

‘The feeling of space’:  
Notes on Walter Benjamin and Architecture

Andrew Benjamin

0.

Walter Benjamin’s writings – especially in *The Arcades Project* – evince a sustained engagement with architecture. The architecture in question takes on a number of different forms.<sup>1</sup> He writes about the use of iron in architecture, especially in Convoluted F, thus the locus of engagement in that particular context is initially with both materials and material possibility. In addition, he also offers a sustained encounter with a range of books that document current concerns within the practice and history of architecture as understood in the contemporary period; one of the most important was Emil Kaufmann’s *Von LeDoux bis Le Corbusier*. Kaufmann’s is also a text whose project is the interplay between construction and historical time.<sup>2</sup> Other texts by Benjamin take up either the language or the preoccupations of architecture. Benjamin writes about cities; Moscow, Marseilles and Naples, for example, are each attributed a specific text. (The latter written with Asja Lacis.) The urban figures as part of a more general attempt to engage with modernity. Baudelaire becomes the key figure; though equally the dandy and the Flaneur are characters in the city. They have no other place. While the urban may be contrasted to architecture, in the context of his writings both have to be thought together. Benjamin names a text, *Einbahnstraße*, as though the presence of an urban thoroughfare gives thought a specific direction by creating a dense field of inquiry. This ‘one-way street’ should be contrasted with the methodological impulse from *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* that also invokes the urban, namely the famous proposition that ‘*Methode ist Umweg*’ (Method is digression).<sup>3</sup>

Rather than identify in advance what architecture means within Benjamin’s voluminous writings a start will be made with a specific formulation that appears in *The Arcades Project*. The initial significance of the passage is that within it, not only is a major claim made about architecture, that claim is linked to the presence of an example. Benjamin writes;

It must be kept in mind that the magnificent urban views opened up by the new construction in iron – Giedion, in his *Bauen in Frankreich* gives excellent examples with the *Pont Transbordeur* in Marseilles – for a long time were evident only to workers and engineers. • Marxism • For in those days who besides the engineer and the proletarian has climbed the steps that alone made it possible to recognize (*zu erkennen*) what was new and decisive (*Neue, Entscheidende*) about these structures? The feeling of space (*das Raumgefühl*)?<sup>4</sup>

Was this ‘feeling of space’ – a feeling afforded by the *Pont Transbordeur*, an architectural work that results from specific material possibilities - reducible to the

language of experience? Such a reduction would trivialize what is at stake. Note Benjamin in the passage joins the language of feeling to the presence of knowledge or recognition. And, moreover, complicates the position held by the experiencing subject by insisting on the original interplay of universality and particularity. Within that setting the 'feeling' was itself recognized. Affect endures, though not as an end in itself. It is there with, and within, processes of recognition. The *Pont Transbordeur* in Marseilles is presented both as an effect of its materials and as that which was 'new' and 'decisive'. The latter were recognized and felt; there was both knowledge and feeling. Benjamin is also clear about the role of materials. They have a direct quality. He quotes, approvingly, from A.G. Meyer's *Eisenbauten*, to the effect that what defines iron construction is its 'distinctiveness' (*Eigenart*). Iron construction is 'the product and expression of the natural properties of the building material'.<sup>5</sup> This position, more exactly its inverse, formed a fundamental part of Benjamin's own critical engagement with Jugendstil.<sup>6</sup> While Jugendstil deployed the most recent materials, there was a fundamental problem in the movement's own endeavors. For Benjamin 'its recourse to technological motifs arises from the effort to sterilize them ornamentally.'<sup>7</sup> Against this movement of undoing and sterilization stands the material's own potentiality. In this regard Benjamin quotes again, clearly approvingly, from Meyer, that with this material innovation there is a 'beginning' and that as a result the material is able to be 'volatilized in limitless possibilities' (*unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten*).<sup>8</sup> The 'limitless', which is Meyer's term, refers in his text exclusively to material possibility. And yet, were that possibility to be taken as an opening that had to be thought, and this may indeed be what the passage's citation in Benjamin's text actually demands, then it is this play of limits that becomes the point of orientation. Material possibility opens up the realm of possibility now understood however as the refusal of limits; the continuity of opening is the limitless, the immediate significance of which is that it is a continuity without an identifiable image. In this regard one of Benjamin's chief concerns is the documentation of the way that the 'limitless' – again understood as a form of potentiality – comes to be curtailed. Pure openness would be the both philosophically and politically naive. Jugendstil curtails possibilities by reducing material possibility to ornamentation. Ornamentation is, of course, the identification of a possibility or a potentiality with an image that curtails both in advance. As part of his citational investigation of the question of limits, openings, and images not only will Benjamin cite further contemporary evidence, e.g. newspapers, he also identifies ways in which the 'limitless' gets to be delimited and restricted and where those modes of delimitation and restriction are then naturalized by the manner in which the interplay of historical time and the creation of the 'today' that it generates, are themselves understood.

