Alberti,
> *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, 1450[1]

1. Timeless Architecture

The idea that architecture can be timeless has a widespread appeal. There are several books that present architecture and urban design as potentially timeless phenomena. Timelessness, as something that overcomes the transience of time, suggests the kind of permanence implied by the repetition of historic themes in traditional and classical architecture. This is clearly articulated in the title of the book, *Traditional Architecture: Timeless Building for the Twenty-First Century*.[2] The publication, *Timeless Architecture,* also charts the first ten years of the Driehaus Prize, which is awarded for 'traditional, classical and sustainable architecture and urbanism'.[3] Christopher Alexander's influential book, *The Timeless Way of Building*, in print since 1980,[4] is a hymn to a romantic ideal of traditional architecture and urban design.

From a quite different standpoint, winners of the Pritzker Prize, which has a record of giving awards to radical designers, are consistently described as timeless: in 2009,

Peter Zumthor's buildings were said to 'have a strong, timeless presence';[5] in 2012, Wang Shu is described in his citation as 'producing an architecture that is timeless';[6] in 2013, Toyo Ito is called 'a creator of timeless buildings'.[7] In the USA there is even a 'Timeless Architecture Award' given by the American Institute of Architects, although only to members from Pittsburgh.[8]

1. Denver Public Library, Michael Graves, 1990. Built by one of the winners of the Driehaus Prize whose work is described as timeless.

2. Porta Fira Hotel, Barcelona. Toyo Ito, 2010. Built by one of the winners of the Pritzker Prize described as 'a creator of timeless buildings'.

Architectural practices often simply claim that their work is timeless. There is a practice called ‘Timeless Architecture’ in California[9] and another in Massachusetts,[10] and there is an ‘Estudio Atemporal’ in Mexico City.[11] ‘Timeless’ can also be expressed as a subtitle to the firm’s name: Ascot Design in the UK describes its work as ‘timeless architecture’;[12] the Belgian practice ‘Architecture Responsible’ refers to its designs as ‘Une architecture intemporelle’;[13] and ‘Architekturbüro Hornstein’ in Nuremburg presents its work as ‘Zeitlose Architektur’.[14]

The suggestion of a lack of change over time does not sit easily with some architects concerned with overt modernity, but the appeal of timelessness remains strong nonetheless. These architects sometimes try to resolve this by resorting to an apparent contradiction in terms, linking modernity or innovation with timelessness. The British firm, MacCreanor Lavington, claims to ‘make architecture that is both contemporary and timeless’;[15] on the website of the Hamburg practice, Mollwitz Massivbau GmbH, its architecture is labelled as ‘Zukunftsweisend und zeitlos’ (trendsetting and timeless);[16] and Estudio Carbajal, from Seville, say that ‘perseguimos una arquitectura contemporánea … una arquitectura atemporal’ (we pursue a contemporary architecture … a timeless architecture).[17] The Danish architect, Bjarke Ingels, tells us that, ‘the only way to be timeless is to be of your time’.[18] The star architect, Frank Gehry, seeming to recognise the contradiction while maintaining an aspiration for timelessness, stated that ‘architecture should speak of its time and place, but yearn for timelessness’.[19] An *e-architect* discussion by Roland Wahlroos-Ritter,[20] gives a typical resolution to the problem, drawing together all sides by reducing the issue to one abstract feature: ‘associated with Classicism as well as Modernism, *white* has the allure of timelessness.’ (my emphasis).

The desire to, in some way, stand aside from the physically and culturally destructive passage of time is clearly powerful. The microbiologist and philosopher, Darryl Reanny, saw this as a prime motivating force for creativity. 'From this yearning for forever, this aching sense of passing time, springs most of humanity's greatest achievements in art, music, literature and science. Paradoxically, it is the very awareness that life is fleeting on the wings of time that directs human activity towards the creation of artefacts that possess the durability their creators' lack, images in carved stone and marble, words written in books, beauty woven from sound, ideas captured on film. Most of civilisation is a by-product of the quest for immortality.'[21] The German philosopher and commentator on architecture, Karsten Harries, identifies this urge in architecture in his paper, 'Building and the Terror of Time', saying that, 'Architecture is ... a deep defence against the terror of time. The language of beauty is essentially the language of timeless reality.'[22]

This terror of time - of decay, mortality and oblivion - is a fundamental neurosis in the human condition on which is built religion and myth. As the designers of long-lasting structures, it is not surprising that architects seek to find ways to overcome this phobia with their work.

