

**VER, CONOCER Y
PROYECTAR EN CONTEXTO**

La arquitectura puede ser experimentada de las maneras más variadas, dependiendo de la propia edad, el ambiente, el estado de ánimo, su posición en el contexto urbano, etc. En todos los casos, sin embargo, la condición física y psicológica del ser humano debe ser para el arquitecto la referencia inevitable. En este artículo, el Panteón de Roma y la Piazza della Rotonda son utilizados como pretexto para una disertación sobre la relación entre arquitectura y percepción.

SEEING, KNOWING & DESIGNING IN PLACE

STEFANOS POLYZOIDES

Six months ago, on a still and rainy winter night, I entered the Piazza della Rotonda walking from the direction of the Via della Rotonda. This is the view that reveals the body of the Pantheon slowly, in all its magnificent scale and plasticity, emerging on a shallow curve, right to left. The piazza was empty and the dark hulk of the grand temple appeared eerily vivid. The faint glow of the piazza storefronts and the street lights barely illuminated its cylindrical body, magnifying its apparent mass. I paused in the presence of such architectural magnificence and the first thought that then crossed my mind was that the Pantheon was so much larger than I had ever remembered or imagined before.

This was a disturbing idea, because on previous repeated visits to Rome I had been in and around this building many times and was certain that I was intimately familiar with it. As is often the case, in that one moment, I hurriedly assigned the difference in acuity between my hyper stimulated new Roman eyes and my steady Los Angeles ones, to an obvious cause: mere memory fade out. That is, the process of slowly forgetting the precise, detailed configuration of objects and places once registered in the mind. Over time, retaining some of their important basic ingredients. But eventually recalling them as fragments only, not in the wholeness of their precise dimensional form or context, spatial or figural.

Over the last months, my Pantheon lapse has become a challenge, and the prod for serious introspection. Slowly, a new understanding of how we learn to see and to process this deep visual knowledge has begun to emerge: that the experience of navigating through urban and natural space, continually calibrates the human eye. And that this daily, repeated observation of places and objects from multiple points of view, constantly enriches and refines our vision. Causing us to see more clearly, precisely, and comprehensively. And to eventually fully know and use the exact configuration of spaces and the form of the things that exist in and around us in daily life. Recalling these most precisely and consequentially, when it is time to directly connect our vision to our imagination through architectural and urban design.

Is it then possible, that the reason that I was not clear about the definitive form of the Pantheon was that my experience of the building in its place was incom-

plete? That during my many previous visits, my eyes had not registered it from many and diverse points of view; in enough constructional detail; in terms both orthographic and perspectival; in darkness and in all kinds of light, statically and kinetically, in isolation and framed by the urban space of the Piazza della Rotonda and the context of the surrounding urban fabric; in daily and ritual circumstances, full of people and empty? Was it that I had previously not focused on the building in enough detail, or that that the record of my observations was incomplete?



The Pantheon in Rome, after Giambattista Piranesi

For an answer to these questions, I turned to the examination of how human beings actually experience Architecture. How we register it with our eyes, how we store it in our brains, and how we recall and process it into the design of new buildings:

Babies are born with eyes uncalibrated to the form of the physical world. We get slowly contextualized into early life, by a process of locating ourselves in the world topologically: distinguishing between far and near, front and back, left and right, up and down, large and small, high and low, deep and shallow, etc.

As young children we first use our vision, and then all our other senses to direct our bodies to measure and decipher the physical qualities of the proximate world around us: first the space of our crib, and then our bedroom, house and garden. Then with increasing curiosity and using the scale of our bodies, absorbing the character of the public space of our neighborhood, our city and nature. The first years of life are also a constant process of absorbing the form and physical qualities of all kinds of objects small and large, including buildings. These experiences eventually resulting in the construction of a visual nexus, a road map of the range of possible human interaction with the physical space and the objects that are the backdrop of our earthly lives.

The sheer joy of childhood is, to a great extent, a reflection of this process of becoming acquainted with the visual language of physical being.

During adolescence, and as our bodies grow fully operational, we slowly become more and more grounded in the physical world. In an optical sense, all young people's vision is similar. But eventually, each person's vision is refined by exposure to the normative expectations and protocols of the culture that they grow up in. Our early uniform topological understanding of places and objects is modified by the unique conventions of each of our many and diverse societies. Far and near is not the same for a Kenyan villager and an American suburbanite. Up and down is different for a Parisian urbanite and a Nepalese farmer. We all develop our visual life in a visual mold based on where we inhabit the world. But we do not end there.