The project here is the identification of the 'limitless', and thus, of a limitlessness that continues to circumvent the hold of the final determining image. This involves as much a rethinking of what material possibility entails as it does the developing of another sense of historical time and its specific 'today'. The first step is making clear in what sense the naturalization of normativity is the undoing of the 'limitless'. If there is a counter to the refusal of the 'limitless', then can be understood in terms of what will emerge neither as the affirmation of pure limitlessness, a project that would come undone the moment an image became necessary, nor as range of possible acts oscillating between pure destruction and simple repetition, but a spatial correlation to the 'new' and the 'decisive'. It would no longer be identified with the creation of a new object but with spatial registration. There would be another

conception of space, a third space. And thus, there would be another sense of spatiality. A sense that involves both the affective and the project of knowledge/recognition where both are linked to analysis and creation thought within the distancing of that sense of finality with which particulars are synthesized into a whole. This is of course, if only in part, a position to which Benjamin alludes when he writes of the complex sense of subjectivity that was implicated in the recognition of 'the feeling of space' (*das Raumgefühl*). Here emphasis shifts from object to space. While it will need to be taken up at a later stage, it is vital to recognize that the claim always has to be that the 'limitless' is a description that identifies a potentiality. It does not name that which is, of necessity, already actualized. Moreover, this 'feeling of space' is an opening. While the opening is linked to an example, the example should be neither literalized nor attributed an interiority such that it is taken to point to a hidden or inner truth. The recognition of the feeling is contemporaneous with the *Pont Transbordeur*. However, the significance is the interruption, the point of connection, is equally one without automatic assimilability. What is present is a field in which any suggestion of a synthetic unity has come undone. That undoing will of course have to resist what Benjamin will name as those 'military orders' that would attempt to 'confine' any interruptive particularity to the 'barracks'. These military and architectural references will become clear. At stake within the interruptions, the openings, the continuity of engagement with the 'limitless', the refusal of unity and thus the possibilities that this now emergent third space holds open is the fleeting presence of what Benjamin identifies as 'the true life'. A life that occurs in what will emerge as the 'space of existence'

## 1.

In Convolute G of *The Arcades Project*, in a series of citations and comments on exhibitions, Benjamin quotes from Sigfried Giedion. In G2,3 he cites a passage in which Giedion notes that in contemporary exhibitions what can be observed is 'a peculiar demand for premature synthesis' (*ein merkwürdiges Bedürfnis nach verfrühter Synthesis*).<sup>9</sup> To which it can be added that this movement cannot be separated from a mode of thinking that is itself compatible with the generation of 'the total work of art' (*Gesamtskunstwerk*). Benjamin goes on to comment on the citation. There are two reasons for his interest in the passage. Firstly, it is because of his particular methodological and political opposition to the positing of any form of synthesis, and secondly because of his own critique of a conception of the work of art in which that work has an all-encompassing and self-completing finality. Benjamin comments on the passage from Giedion. In that comment he repeats the words 'premature synthesis' (*verfrühter Synthesis*). The use of the temporalizing term '*verfrühter*' needs to be noted. Synthesis and totality have a particular quality. They are precipitate. Were they to obtain, they would mask the reality of what is at play. Benjamin writes in G2,3 that 'these premature syntheses also bespeak a persistent endeavor to close up the space of existence and of developments (*den Raum des Daseins und der Entwicklung*).' What is significant here is that what counters both the synthetic and totality is holding open a space in which limits no longer pertain automatically. There is an opening. It is not just 'the space of existence', it is the space in which other lives become possible. Again, it can be thought of as a third space with a twofold presence. Occurring as much within the given, as it is within any concomitant architectural or political reinforcement of the given. (However, it should not be thought that the given does not have its own sense of innovations and

the new. Innovation in such a setting is that version of the new that leaves the repetition of the given both untroubled and unquestioned. A reiteration, therefore, in which the 'true life' becomes mere life, mere life is the life within normativity's naturalization. In the latter there is still a sense of life, however it one in which the patina of design allows it to take on the semblance of true life.)

