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## A Contemporary Artistic Lection of Architectural Space

**Abstract:** Contemporary logic of art supposes, amongst other things, the understanding of artistic activities as practices of ordering cultural terms, regardless of the form in which they are used. In this context, artistic practices more and more assume a stake in interhuman relations on diverse artistic themes. In the light of relatively recent theories, this analysis looks at architecture as a practice that offers cultural space tailored for this experience (Brian O'Doherty) and its artistic dimension – where art is an event (Nicolas Bourriaud). My approach looks at the artistic offer of architectural space, *habitation*, seen as a situation that poses two anthropological lines of questioning (André Leroi-Gurhan) – the bond between utilitarian and aesthetic and the restructuration of physical space as culturally signifying space.

**Keywords:** art, architecture, habitation, aesthetic, utilitarian, significations, artistic function, significative cultural space

### 1. A contemporary artistic lection of architectural space

This paper discusses today's understanding of the visual artistic offer made by an architectural edifice, from the perspective of two anthropological lines of questioning posed by André Leroi-Gurhan in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Leroi-Gurhan 1983), first being the link between an artefact's aesthetic and functional qualities, the second being the use of architecture as a means of humanizing physical space with the use of symbols – the re-forging of physical space into a significance rich cultural one.

The two lines of questioning look to employ an analytic framework based on the sum of the changes regarding the understanding of art's cultural perception and understanding that came about since the birth of aesthetics up until present day, as a driving force behind the aesthetic behaviour and attitude of individuals. In short, the trajectory of these changes can be described as the transition from understanding art as an abstract institutional entity, structured on linguistically autonomous theoretical entities with dedicated rules and practices, to art being a cultural space, built from countless formal combinations and possibilities, meant for the interaction of individuals.

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Today's relationship to the idea of artistic space is understood at the intersection between 1) the idea of *total art*, introduced by the first avant-gardes and mainly reintroduced by situationists – and other artistic movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – as an adequate practice model for the contemporary world, and 2) the evolution of artistic practices after the 1960s – towards a production that employs language as an endless string of elements, practices, and techniques – seen as an important breakaway from the cultural logic of art proposed at the beginning of its modern aesthetic systemisation, in the form of taxonomic structuration of artistic practice based on aesthetic norms of employing language (Morley 2003, 12-14).

Generally, contemporary understanding of the purpose of art is based mainly on the major changes that took place in visual artistic practices. It manifests itself as exceeding the idea of retinal autonomous expression as a specific stake of traditional artistic practices and, in this context, is boasts the reassessment of the artistic function of an artefact.

The characteristics of contemporary artistic practices which support the new artistic identity can be broadly summarised as:

1. Inter and trans-disciplinarity, used by professionals without regard for normative boundaries belonging to logic employed by early modernist aesthetics which set clear autonomous artistic categories: painting, sculpting, architecture, visual arts, literature, decorative arts, etc. (Morley 2003, 14-16). From methodologic perspective, the main result of this lack of regard is the re-evaluation of artistic language: anything can be used as a language element – from technological novelties to philosophical concepts and inter-human relations – employing its potential as a signifier.
2. Shifting in the lector's role in experiencing art, from just contemplation to active participation (Nae 2013, 155) which reshapes artistic experience as a cultural exchange or negotiation, close to the idea of *potlach* (Sansi 2010).
3. Recognizing the evolution of arts cultural state, both as a mark and as a discursive element present in works<sup>1</sup>.
4. The use of context as a way to (re)signify<sup>2</sup>. From professional perspective, the main result of this logic is the re-evaluation of the idea of visual artistic representation. Beyond aesthetic norms of representation, proper to any particular field, the idea of artistic visual representation stands for: presenting any common entity *again* (re-presentation), in a new context able to change its initial common identity into an artistic one. The artistic identity of the representation is not dependent on technique or artistic medium but on the artistic logic of the context. The obvious repercussion of this is that anything can be a work of art if the context in which that *anything* is re-signified/re-presented is acknowledged as being artistic.

This evolution of artistic practices has not resulted in the annulment of traditional practices, but in their integration in a different cultural logic or mindset as different simultaneous techniques, which support the idea of vastly varied artistic production meant for a group-fragmented audience.

