Nature Seconded

a paper at *Constructing Place*

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April 2002

Abstract

Heidegger's remark that the banks of the river (representing nature in its supposedly pure state) only become apparent because of the presence of the bridge (representing the artificial in its supposed opposition to that nature)[1] will lead this presentation to a discussion of whether or not the idea of "nature" as *prior to* architecture remains unequivocally valid. If nature/the site - that which claims[2] to come before the artificial/architecture - only appears as a result of the presence of the artifice/architecture, then the notion of nature/the site as *original*[3] and *prior to* artifice/architecture is called into question.

That question will in turn stimulate a particular thinking about *place* as the relationship, resonance, or play[4], between a number of sets of poles, including nature/architecture and building/subject[5]. Thus a relational interpretation will be given to architecture and place. This interpretation will be informed, via Derrida's exposition[6], by references to *chora* (place) in Plato's *Timaeus*, recalling in turn that the word relates to non-static notions of place: to the *chorus*, the dance.

The photographic work of Andras Gursky and Thomas Ruff, amongst others, may be used during the presentation.

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[1] Heidegger, Martin. "Building Dwelling Thinking" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, ed Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row, 1971; p152. In the same collection, the section on the Greek Temple in "The Origin of the Work of Art" makes a similar point

[2] see the introductory pages to Laugier, Marc-Antoine *An Essay on Architecture* (trans of *Essai sur l'architecture*, 1753). Los Angeles: Hennersey & Ingalls, 1977

[3] cf Derrida, Jacques. "Qual Quelles: Valery's Sources" in *Margins of Philosophy* trans Alan Bass. Chicago: UCP, 1982

[4] cf chapter 9 "Play: from the Phamakon to the Letter & from Blindness to the Supplement" in "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination* trans Barbara Johnson. Chicago: CUP, 1981

[5] cf Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth & Method*. London: Sheed & Ward, 1975, pp 91-142 esp pp138-142 on architecture; Lindsey Jones, in *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: HUP, 2000) has re-emphasised Gadamer's take on architecture, although from a specifically ritual perspective which this author would question

[6] in Derrida, Jacques "Chora" in *Chora L Works*, ed J Kipnis & T Lesser. New York: Monacelli Press, 1997

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So, to begin with nature. There it is, unspoilt, pristine, a site, a location from which we can start, and which we change, impinge on, set something within – set a work within.

It is simple – an origin, *there*, out there, prior to us, prior to our activities, prior to architecture, prior to all conceptualisation, all metaphoricality [metaphor; the taking over of a "natural" meaning by an artificial one]; in short, prior to all artificiality.

Laugier, perhaps clearest of all (but his fabricated myth is repeated more or less explicitly across the history of writings on architecture) knew it to be so. His essay hopes to essay and establish the "principles of architecture"; beyond the "chaotic mess of clumsy debris, immense piles of shapeless materials, a dreadful noise of hammers, perilous scaffolding, a fearful grinding of machines and an army of dirty and mud covered workmen" (a sort of primordial chaos from which the building arises) there is an essence accessible to those with a clear eye, for "it is the same in architecture as in all other arts; its principles are founded on simple nature…" And here comes the myth, fabricated (inevitably – for who could have recorded such a moment?) by Laugier:

> let us look at man in his primitive state without any aid or guidance other than his natural instincts. He is in need of a place to rest. On the banks of a quietly flowing brook he notices a stretch of grass; its fresh greenness is pleasing to his eyes… he thinks of nothing else but enjoying the gift of nature;…. but soon the scorching heat of the sun forces him to look for shelter.   A nearby forest draws him to its cooling shade…. there he is content. But suddenly… torrential rain pours down on this delightful forest. The savage… creeps into a nearby cave and, finding it dry, he praises himself for his discovery. But soon the darkness and foul air surrounding him make his stay unbearable again. He leaves and is resolved to make good by his ingenuity the careless neglect of nature. He wants to make himself a dwelling that protects but does not bury him. Some fallen branches in the forest are the right material for his purpose; he chooses four of the strongest, raises them upright and arranges them in a square; across their top he lays four other branches; on these he hoists from two sides yet another row of branches which, inclining towards each other, meet at their highest point. He then covers this kind of roof with leaves so closely packed that neither sun nor rain can penetrate. Thus, man is housed….
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> Such is the course of simple nature; by imitating the natural process, art was born.   All the splendours of architecture ever conceived have been modelled on the little rustic hut I have just described…. Let us never loose sight of our little rustic hut.

