

# Aesthetic Investigations

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## Architecture is Not Public Art

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**Abstract:** In this ‘Editor’s column’, I question whether architecture is what we have come to call *Public Art*. It seems nonsense to say that architecture is not an art, when it is obviously something that people make for audiences, i.e. for other people who admire it. Moreover, architecture steers and influences people. Evidently, all of culture is by and for people and influences people. But when is culture art? Is design an art – is architecture?

With this my last Editor’s column I am stepping down as the editor-in-chief.

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### INTRODUCTION

We walk the streets looking at the built environment, thinking our thoughts, living our lives and entertaining our personal associations. That is one thing we standardly do with buildings. Could we then argue that we are walking in or alongside works of art? Or does that, rather, obliterate the distinction between art and non-art?

Here is another thing. Last year I moved to a new home. It was built in the 1970s and rebuilt drastically over the last five years, so everything was practically new, with all the apparatuses one could wish for and ample cupboard space, a spacious kitchen, and floor heating all over the house. The house is near the end of a dead-end street situated up against the woods. It is maximally silent. We feel engulfed by nature, large trees, flowers, animals: a snake, a fox, birds – it was autumn when we moved. I could not wait for Summer to arrive. The roof is decked with solar panels. The floors and

sanitary spaces are tiled in dark grey stone. It feels like we are on holiday, in a newly built hotel.

The contrast with our previous house could hardly be bigger. That house was built in 1905, situated in the heart of the city of Utrecht, looking out over a park that is crossed by a bicycle lane connecting the inner city with the university campus. Hardly any cars drove by in our street then, but within three kilometres several large highways turn Utrecht into a hub of our province. Every morning upon awakening, we would hear cars race by in the near distance. The interior of that house was classical, with beautifully adorned high ceilings, and black marbled mantelpieces, French oak parquet everywhere, sanitary spaces tiled white. A cosy house by all standards, but rather dark – sparse inlet of sun light; we always had the lights on – hardly any isolation, no cavity walls, no solar panels on the roof.

Talking about these houses in this ways seems appropriate. It gives an audience some idea of the architecture, and of what it means to live in these houses. Objectively, the new house is beautiful, situated marvellously, and absolutely comfortable; but subjectively when we moved in, it felt at times, as I said, like a hotel. What would be wrong with that? Well, a hotel is not your home, you are only passing by. You are there for a few days and then you move on. There is no need, or opportunity to feel at home there.



*A walk in Coimbra,  
Portugal*

*Walking in a modern city*

**Figure 1:** Public space

Still, that is what we try to do in a hotel too. It is what we are: creatures needing to feel at home wherever they are. That is the thing with tourists: we fly long distances to find some unknown part of the world, and upon arrival we have but one aim, to come to grips with the environment. Where are the

shops, where is the action, where are the restaurants, the bars, the museums, the no-go areas, and so on? It is how we respond to the built environment: it is what we do with architecture.

After we moved, we returned to the old house to quickly clean up and do the gardening for the next owners. We had already emptied out the house, so all I saw was the structure of its parts, the walls and all the traces we had left on them while living there for 12 years. Already, I had a hard time understanding how our lives there had been. It seemed like an abstraction to imagine us sitting watching television, eating breakfast, going to bed, living with our two sons, and so on. Our lives had left the building, which returned to being a beautiful heap of stones and wood, ready to be brought to life by its next inhabitants. After working in the old house for five hours, we returned to our new house which was still waiting to be turned into our new home – still very much like a hotel, waiting for us to fill it with the contents of our boxes, with our life.

## ARCHITECTURE

Architecture provides spaces that one can move about in. And moving about is more than just moving your body; it is moving your body to do things and to feel the things that your actions bring about. Simple examples are: we enter a building to get out of the rain, to sit and drink, to sit and read, to sit and talk, or to use our computer, do the dishes and sleep.

Whatever our aims, the buildings we enter have an influence on what we do and feel. Buildings confront those who enter them with a circulation lay-out. Which direction should one take, where are the rooms to dwell in, the stairs to mount, the other people, neighbours or customers? What forms do the corridors have, and so on? Which types of behaviour are called for, which are prohibited and how are these opportunities and prohibitions communicated? And what does all this feel like?

You could say of one group of trees that it is packed and impenetrable, of another that it consists mostly of open space. As such, the woods, too, have a program in store for us. But there is a difference, of course, and it has to do with the intentions of the ones who designed the space. In the woods, the trees themselves have a say, too. Not all is determined by landscape architects. Similarly, walls and floors have their own materiality – the building blocks of ... the buildings.