Within the creation, recovery and thus promulgation of a third space – which is there as an insistent possibility – there is an intimation of the relationship between the 'feeling of space', the 'limitless' and other possibilities for life. Rather than a closure it becomes necessary to hold open 'the space of existence'. This space continues in terms of what was identified above as a third space. The interplay of 'developments' and the limitless' has therefore an essential quality. This point is central. Developments and forms of progress are possible. And yet, developments and progress are neither forms of space creation or modalities of time in any conventional sense, they are inextricably linked to the actualization of potentialities; actualization as space creation. Further instances in which that space comes to be closed – closed in the precise sense of being present as a synthesized unity refusing genuine forms of interruption, thus closing down the possibility of what been referred to here as third space – also occurs in the Convolute devoted to 'Iron Construction'. Citing the passages in question opens up both the context with which Benjamin is concerned and also indicates part of his own method.

The first passage - F3a,2 – is located in *The Arcades Project* just after the extract from A.F. Meyer that underscores the presence of 'limitless possibilities' in iron construction. The two passages are the following:

Meanwhile, how it looked in the vulgar consciousness (*im Vulgärbewußtsein*) is indicated by the crass yet typical utterance of a contemporary journalist, according to whom posterity will one day have to confess, "In the nineteenth century, ancient Greek architecture once again blossomed (*ebühte ... weider*) in its classical purity." *Europa*, 2 (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1837), p. 207<sup>10</sup>

Protest against the Eiffel Tower (*Protestation gegen den Eiffelturm*): 'We come, as writers, painters, sculptors, architects, . . . in the name of French art and French history, both of which are threatened. . . to protest against the construction, in the very heart of our capital, of the useless and monstrous Eiffel Tower. . . Its barbarous mass overwhelms Notre-Dame, the Sainte-Chapelle, the Tower of Saint-Jacques. All our monuments are debased (*humiliés*), our architecture diminished." Cited in Louis Cheronnet. "Les Trois Grand-meres de l'exposition," *Vendredi*, April 30, 1937.<sup>11</sup>

Both quotations are from contemporary magazines. The contrast announced therefore is in relation to the 'limitless'. There is incorporation as assimilation, and then incorporation as absolute refusal. Relationality and opening remain unthought. Both texts provide an insight into that which stands opposed to the 'limitless' and the constancy of third space's possibility. In should be recalled that for Meyer, quoted by Benjamin, the advent of iron meant a 'beginning'. While Benjamin cites the passage in which Meyer posits 'beginnings', for Benjamin an actual beginning is constantly threatened. It can be flatly denied or denied more subtly by having been located within, for example, the interplay of ornamentation and the temporality of fashion.

This accounts for why one threat to any actual beginning is the form given it by Jugendstil. The 'beginning' and the 'limitless' are undone in that specific context by the identification of material possibility with strategies of ornamentation. Another is the position advanced by 'vulgar consciousness' who sees in the present, understood as chronology's insistent now, the reiteration of past forms. Moreover, a reiteration in which what returns is 'Greek architecture .. in its classical purity'. Openings closed by the repetitive 'blooming' of what had already been. Time will have been smoothed out; disruptions smoothed over.

The passage from the French social democratic magazine *Vendredi*, and it should be remembered that this is a passage from a French newspaper that is simply reproduced as it is, Benjamin does not comment apart from a few opening words, is concerned with the effects of a new architectural edifice on a pre-existing one. This 'protest' (this is one of the few words of Benjamin's) is against the Eiffel Tower. The 'protest' matters. However, it does not matter in itself. Its significance is elsewhere. What is significant within the extract is that it records the failure to engage with how the juxtaposition of the 'new' and the 'old' is to be understood. In sum, both extracts demonstrate that what greets interruption in the present is a failure to understand the complexity of the present. And yet, understanding the present and what comprises the present, the present that while alluding to the present within chronological time – newspapers bear dates after all - cannot be reduced to it, is a preoccupation of Benjamin's. A preoccupation, moreover, that is integral to understanding the way the politics of time are at work in his thinking. In *Convolute H*, a folder containing notes and citations dealing with 'collecting', there is an entry of decisive importance. Within it, time, the present and space are all staged with reference to architecture. Within it, moreover, the possibility of third space is identified once again. The note is the following:

The true method (*Die wahre Methode*) of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space). (The collector does just this, and so does the anecdote.) Thus represented, the things allow no mediating construction from out of "large contexts". The same method applies (in essence) to the consideration of great things from the past - the cathedral of Chartres, the temple of Paestum - when, that is, a favorable prospect presents itself: the method of receiving the things into our space (*unserm Raum*). We don't displace our being into theirs; they step into our life (*Nicht wir versetzen uns in sie, sie treten in unser Leben*).<sup>12</sup>

When Benjamin writes of the temple at Paestum he writes without necessarily knowing that this is in all likelihood the temple about which Heidegger writes in *The Origin of the Work of Art*.<sup>13</sup> As with Heidegger, Benjamin is engaging with the sense of history proper to human being. For Heidegger the temple presents. Its elemental figuring becomes a marker within which human being discovers its own sense of propriety. As a site, for Heidegger, it 'opens a world'. For Benjamin, on the contrary, these entities 'step into our lives'. They do not provide access to a truth, truth resides in how the relationship between their presence and the presence of 'our life' is to be understood. Benjamin provides two examples – though they are more hints than examples – of how to understand the 'true method' of a making present and therefore of understanding presentation. Both the 'collector' and the 'anecdote' act in accord with the truth of things. 'Anecdote' is an odd and unsettling term. It marks an

interruption that fractures unity, that comes from the outside and whose incorporation is a question, continually becoming a question, a question whose acuity can be maintained but which has an almost inevitable precarity. The term occurs a number of times in *The Arcades Project*. Note the following.

The constructions of history are comparable to military orders that discipline the true life and confine it to barracks (*die das wahre Leben kuranzen und kaserniern.*) On the other hand: the street insurgence of the anecdote (*der Straßenaufstand der Anekdote*). The anecdote brings things near to us spatially, lets them enter our life. It represents the strict antithesis to the sort of history which demands "empathy;" which makes everything abstract.<sup>14</sup>

There is a continuing refrain of the anecdote's capacity for 'insurgence' or to stage an 'uprising'. The activity of the anecdote already has an urban context. Benjamin is clear. He writes of 'the street insurgence of the anecdote (*der Straßenaufstand der Anekdote*). What is this insurgence? How is the presence of the 'anecdote' to be understood? It should already be clear that it has a fundamental relation to life. Benjamin wrote that the 'anecdote brings things near to us spatially, lets them enter our life'. Hence, there is clearly a link between space creation, which here is the creation of third space, the space that stands in a complex form of opposition to military orders and the architecture of the 'barracks', and taking a stand in relation to life. While these points prepare the way to answering the questions posed above pertaining to what might be described as the concept of the 'anecdote', doing so still necessitates a slight detour through another text by Benjamin. In this instance the text is without any direct reference to architecture, and yet opens within an evocation of spatiality such that it can be interpreted as a text focusing on the very possibility of third space.

## 2.

Benjamin's text *The Destructive Character* was initially published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in November 1931.<sup>15</sup> The title is inherently provocative. Hence the question: how here is destruction to be understood? While the text warrants detailed consideration, in this instance two defining lines will suffice:

The destructive character knows only one word: make room; and only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and free space is stronger than any hatred. (*Der destruktive Charakter kennt nur eine Parole: Platz schaffen; nur eine Tätigkeit: räumen. Sein Bedürfnis nach frischer Luft und freiem Raum ist stärker als jeder Haß.*)<sup>16</sup>

Central to this description of 'the destructive character' is the project of 'room making' (*Platz schaffen*). The activity of 'the destructive' character is further described as 'space making' (*Räumen*).<sup>17</sup> These descriptions have to be qualified. There is a clear need to differentiate between modes of destruction. Haussmanization is one such mode. The activity of 'the destructive character' is a fundamentally different one. In *Convolute E* Benjamin quotes from Marcel Poëte's *Une vie de cité*. Poëte is himself citing a justification for the creation of 'large thoroughfares' in the city of Paris during the time of Napoleon III. Their construction amounted to what Benjamin describes as a 'radical transformation of Paris'.<sup>18</sup> The

internal justification was clear. The transformation meant that the new roads “did not lend themselves ‘to the habitual tactic of local insurrection (*des insurrections locales*).”<sup>19</sup> Here ‘insurrection’ refers to the reality of actual or possible historical occurrences. However, what is at stake is a modality of policing. Policing is not a benign activity for Benjamin. It is through policing, which for Benjamin is indissolubly bound up with ‘blood’ (*Blut*), that that ‘the mighty’ (*Die Herrschenden*) secure their ‘position’.<sup>20</sup> What that means is that there is an obvious politics of destruction. There are decisions leading in one direction rather than another. The politics in question do not refer to a moral dimension but to life. In the language of *The Destructive Character* one direction is organized by ‘the need for fresh air and free space’. Insurrection occurs for the possibility of another life; one which may be closer to what Benjamin has already referred to as ‘the true life’.