In the process of growing up, we are encouraged to test the received visual wisdom of our given education, in order to expand and refine the architectural, urban and environmental norms of our generation. Such is the process of physical and cultural human renewal. We often do so by activities that have little to do with architectural or urban design. We mostly engage in experiences that test the limits of our ability to see. Often through exacting movements in space and in relationship to objects under complex circumstances, and under a great variety of speeds. In sports for instance, training the eye to place a ball perfectly at the feet of a moving teammate. In ballet, learning to anticipate the movement of other bodies and synchronizing with theirs. In driving, achieving life-threatening speeds, while avoiding crashing with others. In all these cases, the emphasis on graceful, poetic and effortless serial vision and visual coordination is an indication of how much we value stretching our visual acuity beyond our body's apparent normative limits of seeing.

The rebelliousness and recklessness of adolescence is, among other things, an expression of our ambition to test our social boundaries, including the visual ones. And extend our ability to see far beyond what is presented to each of us by our culture as a fact.

We reach adulthood with an established, mature sense of seeing. We revel in our ability to freely enjoy our relationship to the public realm and the objects in it and the buildings that configure it. Our vision is centered on a frontal 90 degree cone of precise vision and a 180 degree peripheral field of indefinite vision that can be redirected instantly to the right and left. The simple physical ability to move our eyes and our head and direct our cone and field vision at will is at the heart of experiencing Architecture. Our inborn interest in changing our point of view and towards visually stimulating subject matter, provokes constant and fluid sequences of head movement. These generate a seamless, cinematic flow of images that allow us to navigate the world, and to sustain our visual curiosity, and through it, our visual evolution and fluency.

Key to the mature condition of the human eye is that it sees ceaselessly and in the round. Seeing in the round has a particular effect on how most people read

Architecture. First and foremost they see it in a context, that of the city and nature. As a result, we expect and insist to encounter buildings in a form appropriate to their circumstances, urban, sub-urban, rural or natural. High-rise buildings in an agricultural setting offend as much as out of place single-family detached houses in a Metropolitan center.

Our ability to see buildings juxtaposed to nature is remarkably varied. We can register them through their isolation, dispersion or concentration against all kinds of natural forms: great examples of this are the isolated Ancient Greek temples that are sited to geometrically engage both the mountains and the horizon that frame them. Or the combs of Maya pyramids that on foggy days can appear to be grounded just above the clouds. Examples of scattered architectural form experienced in tandem with nature are the villas of Fiesole, high above Florence, surrounded by gardens and forest. Or the scattered wineries of Burgundy, floating in a sea of vineyards. There are also too many examples of buildings concentrated in an urban form that is poetically juxtaposed to nature. The earth-colored adobe villages of New Mexico, placed among agricultural fields, or the white villages of the Mediterranean, nestled into arid mountains and wedged between the blue sky and the blue sea. In all these cases, buildings and building fabric become an imagined bridge between the natural and the man-made world. Architectural form composed inseparably with that of nature.

Our aptness to experience single buildings in the context of the city is even more varied and complex. We can recognize certain unique buildings as monuments. By their location, size, configuration, materials & finishes and scale relative to the buildings that surround them. An example of this kind of architectural reading is the centerpiece of Rockefeller Center in New York, the RCA building. Or Sant'Agnese in the Piazza Navona in Rome. Curiously, we do not consider such unique edifices as being autonomous. We instead tend to condition our impression of them by their explicit form responses to the fabric of buildings surrounding them and the character of the public space to which they are bound in a binary relationship.