At this basic level, it makes sense to call architecture an art: some person or persons' intentions are realised in buildings and public places. But we would be hard-pressed if we were required to *interpret* a floor or a wall whenever they are passing through a building as to what it is trying to say to them. Sometimes this *is* what we are supposed to be doing – and in those cases you might think of the building as art in the narrower sense that applies to music, painting, theatre, photography, poetry, and so on.

Interpreting works of art guides us to a thought intentionally realised in the work for us to be picked up. Let us call that art in the sense that we know from the *Modern System of the Fine Arts* as it was conceived in 18th century. Charles de Batteux argued, in 1746, that the fine arts are to be distinguished from the functional arts for being aesthetic – whereas the functional arts are first and foremost . . . functional.<sup>1</sup> But architecture, no matter how beautiful or interesting streets and buildings may be, must always also be functional, and primarily so. So-called follies are not functional – that is exactly their point, if you will – and for that reason they cannot be called architecture.

So generally, building is an artful craft in the functional sense, an artefact, but it is not an art in the sense of the modern system of the fine arts. Architecture is meant to be used, and even though it will restrict our thought, feelings, and actions in some programmatic way, this is not to be understood as something we are to ponder about, not the subject matter or artistic expression of the building – as we know from works of art. It is not an art critical mistake to ignore, while living in it, the house you call your home.

To summarise what I have been arguing, architecture is an art, but in a merely general sense. It is functional, made with certain purposes in mind, that are primarily, or eventually functional, not aesthetic – even though architecture will have aesthetic properties, as everything does, including clouds, trees, design and, indeed, art. But perhaps architecture is a particular art form, Public Art? I don't think so, either.



*Statue: Bishop Willibrord on Horse,  
Utrecht (historically motivated)*

*St. Willibrord Church, Utrecht*

**Figure 2:** Art in public space

### PUBLIC ART

Architecture is public, at least in its façades, and often also in its interior: we are allowed to see and scrutinise buildings, and often enter them and do things inside – sometimes after paying a fee. When I deny that architecture is Public Art, I am referring to a particular art form in the *Modern System of the Fine Arts*, not even just to art in public space, as the statue in fig. 2a.

In 2011, Dutch artist, Erik van Lieshout, explained the nature of Public Art.<sup>2</sup> He described how a group of protesters, who had marched, years ago, against certain political developments was invited by Jeremy Deller to re-perform the march with the same group in the same surroundings. Through this re-enacted march, the land meanings resurfaced, both in the land and in the experiences of the participants. The meaning of this work was profoundly site-specific, incorporating not only the objective surroundings, but also the original agents' responsive behaviour. Profound site-specificity is a core property of Public Art. Public Art is art *of* (or about) the public space.

The Willibrord Church (fig. 2b) follows a clear architectural program, and in that sense it makes passersby think, feel and do certain things by guiding their behaviour. The aureole at the church's rooftop, by Merijn van der Vliet, in contrast, is different: it is ironic and *derives* its meaning from its place on the church tower. The aureole clearly calls for interpretation and makes us think about those who placed it there. It does not univocally invite us to pray like the church does. The aureole is art in the sense of the *Modern System of the Fine Arts*, because it is not a piece of architecture.

The aureole comments on the church, whereas the church does not comment on the street it is in. The church tells the passersby that here is a place for religious worship. It fits narratively in the street, I want to say, just like a statue does (fig. 2a). The statue of Willibrord fits Utrecht because of Willibrord's historical role in the city. That narrative explains its presence. The narrative explaining the role of the church or the statue is external. To understand the place and role of a church in a city one needs to know about the religion supported by, and in it.

The aureole's meaning, though, fits the church phenomenologically. It acquires its meaning from its site whilst commenting on that site – figures in pictures have aureoles, buildings do not normally. Moreover, it would not make much sense, or a very different sense, if it were placed on my home. The aureole is site-specific art. Phenomenological fit is another characteristic of Public Art.

Another example is given by Banksy's street art, which provides social or political commentary in a way that blends in phenomenologically with the site of placement. His works seem to provide the schoolbook definition of 'phenomenological fit'. Some of Banksy's works (e.g. the rider in 3a merely comments on the form caused in the wall by the dropped off plastering) do this better than others (3b requires more art historical knowledge, as it involves an ingenious reference to graffiti's similarity to cave paintings).

Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, a 40-metre wide COR-TEN steel plate, slightly leaning over (fig. 4a), was commissioned by the New York municipality for placement on the Federal Plaza in 1981. It was removed in 1989 after a court case. Serra argued that *Tilted Arc* was site-specific and was meant to work at the Federal Plaza. Moving the work to a different place would mean destroying it. That point granted, Michael Kelly and Arthur Danto



**Figure 3:** Banksy, Public Art, fitting public space phenomenologically

argued that *Tilted Arc* brought the logic of modernist art into the public space where those living there did not like the appeal it made on them. A lack of phenomenological fit led to a conflict of practices not present with the Banksys.

Barry Flanagans' *Thinker on a Rock* (Utrecht, 2002, fig. 4b) is not in any way clearly phenomenologically nor historically connected to the spot it is in. It is clearly art, and not architecture, but it makes no modernist appeal to the site it is placed in. It is not site-specific and would have more or less the same meaning were it moved to a different city environment. The sculpture is also funny. We smile at it, while placing our bikes against its pedestal, as we do with the Willibrord statue, which *is* clearly embedded in a history, as it refers to the function the bishop once fulfilled for the city. Both works have become part of the public furniture of our streets without requiring us to interpret or pay much attention to them. They allow us to walk the streets looking at buildings and the built environment, thinking our thoughts, living our lives, entertaining our personal associations.

The question whether architecture is an art or not, has been discussed here in two directions. First, I looked at how architecture does something for how we feel at home. By guiding us through the built environment architecture archives our memories, but not explicitly as art or representation might. The second way compared architecture with what may be called more straightforwardly art in public spaces, like graffiti, statues and and Public Art. This discussion is relevant for how we are supposed to appreciate architecture aesthetically.

When architecture does explicitly try to impact the everyday user, it may get in the way of its use, like Serra's modern work of art did at the Federal Plaza. I am now thinking of the stairs in Rem Koolhaas' *Educatorium* in Utrecht Science Park. You cannot take these stairs one step at the time. The steps are too wide to step over them, too small to put in one extra step each time. It stops you short; you are forced to think about something



Richard Serra: *Tilted Arc*, 1981,  
Federal Plaza, New York City, US



Barry Flanagan, *Thinker on a Rock*, 2002,  
Utrecht, NL

**Figure 4:** Artworks in public space

other than going up or down. Here, the artist Koolhaas stands in the way of the architect. I know that was intended, and I am not complaining about architecture trying to be art. But it is appreciated for different reasons.

My special thanks go to Paul Guyer for guest-editing this special issue on ‘Architecture beyond the building’, that you are about to read.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Kristeller 1978.

<sup>2</sup>In VPRO’s Zomergasten, 21 August 2011.

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### POSTSCRIPT

With this, I retire as the editor-in-chief of *Aesthetic Investigations*, a job I have always done with great enthusiasm, and I am sure I am going to miss it, though I look forward to the extra time that I can now spend on my next book on the aesthetic nature of moral deliberation. A mostly new editorial board is already taking over. It is led by two *ad interim* editor-in-chiefs, Clint Verdonschot and Sue Spaid. I am sure the journal will benefit from the change.

### IN MEMORIAM JURRY EKKELBOOM (1954-2023)

Rather unexpected, on June 9th, Jurry Ekkelboom died while hospitalised, aged 69. Jurry was a loyal and dedicated assistant-to-the-editor. The two of us had decided last December that the present issue on ‘Architecture beyond the building’ was going to be our last one.

I have known Jurry for more than twenty years, almost from the beginning of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics, which was founded in 1997. He organised a series of ‘salons’ for people interested to meet with speakers on subjects from the philosophy of art. They were a feast of good-natured philosophical argument. For the last ten years, we have worked intensely together to publish issue after issue of *Aesthetic Investigations*, for weeks on end.

Jurry was always friendly, yet decisive, and always accurate. Sometimes, he would read a piece of mine, and say ‘Are you sure that is how you want to say it?’ leaving me to decide how to proceed. He was pro-active and needed only half a word to pick up things. We would meet regularly for a mere two months each year so I am more or less used to not seeing Jurry, yet in the weeks after he died what made me think of him was not so much his death, but the fact that I would never be able to talk about it with him. Things went so smoothly between us, we didn’t even notice. Now I do. Fare well, Jurry.

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