As is well know, we can find the same myth, more or less explicitly put, with variations (does fire bring communities together first, or buildings?) in Vitruvius, Alberti, Le Corbusier and others.

Gursky's piece might be thought to illustrate unequivocally the natural pole of this myth. A mountain, raw nature, edging towards the sublime; the elements coming fierce off it; that against which architecture defines itself.

This work is, of course, anything but a representation of nature. This is no mountain; nature is not there. There is here a series of more or less apparent mediations; this is a projection of a slide, made from a photograph of a plate in a book which represents a piece of work – a c-print or a series of c-prints – which is in turn a presentation of a form of digitally and optically manipulated photograph of a

mountain. It is run through and through with artificiality and a series of conceptual manoeuvres, moves away from any "raw" nature.

So much is clear.

But more radically, we should ask, was the mountain – standing here for nature in its "pure" state – ever "there" for Gursky *beforehand*. *Before* the work, or least before the *possibility* of this work, was there a mountain?

Here is a bridge. Baldessari's "Man and woman with Bridge". It's like Heidegger's bridge, perhaps the old one across the river in Heidelberg. In *Building Dwelling Thinking* he asks the question "what is a built thing?"; and gives the example of a bridge in immediate response.

> The bridge swings over the stream with ease and power. It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge…

The banks of the river here stand for nature in its pure state, that which for Laugier would so clearly pre-exist the bridge, which in response to nature is the artificial work of architecture which is brought to impinge itself (more or less beneficially) onto nature. But, for Heidegger, the banks *do not* pre-exist the bridge. Neither does the river. The banks and the river emerge *as* they are, *as* "nature", only as – that is, *at the same time as,* [zugleich] – the bridge. Nature does not, for Heidegger, come before the artificial. It is as if the "natural", far from pre-existing architecture or the artificial, only occurs, can only come to exist, by virtue of architecture or the artificial. The "usual" order is inverted, conceptually certainly, temporally as well.

Likewise, in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger speaks of a Greek temple simply standing in its rock-cleft valley, but in its standing it "holds its ground against the storm raging about it and so first makes the storm manifest in its violence…. men and animals, plants and things, are never present and familiar as unchangeable objects, only to represent incidentally also a fitting environment for the temple, which one day is added to what *is*, rather, if we think of all this in reverse order…". The "natural" – the storm, plants and animals, the rock-clef valley itself – can only appear *as such* when "added" to it, in an addition that is no addition because the "nature" which was *supposed* to have pre-existing only arrives *at the same time as* and *by virtue of* the artificial.

So it is with Gursky's Rhein. Gursky is "showing" us the riverness of the great river; but he does this by means firstly of that most artificial of image-making, the camera. Secondly, by means of digital manipulation, he further distances from us what was already "there", but at once brings us closer as well, bringing us the "pure" river, the "pure" banks, unsullied by extraneous forms. In other words, to reveal the "river" and its banks in their pristine state, he goes to an extreme of artificiality, mediating the supposed "thing itself" through a series of manipulations which would finally allow us to see, truly and in essence, what was putatively *there* originally. And by doing this he points to the structural necessity that in order for there to be "riverness", the "essence" of the river; and in order for there to be the "river" itself, natural, in an original state prior to the image of it; the possibility of the image (the possibility of that which we deem to come after the original) must already be there. No prior nature without a prior artificiality, which thus destroys all assurances of the originary character of nature.