“Artistic practice”, as Rosalind Krauss wrote at the beginning of the `70s regarding “sculpture”, “is defined by [...] logical operations applied to an ensemble of cultural terms”, for whom “any medium can be used: photographs, books, lines on walls, mirrors or even the sculptures themselves” (Krauss 1979, 42).

In lack of a consensus, democratic acceptance of diversity of opinion represents the cultural logic of contemporaneity.

In the words of Nicolas Bourriaud, the logic of the formentioned changes implies a new understanding of the work of art as a cultural event, as a state of interaction between individuals (Bourriaud 2007, 13-14). In this context, for the individual, art isn’t the identification and connection of a category of archived objects with a database of aesthetic norms (seen as artistic qualities), but the participation in a contemporary cultural ritual. This situation – in my opinion more an anthropological setting than an aesthetical one – defines the manifestation of art as an instance of human interaction within a particular experience.

In such a comprehensive context, the particularity of the experience is in the delimitation, within a wide cultural field, of a self-serving symbolic space. This means that artistic identity is based, first and foremost, on the association of an artefact with a cultural space loaded with artistic significations (Danto 2001, 180-181), regardless of artistic medium, technique or logic of expression. Any contemporary artwork contains and uses, as an implicit element, the corpus of ideas about art that constitute the space. The artistic quality of a work of art is dependent on the author’s ability to integrate – to order and include the elements within the expression medium – this corpus. Architecture, seen as a visual artistic medium, submits to the same logic.

## 2. Architecture and the contemporary artistic dimension of space

Based on contemporary practices and the idea of art as a cultural space, we can say that Leroi-Gurhan’s ideas – buildings as ways for man to “tame” (Leroi-Gurhan 1983, 124-127) real (physical) space with the aid of significances and the link between utilitarian and aesthetic – are not far from the situationist *total* art stake and its methodology. For example, in *What Is Situationism? A Reader, Essays from Leaving the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, the Situationist International frame of thought was presented thus:

The situationists’ programme was based on what they called “the construction of situations”. In the first place this meant the bringing together and fusion of

various separated art forms in the creation of a single unified environment. Nor was this process restricted to a new focusing of contemporary artistic activity. All the great artistic visions and masterpieces of the past should be pillaged and their contents made real: “subverted”, as the situationists called it, as part of a real script. All scientific knowledge and technical skill could be brought into play in the same way. For the first time art and technology could become one: put on the same practical footing with reality (Grey 1974, 5).

In this setting which engages art as an event, the contemporary cultural offer of architecture as an artistic medium (and artefact) manifested mainly in terms of *habitation*<sup>3</sup> than *monumentality*. In other words, the artistic quality refers more to the power of signification associated to inhabiting a space than to adhering to aesthetic norms of volume arrangement, ornamentation, etc.

Understanding habitation as an artistic experience is based on seeing architecture as an act of symbolic representation, described by Leroi-Gurhan as: “The organisation of living space is not only an example of technical convenience, but, in equal measure to language, the symbolic expression of human behaviour as a whole” (Leroi-Gurhan 1983, 135). In the same logic Roland Barthes later discusses architecture as a means of communication (Harvey 2003, 73).

Architecture as artistic language means two things: 1) its artistic quality derives from the transformation of a real space, through symbolic representation, into a cultural one – this is also the modernist professional logic of plastic space in traditional artistic mediums<sup>4</sup>; 2) the significances of space are in equal measure, both utilitarian (regarding the use of the building itself) and aesthetic (its aesthetic qualities). The two aspects overlap with the two lines of questioning mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

### **3. The relationship between utilitarian (functional) and aesthetic**

From the perspective of artistic expression, the relationship between the aesthetics and utility of architecture is treated particularly, different is when discussing these two concepts separately, where distinct protocols are employed for understanding the aesthetic function of a building and its utilitarian one. My goal is not to pursue this distinction when using the building as shelter or when treating it as a modernist aesthetic item. I am only analysing this distinct relationship from the perspective of a more organic bond, proper to understanding architecture in the terms of contemporary artistic language. In this case, both the utility and aesthetics of a building are engaged as elements of contemporary artistic language. The presence of utility as a visual element marks a change in attitude in understanding the cultural purpose of art. On one side, from an artistic perspective, functional means more than “artistic disinterest”, and on the other side, any version/functional destination of an artefact provides an implicit aesthetics tied to

that functionality<sup>5</sup>. The functional aspect is part of an artistic discourse where the presence of aesthetic aspects is not more important than of any other ones in that work of art (e.g. its communicational function socially engaged within a cultural trend).