If architects are pursuing a piece of the same timelessness as religion and myth, can these help us to understand or advance the architectural objective?

2. Timelessness in Anthropology and Religion

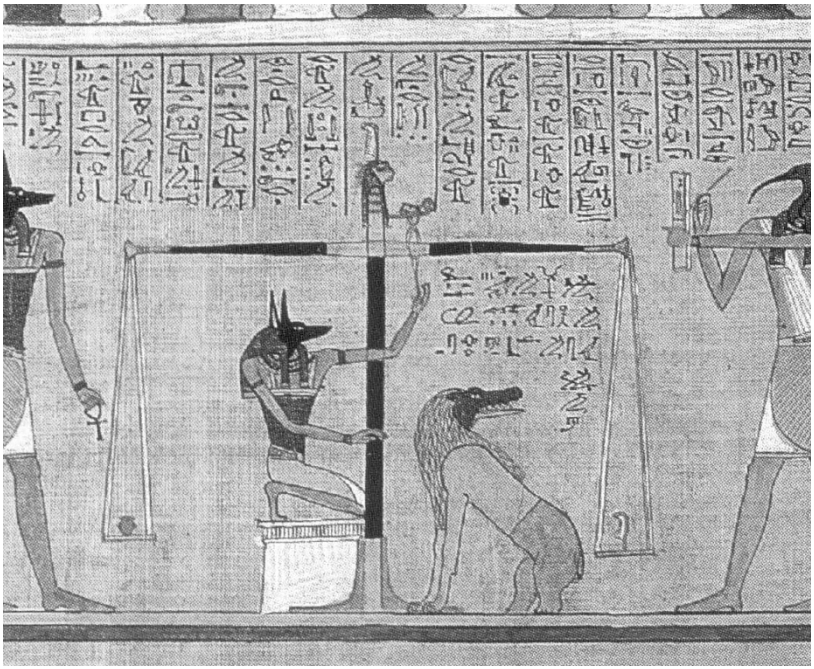
A window to our earliest perception of time may be found in the studies of tribal societies. The French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, observed that rituals make ancestors a present reality and that myths are 'machines for the

suppression of time'[23]. The British anthropologist, Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, in his study of the southern Sudanese Nuer, notes that, 'the distance between the beginning of the world and the present day remains unalterable. Time is thus not a continuum but a constant structural relationship between two points.' Aboriginal tribes in Australia see in the landscape, and the ritual objects found there, the constant presence of their ancestors; the past and present live side by side.[24] The New Zealand Maori describe the past as 'the time in front of us'.[25] We should not assume that these views of time are a deliberate attempt to overcome chronological time; our modern sense of time was simply absent. Members of some Amazonian tribes do not count beyond ten and have no knowledge of their age. When converted to Christianity, the Arctic Circle Inuit were perplexed by the need to count days in order to observe the Sabbath.[26]

Marking out the repetition of ritual can be joined with the everyday experience of cyclical time. Solar, lunar and celestial cycles, tides, seasons and the migration of herds reliably repeat themselves. The beginning and end of these cycles are locked into a perpetual repetition that links the present with an endless series of past events. Cycles could be seen to sit within other cycles: the solar with the seasonal; the tidal with the lunar. As societies became more complex, new cycles were added to those that had been observed. The Mayan civilisation had a series that stretched to 63,081,429 years. Hindus also believe in interlocking cycles, the longest of more than eight trillion years and the smallest of 4,320,000 years. Greek and Roman Stoic philosophers saw history as an ever-repeating series of ages, each of which ended in conflagration and a new beginning. For the Stoics, God was an eternal presence above this perpetual duplication of history. For Hindus and

Buddhists, eternity was the release of the soul from this endless repetition and entry into a state of timelessness.

