

## Introduction

# Psychoanalysis and Architecture

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Theodor Reik, in his 1937 paper on “Surprise in Psychoanalysis” pointed out that where the analyst is surprised, brought up short, by something the analysand has said, this generally indicates a glimpse of something crucial, something that relates to the unconscious. Analysts will be familiar with that sense of sudden alert that results from the surprising elements in the discourse of the analysand, the bits that “stick out”, that do not fit smoothly into the landscape. So the element of surprise comes from the uncanny, what does not work, what does not seem to be part of the discourse of the ego, what does not make sense. From a Lacanian point of view, it is the real that emerges out of the apparent gestalt of the symbolic, the skull in the picture that only fleetingly comes into view. So what to make of this strange and surprising juxtapositioning of architecture with psychoanalysis? I was interested to find that it surprised psychoanalysts more than it did architects. It might be expected that psychoanalysts are well used to having to ply their trade, as it were, in the field of all sorts of creative enterprises. After all, the symptom in psychoanalytic sense, is a kind of construction,

a building of a partly protective apparatus. One might therefore anticipate that this pairing would make intuitive sense to psychoanalysts, who we suppose know about these things, more than to architects who we assume do not. When I told a number of colleagues (both in psychiatry and in psychoanalysis) that I would be chairing a session on Psychoanalysis and Architecture, I was met with surprise – and incomprehension. What could psychoanalysis have to say about architecture, and how could architects say something about psychoanalysis? One would be forgiven for assuming a degree of ignorance on both sides. And yet ignorance is part and parcel of the ethics of psychoanalysis. Lacan suggests that the analyst maintain a *docta ignorantia*, a doctrine of ignorance about the particularities of the analysand. He may know much theory but does not know the answers as such. The analysand, meanwhile does know his own answers but is blind to them – he has a *méconnaissance*, a mis-knowing about his own truth. It is only through the non-sensical, through free association and the analyst's studied ignorance about the unconscious that it can be known. Paradoxically, this free speech on the part of the analyst depends on the transference which requires the supposition that the analyst is a subject who may know the answers – the installation of what Lacan calls the *sujet supposé savoir*. To be surprised therefore, is essential to the enterprise of psychoanalysis but to draw us in we need to assume that the answer lies

somewhere. Perhaps this is the basis of all attempts at relating psychoanalysis to other disciplines – a transference hope that it will tell us something about our own enterprise and about ourselves. There is always a danger in this approach becoming a kind of applied psychoanalysis. Instances of the odious results of this spring to mind – some notable works of psychobiography, or psychoanalytic post-mortem, for instance. However, rather than resulting in a complacent mapping out – or flattening out - of the psyche using architectural coordinates, the surprising juxtapositioning of psychoanalysis and architecture suggested many more fruitful routes of enquiry and opportunities for further discourse.

Attending the session in Newman House had particular memories for me. At one time I had held a Newman scholarship through University College Dublin; the philosophy behind the scholarship was to foster research and further education, in keeping with Cardinal Newman's original idea of the university. In an earlier life, as a medical student, the basement of that now-restored building was the scene of many examinations. The church next door was, not surprisingly, the scene of many a last-ditch pre-exam prayer. During my happy tenure of that scholarship, that basement was transformed into a gourmet restaurant (now closed) which provided many wonderful dinners, regular attendance at which was one of the "perks" of the scholarship. As that period had allowed me

to develop psychoanalytic research and writing, there was a particular resonance in revisiting Newman House which may have had an unconscious effect – after all I and many colleagues had been made into *new men* there – bachelors of medicine, surgery, masters of this and that. However, these symbolic mandates can be anxiogenic, as was the mandate handed to me to chair the session. There was a certain comfort in chairing this session on familiar ground, but also a degree of anxiety that (as in many of those examinations in the basement) I would not know the answers (as I certainly had a real, not studied, ignorance about architecture) and that the discourse might come to an uncomfortable standstill and end in silence. Fortunately, that was not the case. These papers, from different perspectives, address the shift (within psychoanalysis, within Freud and from ego psychology to Lacan) from subject caused by trauma to subjective structure, from psychotherapy to psychoanalysis, from the influence of the social on the individual, to the influence of the individual on the social.