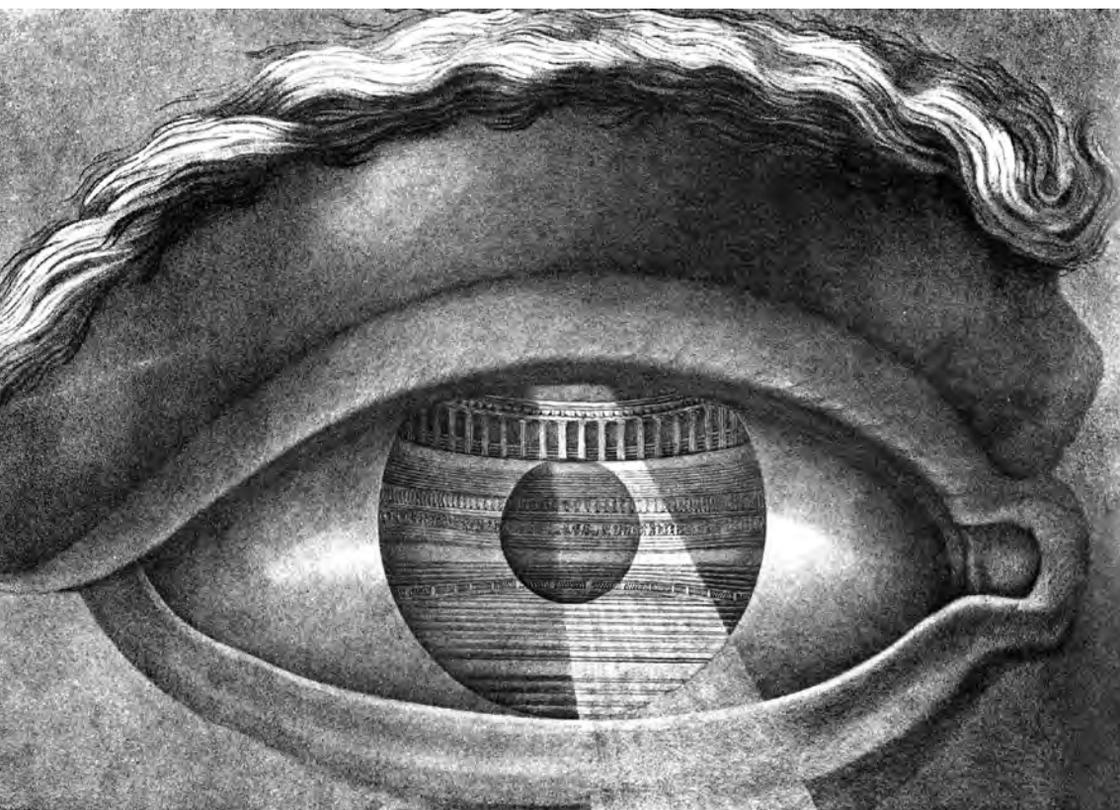
We are also fully capable of registering buildings as a collective form. As contributors to the configuration of a city block, as a fabric of typologically repeating structures whose architectural specifics are sublimated by their position in an urban composition that is larger than their individual character. Examples of this way of experiencing architecture would be the corner buildings of the 19th century Spanish Ensanches, most notably those of Bilbao, Barcelona, San Sebastian and Valencia. Or the 18th and 19th century row houses of London.

Public space can modify our perception of monumental buildings in a kinetic sense. For example, the huge Esplanade of Les Invalides in Paris tends to deceptively reduce the apparent size of the building. It is by moving aggressively in the direction of it, that the edifice increases in size, until it finally reveals its immense scale. Precisely when we suddenly find ourselves close enough to it, to scale it with our bodies as a measure. It is this serial optical facility that also allows us to experience the drama of moving through towns and cities. Particularly the ones

organized on irregular blocks and streets, complex plazas of varied dimensions and geometries, on pedestrian paths often deflected by terminated or framed vistas. It is in our visual nature to be drawn to the mysteries of a medieval urban fabric and network of streets, over the rational, orthogonal and obvious buildings and thoroughfares of gridded cities.

Public space can also suppress the individual presence of buildings and render them visible to us as a singular, neutral built background. This is particularly true in the case of streets that achieve the status of an iconic thoroughfare. As is the case of the Champs Elysees in Paris, or Las Ramblas in Barcelona. There, we tend to perceive and to sustain in the mind, the figure of the public space, before the collective form of the street wall.

The theater in Besançon, by Claude Nicolas Ledoux



There is no doubt that our most common interaction with buildings is experiencing them as single objects. Our eyes are capable of picking them out and observing them at a variety of scales. First and foremost, seeking to relate to them functionally, symbolically or casually, we can perceive them as a singular gestalt. Whether they are monuments, foreground or background buildings, we typically comprehend them as a single, potent, all-inclusive image. This is most often accomplished through a combination of simultaneous readings, of a building's profile, its volumetric composition, the rhythm of its architectural components, its relationship to the ground, the indicators of its structural stability.



Separately, we can refocus on many architectural qualities of the single building that are smaller than an entire object. The scale of its doorway as it reflects the scale of an adjacent street. Or the presence of unique or repeating form elements, such as balconies, cantilevering bays or towers. And finally, we can indulge our interest in building details: opacity or transparency, common or refined materials and finishes, elaborate or simple construction joinery, rich or scant textures, extravagant or spare ornament. All of the proximate physical attributes of buildings that we associate with our obsessive attraction to the form of other bodies, and our interest in the aesthetics of corporeal culture in general.

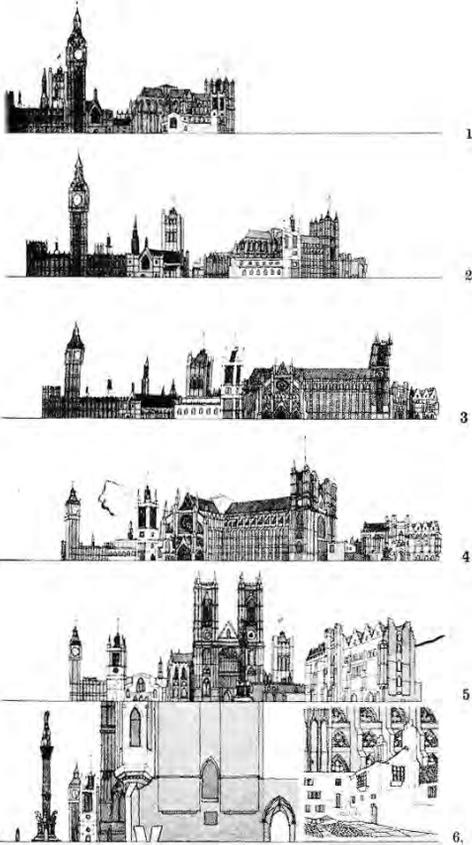
The architect's eye is a special creative version of the mature, common human eye. It achieves this special distinction by being trained in the art of architectural, landscape and urban design. In order to deliver new buildings based on new needs, that can be inserted harmoniously into existing places, and also generate distinguished and new ones of lasting meaning, beauty and value.