The logic of the artistic bond between utilitarian and aesthetic has a self-evident:

1. The artistic experience of an artefact is owed to a particular function that supports its manifestation as a work of art.
2. Its manifestation as a work of art is understood as:
  - a) The appropriation of utilitarian and aesthetic functions of an artefact as elements of artistic language means their manifestation, on the level of artistic expression, as significations.
  - b) This situation generates another cultural function – an artistic one – as a result of their dissolution into the new function.
  - c) The new artistic function transforms the artefact into a significant whole, that manifests as unique artistic substance resulting from the dissolution of the functional identity of the two dimensions – utilitarian and aesthetic – which, when it comes to language, lose their significative identity (of utilitarian and aesthetic) in favour of the significance of the relationship between them (the unity between aesthetic and functional).

The unity between aesthetic and functional, present on the level of their common significative substantiality, is implicit to their trans-disciplinarity, seen as the methodology of a unique artistic medium – in the idea that, on this level, there are no more differences between artistic mediums (architecture, painting, sculpture, etc.), nor differences regarding the categorial identity of different elements present in a work of art (wood, brick, metal, colours, cultural codes, etc.) often attributed and distributed based on their different utilitarian functions.

#### **4. The artistic taming of real space**

In architecture, real space is both a particular artistic medium<sup>6</sup> and an element that actively participates, through positioning, dimension, proportion, etc, in establishing a building's artistic quality, along with its solid aspects (walls, façade elements, materials, chromatics, etc.), through compositional use by the author. The transformation of real space into artistic space means, in this logic, its re-presentation alongside its solid elements, so that it re-defines its importance as utilitarian physical space in favour of gaining cultural significances that transform its utilitarian reality into significant elements of artistic space. In other words, the physical space between the walls of a building gains the function of a relational element that, along with the solid elements, can generate a cultural context with an artistic

identity. Thus, the architectural edifice gains the same quality as the plastically pictorial space because it provides the same particular cultural function in relation to an interaction between individuals (that in this case becomes an artistic experience).

In the contemporary world this function is operationalized in the form mentioned way: the legitimation of a work of art is a cultural one, acquired along with its appurtenance to the cultural space of a series of artistic significances, and architecture, as an artistic medium, submits to the same ruleset.

The theory about the artistic-cultural dimension of an architectural space that best supports this point of view belongs to Brian O'Doherty and it pertains to the artistic function of space in an art gallery (O'Doherty 1986). Essentially, it's based on the unity of the bond between aesthetical and functional. O'Doherty's logic is that the destination – in other terms, the utility – of a gallery invests its own physical space with the legitimating power of the understandings and discourses present in the modern evolution of art, that establishes the cultural identity of exposed artefacts in the contemporary world: “Conversely things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them” (O'Doherty 1986, 14).

In the theory of the white cube, the field of artistic cultural significances is implicit to the gallery space. Thus, space becomes a form of existence for the field as a cultural spatial context with double function: a) the artistic legitimation of displayed objects, b) that of significant content for said objects. The relationship between the two functions can be described as: With the objects as content, this context can legitimate them as works of art. The unity between space and objects manifests itself as a qualitative harmonic state transferred to the objects, where the cultural significances of the object are indiscernible to the ones of the context. O'Doherty states that:

Indeed, the object frequently becomes the medium through which these ideas are manifested and proffered for discussion- a popular form of late modernist academicism (“ideas are more interesting than art”). The sacramental nature of the space becomes clear and so does one of the great projective laws of modernism: As modernism gets older, context becomes content. In a peculiar reversal the object introduced into the gallery, frames, the gallery and its laws. (O'Doherty 1986, 14-15)

In his opinion, this situation means, in fact, the artistic autonomy of a space (acquired by being part of a cultural identity and function):

The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is “art”. The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its

own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of aesthetics. So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber that, once outside it, art can lapse into secular status. (O'Doherty 1986, 14)