The “traditional”, or popular view of psychoanalysis is that it concerns itself with past events, with temporality as it were. Paradoxically, within this traditional view, the unconscious is often thought of spatially – as a location, a place. These views owe much to the ego psychology school, but are at odds with Lacan’s rehabilitation

of the Freudian subject. Lacan proposes the subject not as a series of layers, with the id on the bottom and the ego acting as kind of “lid” on the top, but rather as the artefactual product of repression, operating as a function of the tension between the real, symbolic and imaginary. Consciousness comes about as a result of repression which creates a sense that there is something “hidden”, something that lies beneath. So the conscious and the unconscious are two sides of the same coin, of the same Moebius strip and therefore the “container” model does not apply to the human subject. The unconscious is ethical rather than ontological – it emerges, it has an effect rather than occupying a place or having an existence. Likewise, the unconscious in fact has no temporality although many of us experience the unconscious as relating in some way to past traumas which take on a meaning, a causative role in our conscious discourse. There is something in the operation of the unconscious that deceives us as to its nature. This deception is an necessary one however. We need a sense of self-continuity in order to exist as conscious subjects and so the real is experienced as causation, as something “before” which caused “after”. We need a sense of spatial perspective – both of internal and external space – in order to exist in the world without it coming in on top of us. So these effects are artefactual, results of the nature of the unconscious and its operation but are at the same time, necessary ego functions which prevent

us from being psychotic.

If architecture concerns itself with space and construction, how can it say something about psychoanalysis which deconstructs and concerns itself with something that has no place and no ontology? It seems to me that architecture also concerns itself with time –the creation of permanent constructions, history, and memories – if that is so, how can it address the atemporal unconscious? To many people, the notion of architecture includes a reverence for the old, for old buildings. The aesthetic value of old buildings is tied up partly in a nostalgia for the past. There is a sense – both in nostalgia for the old, and in the nostalgic perspective on the subject, that it allows one to be master in one's own (old) house. Nostalgia is of course grounded in the ego psychology school of thought which reversed Freud's most crucial discovery, that it was not trauma that was the basis of hysterical symptoms, but rather phantasy – that trauma depended on language. So, nostalgia harkens back to the past but fails to recognise the role of phantasy in its own creation. The Freudian/ Lacanian view, by contrast, points up the phantastical basis of nostalgic memory, the operation of *nachträglichkeit*, of afterwardness which distorts memories. Sharon Kivland's estate agent shows us around Freud's houses and seems to straddle this uneasy gap – an estate agent, after all, sells a phantasy, but with a certain cynicism. He knows

the phantasy is just that, and that the house is just bricks and mortar, and – dare we say it – location, but has to keep up the pretence, the imaginary side of things so that he can sell houses. Perhaps this sales job underlines the tension between the phantasy and the real, between the discourse of the analysand and that of the analyst, between the ego and the unconscious. On the one hand, the architect seems to deal in the currency of the ego, of identity – it is about material, stuff, things, constructions, locations, creations. On the other hand, it appeals to the unconscious – it is often controversial, provokes affective reactions, and rarely fits seamlessly into the space that it occupies. The endless creation of architecture calls to mind the endless articulation, the “being spoken” that is human subjectivity. Architecture does not “work”, which is why it must be constantly recreated, evoking the constant circling of the *automaton* of the symbolic around the *tuché* of the real.

Le Corbusier’s description of the Parthenon as a “terrible machine” which grinds and dominates is evocative of Lacan’s symbolic automaton, that which keeps on going. His almost agoraphobic response to the Parthenon suggests that that the tension between the symbolic and real was not mediated by the imaginary, the phantasy that makes things bearable. At the risk of undertaking “wild” psychoanalysis here, I suggest that the Parthenon represented, alternately a pure

symbolic, or pure real, with nothing to mediate these registers. If the real is anxiogenic, is it possible that the unmediated symbolic is depressogenic? Surely depression is characterised by the absence of the imaginary – would we not all kill ourselves if we saw things are they really are? The Parthenon in this sense confronted Le Corbusier with the reality of his own subjectivity, without the benefit of a chance to get used to the idea. Might we see his silence on the matter for many years as similar to that of the analysand faced with the demand of psychoanalysis to speak? We could understand this effect of the Parthenon as underlining the essentially a-historical or a-temporal nature of the subject – the fact that the subject does not really have a cause in the traditional sense. This may be why the Tennessee Parthenon has completely the opposite effect – it offers a nostalgic view, as opposed to the analytic view of the subject. It is all imaginary – a stylistic, phantasy version of the original but without a symbolic or real dimension to give it substance.