Photographic work can play this game in other directions. Ricola Laufen, by Ruff, is not a straightforward documentary photograph of a Herzog and de Meuron building. That building in itself is already playing a very subtle game about the ordinary the mundane, that which appears as though it has always been there but which on closer or further inspection starts to question the polarities of ordinariness and pre-existence as against the special and irruptive. This work is not a Becher portrait of an existing ordinary building. Not that the Bechers' work is this, either. But Ruff's

Ruff's
Ricola
Laufen

work here all the more not. Ruff sent out a local, jobbing photographer to the Ricola building with a set of instructions to photograph the building head-on. A series of shots were to be taken of the long façade, because it is in fact impossible to stand back from this building in order to take a full-frontal shot. Ruff then pieced together these shots, taken by an anonymous image-worker, to form this "straightforward" image. it is as if it is only by virtue of the possibility of the digital manipulation of a series of shots that on can get to the essence that Herzog & de Meuron were aiming at with their essay on the ordinary. The building stands here in this image as ordinary, as unmediated, and immediate, and immediately present to us in its simplicity, only by means of a process extraordinary, intensely mediated, lacking in any form of presence, and complex; in short, only by means of an artificiality conceptually at odds with the ordinary.

Jeff Wall
and Hokusi

Gust of
Wind

Likewise, Jeff Wall, in taking Hokusi's "Gust of Wind" and recreating it as a more or less manipulated photographic image, complete with specially grown tree and presented to us via the medium of the light-box, is re-presenting an already highly stylised representation of nature in its raw state – the nature of the wind, those gusts against which Laugier's savage would shelter himself. But who can ay that the wind has been better understood, better given to us than by Hokusi's image, if not by Wall's recreation of it? Was the wind ever such a wind *before* these works? Did the wind pre-exist the possibility of us representing it? ie the possibility of us introducing the artificial to it?

If it is perhaps difficult to answer yes or no to this, then I would argue still that we should remain attentive to the possibility, as least, that this opens. The attentiveness would see in the difference between architecture and the site *not* the straightforward distinction between nature as pre-given, and architecture as the artificial imposition on it. It would be attentive to the "*zugleich*", to the "at the same time", of architecture and the site – that is, the way in which the site in its beauty, its history, its harshness, its very existence, only comes to have this beauty, history, strength and being *through* architecture or through the possibility of something like architecture occurring. This attentiveness would tend to eschew notions reliant on a temporality of before-and-after (closely allied with a cause-and-effect type of reasoning) in favour of a conceptualisation of the nature of the relationship between architecture and the site/architecture and nature , as a play, a sort of resonance between the two. *Place* would be the resonance between the poles of artificiality and nature, what happens between these two. Place-making, architecture, is not the placing of architectural works within the field of nature, but rather the interaction and play between these two. And crucially, this play would have no origin, no starting-point. That is, we would not say that "naturally", we start from "nature". There always already *was* the play occurring. This is what Derrida refers is to in *Plato's Pharmacy*, where he says that "there is no *as such* where play…. is concerned. Having no essence, opening up the possibility of the double, the copy, the imitation, the simulacrum – the game… constantly disappears as it goes along", and contrasts this strong notion of the game or movement prior to essence with Plato's (successful) attempts to praise play "in the best sense of the word", ie a play which is "supervised and contain within the safety net of politics and ethics", ie a play which is given an origin or a starting point in something like nature.