I will make the observation that, in O'Doherty's logic, gallery space today fulfils the same role that the religious edifice did in Middle Ages and Renaissance, specifically it isolates the significances that constitute the cultural identity corpus of art – meaning it frames the territory of artistic space. When, in occidental society, the cultural consensus of the religious condition of art, which ensured the identity coherence of this frame, was removed, another corpus that covers that loss must be established. Retinal aesthetic identity regarding taste, proposed by the Illuminists, never had sufficient consensual stature to cover a cultural phenomenon as complex and unstable as art. That is why it brought along complaints and impugnments, followed by polemics that generated even more confusion. Arguments and confusion established themselves as elements of the new cultural identity of art – seen as providing space for theoretical speculations regarding the axiological boundaries between art and non-art. Something had to gather all these aspects under a functioning corpus capable of having autonomy, and that proved to be gallery space.

About this situation, O'Doherty writes that:

And in its midst, one notices an evenly lighted “cell” that appears crucial to making the thing work: the gallery space.

The history of modernism is intimately framed by that space; or rather, the history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space and in the way we see it. We have now reached a point where we see not the art, but the space first. (A cliché of the age is to evaluate over the space on entering a gallery.) An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that more than any single picture may be the archetypal image of twentieth century art; it clarifies itself through a process of historical inevitability usually attached to the art it contains. (O'Doherty 1986, 14)

In light of the theory of the white cube, the separation of easel painting as a secularised practice, independent of wall painting (its independence of the building) can be understood in other terms. Significantly speaking, painting never actually left the wall or the artistic function of architecture

to which it belongs, but enveloped artistic space within. The difference between mural and easel painting only regards technical or methodological aspects, with no influence on its artistic dimension. It establishes itself as a distinction between ways for painting to relate to the wall, one dynamic, the other static. Such a distinction is only relevant in real space because in artistic space (basically its artistic function) the relationship is the same. The artistic logic of a picture contains this relationship within the painting, in the following process: the cultural artistic quality of plastic space – seen as artistic visual autonomy – is linked to the formentioned corpus of cultural significances. The artistic engagement<sup>7</sup> of this corpus leads to, maybe paradoxically, the reference to the cultural role of art, meaning its functional (utilitarian) dimension. The utility of a painting can be described as: an image dedicated to a space (context) in which – and alongside which (the total link between context and object in which, according to O’Doherty, *context becomes content*) – the painting (as an object) satisfies the human need for artistic experience<sup>8</sup>. For painting, this function is tied to the wall, since its origins to this day, in the form of an existential condition. The wall on which the painting earns its status as art contains its cultural context, because the wall is the depiction of the space which conveys the corpus of significance that legitimates its artistic identity. The development of easel painting as a representative of modern secular art<sup>9</sup> mainly shows the fact that painting swapped out the wall for something else because of the apparition of a new cultural context of artistic identification and legitimation. In this situation, only the context changes – provided by the gallery to cover the function of the cathedral wall – and not the logic of the bonds with the context or its importance. Even the paintings in an apartment portray to some degree<sup>10</sup> the idea of a gallery, and transfer to those walls the significance corpus of gallery space, because it is directly linked to the painting itself, the same as a religious painting brings with it the significances of a religious space.

Regarding the power of an architectural space to culturally autonomize and legitimize, O’Doherty notes the similarities between the religious edifice and gallery space – even if his theory doesn’t particularly explore the artistic dimension of religious space.

A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, to take on its own life (O’Doherty 1986, 15).

Speaking from a constructive (compositional) point of view, the neutrality of white, its antiseptic nature, etc. are aesthetic orderings dedicated to the functionality of the gallery – conditioned by its utility – by the same visual considerations for which the luxuriant ornamentation of the orthodox church or the luxurious space of a catholic cathedral were dedicated to the function of church space to provide an experience transcending profane time and space<sup>11</sup>, as an intermediate space:

Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial – the space is devoted to the technology of aesthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exist in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of “period” (late modern), there is no time. This eternity gives the gallery a limbo-like status; one has to have died already to be there (O’Doherty 1986, 15)

The logic of artistic space as an expression of the bond between the utilitarian destination of a building and the aesthetics that are associated with this function can be extended to the artistic appreciation of the religious architectural edifice. For example, from the perspective of a contemporary interpretation, we can say that Paul Evdokimov understands religious art in the logic of the event and in the terms of a performative act on religious themes brought to the space of the edifice by its ritual destination.