It seems logical to argue – as I believe all of the authors do in different ways – that architecture represents an attempt to articulate subjective structure – or more accurately, an attempt to articulate the relationship of the subject with the Other, to answer the subject's questions about "what does the Other want of me?", "where (literally) do I stand in relation to the Other", even

“what sort of space do I occupy?” In addressing the matter of subjective structure, the papers that follow echo the various twists and turns of perspective that the structure of the subject has undergone at least in Western thought. Freud’s experiences on the Acropolis raised this question of subjective structure in a way that perhaps only the vastness of architecture can. Somewhat in the manner of a trauma, the Acropolis, like the Parthenon for Le Corbusier, call into question the subject’s relation to the Other, with the symbolic order. It is not surprising that they are anxiogenic. Faye Carey refers to Freud’s experiences of derealisation and indeed of surprise, which underline the essentially divided nature of the subject. Contrary to the artefactual sense of self-continuity and wholeness that I suggest are similar to the “delusions” described by Money-Kyrle, the reality is that the subject is fragmented and that the fragmented ego is never very far away. This paper nicely captures the necessary tension between the “common-sense” view of the subject as a whole and the psychoanalytic view of the subject as divided by the very symbolic order that allows it to exist as desiring. This tension is evoked in the discussion on Freud’s wish to return to the mother vis--vis his wish to triumph over the father. A Lacanian reading of this might suggest that so-called castration anxiety is in fact a phobic rewriting of a deeper anxiety, the anxiety provoked by the engulfing mother - the real which threatens to swallow the subject, as it were. The Oedipus

complex allows the subject to gain a distance from this terrifying mother but there is a price to be paid in the form of subjective division, lack; it is hardly surprising therefore that the wish provoked in Freud at the Acropolis was associated with anxiety - anxiety which results from the engulfing of the subject by the mother, what one might call the lack of a lack. Anxiety which relates to a castrating father is not seen commonly in clinical practice nowadays at least - far more common is the anxiety which results from the failure of the Oedipus complex.

The early Freudian viewpoint relied on an historical, deterministic notion of the subject as *caused* which was thrown on its head by his discovery of the Oedipus complex. Donald Judd's struggle with the flatness of painting and the more satisfactory nature of objects seems to evoke this Copernican turn of Freud's (rehabilitated by Lacan). Judd seems to have concerned himself with a symbolic, rather than symbolizing things – it is as though he needed to resolve the failure of the relation with the Other (a failure which is materialized in the various orifices of the body) but also needed to maintain himself as a desiring subject. In his suggestion that Bonticou's work is not a representation, one hears an echo of Lacan's insistence that the Moebius strip is not a metaphor. That is simply how it is – the object plus space equals desire. It is very notable that Judd's objects are not in any sense containers – he is

most definitely not trying to “represent” or metaphorize, in the way that the ego psychology reading of the psyche tries to characterize the subject as a container (full of id). There is a dynamic, endless quality to his objects that suggests Lacan’s pulsatile version of the subject.

If architecture speaks to the structure of the subject, why is its appeal so individual? John Abell’s paper on empathy and the aesthetic qualities of architecture considers this question. Perhaps we could say that what appeals to us about specific architectural forms depends on our subjective structure. Lacan preferred this notion to more temporally-reliant concepts of phases of development. Of course, it may be going too far to suggest that a psycho-diagnostics based on one’s reaction to various architectural constructions is possible, but you never know...! Nonetheless, architecture addresses social structures which are a product of subjective structure; while a “common-sense”, psychological interpretation might be that social structures are necessary to keep individual instincts under control; a more psychoanalytical consideration suggests that in fact social institutions and structures are created by the structure of the subject.

Despite the value of a psychoanalytically-informed reading of architecture, however, I suspect that if psychoanalysts were to design houses, they would be fairly uninhabitable. Richard Patterson’s paper

underlines the subject's need for perspective – just as in existence we need a view of ourselves, a self-narrative, a way of considering ourselves – perhaps, simply, an answer to the question of space. “Where do I stand (in relation to the Other)?” He correctly points out that it is an error to conflate the visual with the spatial. It is not surprising that the preferred perspective in Western architecture is that of the tragic genre. Much as the subject of trauma has been privileged initially in Freud's early theories on hysteria, and latterly in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder, the tragic perspective in architecture seems to have an innate appeal, to the Western psyche at least. (It is worth noting that not all languages or cultures have the same vocabulary to describe trauma.) The price to be paid for perspective, is, after all, repression, but its side effect is the desiring subject.

To my reading, the Western subject seems to have a need for an historical view, a plot-line as it were, a notion of the subject as having been caused. A perspective makes things bearable – we need to have a comfortable sense of inside versus outside. Yet, as we know from psychoanalysis, it is not that simple. We are divided, not complete, subjects and certainly not subjects with an inside and an outside. Perhaps good architecture should remind us of this, but gently, not without an element of surprise or even a degree of uncanniness, and when we are ready

for it – like a good analyst.

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