Gursky's
Kiltschko

But this plays occurs not just between the poles of nature and architecture. That other post-Heideggerian who speaks eloquently of architecture (and who died only last month) – Gadamer – evokes in *Truth and Method* the play between subject and object as the way in which art in general – and architecture in particular – exists; in contrast to the enlightenment notion of an aesthetic appreciation of works of art which leaves architecture almost fatally compromised. In his "relational" interpretation, architecture is seen as the play between the building and those individuals and groups who inhabit it. Neither subject nor object, architecture is the play between these two, giving them their possibility for existence. It would no longer be adequate to say that, pre-existing the work of architecture, there is a certain need, or society, or "brief", or "belief", which the architecture embodies as a

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representation, sign, or practical implementation of these things, coming after these pre-givens as a solution to a problem or the expression of a community or an individual. Rather, these things are given their possibility by architecture (not the other way around); architecture resonates back onto them so that architecture *gives* us society; architecture breaks open the brief and redirects it into something new; architecture questions belief and gives us the possibility for others; architecture enables a community or an individual.

Plato, for all his desire to cast the poets from the city, cannot escape this play, this game, which comes *before* his politics and ethics of control. It is well know; Platonism posits the realm of truth as a realm of essential ideas, which pre-exist the knowledge we have of them. This knowledge is by means of the "images" of these ideas; our sensory existence is one amongst mere secondary images of reality. Platonism's structure is the same as the structural relationship between nature and architecture, traditionally thought. Just as nature comes prior to the artificial; so the thing itself (as idea) comes before the image of it, as in a naïve view of photography or of figurative works of art. Mountain first, Gursky's photograph after. Montparnas first; image second. Essence first; image, *mimesis*, second. The whole of reality is structured around this hierarchical duality which becomes the means by which the cosmos, in Plato's *Timaeus*, is explicated.

Except that *Timaeus*, in recounting the nature of the world by means of this structure now so familiar to us, cannot actually achieve this explication. As Derrida points out briefly in *Plato's Pharmacy*, and at greater length in *Chora*, the point at which the exposition of the cosmos will no longer get along with the dualistic and hierarchical structuring of idea/image, essence/mimesis, origin/copy, nature/the artificial, is precisely at the *place* where *chora* has to be discussed. For *chora*, the idea of "place", is not and cannot be either idea/essence, *or* its polar opposite, *mimesis*/image.   Having set up this intellectual structure to describe the world, Plato/Timaeus finds that *chora*/place can only be perceived by means of a sort of "bastard" reasoning which does not remain respectful of these intellectual and political structures. *Chora*, place, can only be thought about as if in a dream, perhaps because it slips out of and between any reasoning which would try to establish a *starting point,* an origin for it. *Chora* gives place to the possibility of a game between essence and image, nature and image. It is not ruled by these structures, but rather allows the possibility for them and for their movement.

This movement is something like a dance. The Greek work for chorus, similar to the work *chora*, refers of course not just to song but to the movement of the dance of the chorus across the Greek theatre. Similarly, the German word for play, *spiel*, originates as dance. Thus dance, play, and place would be intertwined and themselves self-resonant such that the notion of place giving place to movement would in turn be energised and given movement in a richer conceptualisation of architecture as already, inherently, inhabited by the dance. We could say that the dance is what defines the space of architecture, but already we would not be remaining true to the subtlety of the intertwining of these two. Rather, there is a dance too, without beginning, between the dance "itself" and its other in which it occurs, and which perhaps gives it its only possibility, namely architecture.

Robertson

Is it sure that dance, as spontaneous eruption of passion- the natural - is ruled and contained by architecture? Is it sure that the artificiality of architecture comes after nature? Here, to end, are two works of pure artifice. Each one is an image of the other, hung opposite the other, a reflection at play within the work. These works, by Robertson, are output using a photographic process onto a type of photographic paper; here, fixed onto a transparency and projected as a slide: an image, but one generated direct by digital manipulation, eschewing all reference back to the starting point of the "real" world. My point is that these are no more artificial, no more abstract, nor less "natural" than the image with which we started. This work needs no pre-existing "reality" or "idea" to justify it; rather, just like the Gursky with which we began, it gives us the possibility of the idea and the possibility of our reality.

We should expect no less from architecture.