The architectural forms of a temple, the frescos, religious icons, religious objects, are not just put together simply as objects in a museum, but as the members of a body, they live the same sacred life, *they are integrated into the liturgic mystery*. This is essential, a religious icon can never be understood outside this integration (Evdokimov 2014, 176).

In situationist logic, Evdokimov’s theological statements can be understood as: it’s not the retinal autonomy of the religious icon (objects of worship) or of the architectonic monument that represent the artistic depth of religious art but the fact that for a few thousand years the cultural condition of art, consensually accepted, was its tie to religion, and in this context the religious destination of space implies this link. The edifice, the space and all other entities linked to the ritual function – from objects of worship and participants to rituals to the ideas they convey – legitimate the artistic quality of the event, because until the first forms of the secularisation of art (the iconoclasm of the Reform), cultural acceptance of art did not exist outside of religion. It was all gathered under the same roof of an artistic signifying cultural space, by the religious and cultural condition and origin of art that constituted the artistic field of signification of the time – and that were implicit to the religious event as the sole source of artistic material.

In my understanding, O'Doherty understands architecture, in a broad sense, as cultural space dedicated to a series of “inhabitations” on a significance tier. Some may be artistic, some may not, regardless if it implies contemporary architecture or old religious architecture. Essentially, his theory presents itself as a pattern with anthropologic direction that talks about the logic of interaction between man and the artistic phenomenon, and that includes both the cultural consensus and the debate that sees art as social practice and cultural exchange between individuals. From this angle, the artistic logic of the gallery is the same as the great cathedrals of the Renaissance: a building manifests itself artistically, only because of a particular type of habitation – conditioned by presence of a corpus of significances – that transform its connotation of shelter into a cultural artistic space. Regardless, in the absence of this particular type of habitation, architecture can satisfy other cultural needs that are not necessarily artistic.

Instead of conclusions we can make the following observations.

In the contemporary setting that admits a *puzzle* of contradicting opinions in relation to art, architecture can be seen as a cultural space particularized as an artistic space by a certain type of habitation. In the words of Nicolas Bourriaud, such habitation is a work of art seen as an interstice that “inserts itself in social tissue” (Bourriaud 2007, 15).

We can also observe something else regarding the theory of the white cube. Its power to legitimate a cultural corpus of significations reflects – where context is content – both on artefacts and on the building itself. If the legitimation is based on the fact that the artefacts are identified as art because of the cultural context that becomes content (according to O'Doherty, it *frames* it), then the context, which is equally content of the building, legitimates the building as a work of art. Thus, in the presence of the corpus of significations, thanks to the destination attributed to a space, a building auto-signifies itself as a work of art, regardless of it being a gallery, a religious edifice or a nonconventional space (a factory) which, for some reason, gains the utility of an artistic space.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, the way debated by Daniel Marzona, as a fusion between language and document in conceptual art, seen in Cezanne, where “painting reflects on its own rules” (see Marzona 2005, 8).

<sup>2</sup> Seen by situationists as *building situations* (see Gray 1974).

<sup>3</sup> For example, in his lectures and general word philosophy, Bjarke Ingels, an influential Danish architect, considers that inhabiting a space is more important than the space itself, and that it only gains significance once it is put in the service of its inhabitants.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Mihály Jenő Bartos discusses this situation in terms of the double dimension of plastic space: real space and significant space (Bartos 2016, 21-27).

<sup>5</sup> Regarding the values of functionalism in architecture, Jean Nouvel states: *Many places have aesthetics without aesthetic intent* (Baudrillard, Nouvel 2005, 18).

<sup>6</sup> The artistic medium in architecture is space, where the goal of construction is the delimitation of space. In the same logic as drawing – where we draw black lines to see the white – as an anecdote attributed to Picasso.

<sup>7</sup> Beside other type of engagements (historical, sociological, etc.)

<sup>8</sup> This is the main cultural utility of art, in the same logic as the utility of clothes must satisfy the structural availability of man for the experience of robing or medicine for the experience of getting healthy.

<sup>9</sup> This does not discuss religious oil paintings, whose ties to church space are obvious.

<sup>10</sup> This regards paintings that are generally accepted as works of art, not the decorative function of a painted image.

<sup>11</sup> Where profane means one that sits in front of the temple but has not entered yet (Duve 2001, 110).

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