In ancient Greek mythology, the soul was immortal and on death went to the underworld or Hades, which had its own pantheon of gods and a complex hierarchy. Greek philosophers went beyond the traditional pantheon of gods and for Plato there was 'the Father that … set about making this Universe, … an eternal image, moving according to number, even that which we have named Time.'[27] Aristotle believed that, in a universe characterised by movement, there must be a supreme God who is the eternal unmoved mover. [28] Religion in ancient Egypt was founded on preparation for life after death and the belief that the soul would be judged by the god Anubis and, if it had been virtuous, would share 'an everlasting heaven' with the combined gods, Osiris and Ra. The Judaic tradition had a solitary creator-God but he was made into a paternal figure that watched over the Jewish people and judged souls for entry to a timeless afterlife, be it heaven or hell: 'Multitudes who sleep in the dust of earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to everlasting contempt.'[29] This tradition was passed down to Christianity: 'And this is the eternal life, they that know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.'[30] Muslims share the vision of a single God and an eternal afterlife in Jannah: 'gardens, with rivers flowing beneath,'[31] which is reserved for, 'those who have faith and work righteousness, they are companions of the garden. Therein shall they abide forever.'[32]

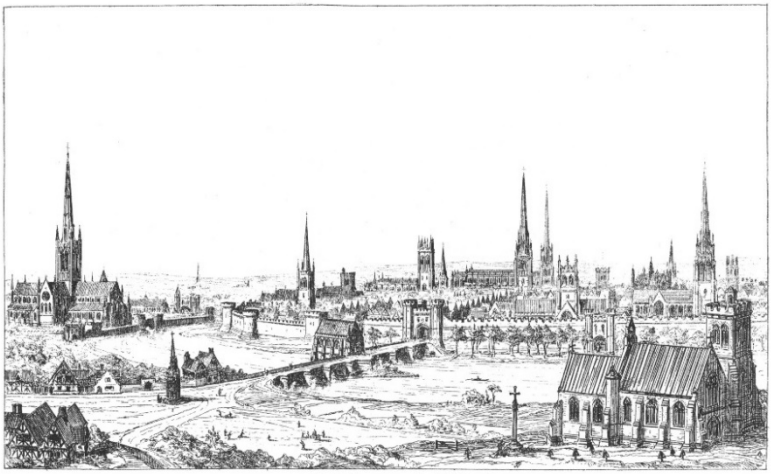


3. The Egyptian god Anubis weighing the heart of the deceased for admission to heaven. Many religions promise a life after death free from the corruption of time.

Most organised religions share the promise of a life beyond that of mortal existence in a place or condition that is eternal, free of time and its path to decay, degeneration and death. This is part of the recent and, for some, the contemporary culture of modern societies. Any reference to timelessness, as a contrary to more prosaic qualities such as ‘endurance’, ‘longevity’ or ‘permanence’, will make, deliberately or inadvertently, some allusion to the metaphysical concept of a place or condition where time no longer exists.

3. Timeless Architecture and Religion

In most modern western societies, religion is predominantly a matter of personal faith and is rarely used as stand-alone justification in debate on practical matters. And yet, as we have seen, timelessness, a supernatural concept, is consistently cited as an architectural objective.



4. The ideal Gothic city, illustrated by Augustus Welby Pugin in Contrasts Or, A Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day, *1836. Pugin saw Gothic Architecture as perfect and incapable of improvement.*

In the past, the connection was made between divine timelessness and architecture. In the twelfth century, Abbot Suger of St Denis, considered to be the first patron of Gothic architecture, would describe those who engaged in the project as, 'focusing the undivided vision of their mind upon the hope of eternal reward, they zealously seek only that which is eternal.'[33] In the late fifteenth century, Pope Sixtus IV, patron of the early Renaissance in Rome,