If we human beings see exclusively in the round, then we must insist that being an architect among us, necessarily means committing to also designing in the round, designing in place. By their professional vows, architects commit to the special responsibility of operating as the keepers of the diverse visual cultures of the world, by respecting the nature of humanity and responding to our practical and existential needs. To live up to this commitment, they should both be the keepers of the wisdom of all that has been designed and built by preceding generations. And also be expert in the technical, financial and other potential advantages offered by our society in the present. They should be as comfortable in their grasp of tradition, as they are in their interest in innovation and fashion. Maintaining our visual vocabularies alive in the form of the buildings, cities and landscapes we have known. While designing their evolution through new forms that transform them and improve them over time.

To say that architects have failed miserably in keeping up with this professional and human obligation is a gross understatement. Over the last seventy-five years, single building-induced urban sprawl and reckless urban infill projects have without exception gravely injured the vitality and beauty of nature and undermined the image, livability and identity of every single city in the world. The problem is that for the last three generations, architects have been taught to consider architecture as unbounded from any other obligation, other than to author, client and high technology. And to be focused on design in terms conceptual not optical. Creating every building as a monument, independent of its program or site. Claiming no interest in the collision between their creations and the city & nature into which they are being inserted. And above all, assuming no special consideration or responsibility for the unintended consequences of their actions. The architectural profession as education and practice needs to be urgently reformed.

For any new such initiative to be successful, it would have to conform to some key objectives: align itself with the way our eyes see; know what has been produced through the centuries to satisfy our visual sense; be willing to sustain the com-

Drawing from the book
The concise townscape,
 by Gordon Cullen (1961),
 showing different viewpoints
 of Westminster.



plexity and variety of this production into the future. This would, for all practical purposes, mean a return to the basic principles of Design in Place. Through:

1. An Architecture that is culturally differentiated, as it revives and reinforces the many diverse architectural languages of the world, vernacular, classical and contemporary. Confirming the value of the varied buildings and public spaces that have been produced through them. And discouraging the current process of insatiable image consumption, that is based on the random fusion of internet-copied, and poorly digested form fragments.

2. An Architecture that is the product of cultural continuity. Based on the study and deep understanding of historical, theoretical trends, compositional strategies and informed insights that are pursued beyond the realm of mere personal expression. Prioritizing substance over fashion and place character over the prominence of single objects.

3. An Architecture that is stripped of its status as a self-referential art. And which regains its authority by being conditioned through its relationship to urbanism at many scales, from metropolitan center to hamlet. An architecture can be produced in many intensities: as a distinctive monument, as the quite ingredient of an urban fabric of common buildings, and also as the silent framer of a figure of public space that renders the city as an enabling and free setting for community life.

4. An Architecture that delivers its form in alignment with the many facets of nature. By providing dwelling comfort in all climatic zones. Generating verdant and blooming streetscapes, gardens and parks that inspire relief, relaxation and livability. Conserving nature in a pure enough form that sustains our life-dependence on a healthy and productive planet.

5. An Architecture that is decoupled from its addiction on the oil economy. And which regains its purpose and identity as a life-affirming art by promoting durability as the first priority of sustainability. By the judicious use of locally-obtained natural materials. And by being realized through the kinds of labor-intense technologies that spread the construction wealth to all segments of society.

It may seem that these strategies for reforming Architecture in our lifetime constitute an impossible agenda with a limited chance of success. Yet, desperate times demand exceptional initiatives. One architect's memory lapse in recalling the true scale of the Pantheon may be mitigated by a more focused study of the building itself, a sharper understanding of its place relative to the building fabric surrounding it, a fuller appreciation of the formal and dimensional characteristics of the Piazza della Rotonda, and most of all, by a deeper insight into the nature of seeing.

A whole profession's memory lapse of all that the human race has ever seen, known and designed is inexcusable if not catastrophic. The current deliberate rejection of the historic nature and mission of Architecture and Urbanism by architects could well be the end of the world that we have known, loved and taken for granted for a few millenia.

The End

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