There is a general claim here, namely that what attends every moment is the possibility that what is could be other. There is the continuity of potentiality. Again, there cannot be pure openness since what actually attends that continuity are forces that restrict, circumvent, police, etc, the possibility of any actualization. Haussmanization names one historically located form of restriction. And yet, once its presence as a form of restriction is given full force then it is not difficult to see that Haussmanization, while having a historical reality, is simply one more measure that has the form of a ‘military order’ that in Benjamin’s formulation disciplines ‘the true life’. Given that it is a specific measure, a question arises: What here would count as a *counter-measure*? What would such a measure effect? Answering these questions would have to start with the move from Haussmanization, as being no more than a historical referent, to its location with a generalized conception of policing. As such, what then has to be reintroduced is what Benjamin has named as the ‘anecdote’.

The anecdote has at least two qualities. As a beginning there is what has already been identified as the ‘street insurgence of the anecdote’; then there is the anecdote as providing insight into what a ‘true method’ might be. In the second instance the anecdote is linked to the ‘true order’ insofar as it refuses the possibility of a natural order let alone of the naturalization of order. The true order attends as a possibility. The structure of the anecdote reveals the present to be the locus of different modalities of time. Understanding the implications of their presence is to recognize that synthesis seeks to undo the genuine presence of a politics of time in the name of the politics of variety. The first quality needs to be set against a broader understanding of Haussmanization. Haussmanization is the attempt to establish a form of spatial organization which, while its end goal is the policing of space this is achieved by a synthesis of all spatial relations. Obviously, there are more or less benign versions of these procedures. Nonetheless, what they all comprise is a centralization of technological power within the organization of the urban. The anecdote resists automatic assimilation to this setting. More significantly the connection between the anecdote and the conception of destruction introduced by ‘the destructive character’ establishes, albeit abstractly, a connection between the anecdote as a modality of interruption and destruction as a modality of creation. While Benjamin is not an urbanist let alone an architect what his writings show however is the sensibility involved in having to conceptualize what an intervention entails. The anecdote becomes a way of thinking interruption. Third space, as it has emerged from these notes, identifies the interrelationship between what might be called the logic of the anecdote and the creative power of destruction.





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<sup>1</sup> The discussion of architecture here is limited for the most part to the presence of architectural and urban considerations in Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*. All references are to *The Arcades Project*. (Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin.) Harvard University Press. Cambridge. 2002. (Occasionally translations have been modified.) Subsequent reference to *The Arcades Project* is to the numbering scheme within the volume itself. References to the German are to Volumes V.2 and V.2 in Walter Benjamin *Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> The best discussion of the contribution and significance of Kaufman can be found in Anthony Vidler. *Histories of the Immediate Present*. MIT Press. Cambridge. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*

<sup>4</sup> F3,5

<sup>5</sup> F3a,5

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Walter Benjamin's engagement with Jugendstil see my *Style and Time. Essays on the Politics of Appearance*. Northwestern University Press. Evanston. 2006. Pages 39-60. I

<sup>7</sup> S8a,1

<sup>8</sup> F3a,1

<sup>9</sup> G2,3

<sup>10</sup> F3a,2

<sup>11</sup> F8,2

<sup>12</sup> H2,3

<sup>13</sup> See Heidegger's The Origin of the Work of Art. In Martin Heidegger. *Basic Writings*. (Translated and Edited by D.F. Krell). Harpers. San Francisco. 1993. While it cannot be done here it would be productive to take the presence of the Temple at Paestum as a way of plotting the differences between Heidegger and Benjamin.

<sup>14</sup> Sla,3

<sup>15</sup> Reference to The Destructive Character here is to the German text Walter Benjamin *Gesammelte Schriften*. Band IV.1. 396-8. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> GS.IV.1.397

<sup>17</sup> GS.IV.1.397

<sup>18</sup> E1,6

<sup>19</sup> E1,4

<sup>20</sup> E5a,7