

# Aesthetic Investigations

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## Haunted houses: Some poetic reflections on buildings and spirituality

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In their wonderful interview published in this issue, Paul Guyer and Laure van Heijenoort discuss the spirituality of buildings. Considering possible factors that make a space feel spiritual, Laure van Heijenoort offers the suggestion that it has to do most of all with a space's connection to its outsides:

Had the townhouse [in which we lived] looked out on a forest, a lush garden, a prairie or a desert vista instead of some sad little bushes and a brick wall, I would have felt more peace in it.

The remark goes to the heart of this special issue which considers philosophical questions regarding architecture *beyond the building*. But it also strikes me as an essential characteristic of modern art in general: that its spirit resides in the relation that it bears to what it is not. This is an abstract remark that I will spend the rest of my co-editorial introduction unpacking, but first let me clarify what I mean by citing a poem that Van Heijenoort's remark reminded me of:

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IM ALTEN HAUSE

Im alten Hause; vor mir frei  
seh ich ganz Prag in weiter Runde;  
tief unten geht die Dämmerstunde  
mit lautlos leisem Schritt vorbei.

Die Stadt schwimmt wie hinter Glas.  
Nur hoch, wie ein behelmter Hüne,  
ragt klar vor mir die grüspangrüne  
Turmkuppel von Sankt Nicholas.

Schon blinzelt da und dort ein Licht  
fern auf im schwülen Stadtgebräuse.  
– Mir ist, dass in dem alten Hause  
jetzt eine Stimme ‘Amen’ spricht.

IN THE OLD HOUSE

The old house on the hill – from here  
a panoramic Prague I see.  
Below, advancing soundlessly  
the hour of dusk treads ever near.

The city blurs, as if behind a glass.  
Alone, in helmet verdigris,  
a virtual Hun stands tall before me:  
there, the lofty dome Saint Nicholas.

Now flickers here and there a light  
through sultry city drizzle – when  
I sense a voice that breathes ‘Amen’  
inside that ancient house tonight.

This is the first poem published in Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Larenopfer*, or: ‘offerings to Lares’, the ancient Roman deities of the household.<sup>1</sup> The title of the poem, as well as its position in the volume as the first of such offerings seems a little ironic, because the poem is not at all about what is inside the house, but rather what one can see *from it*. It is only at the very end of the poem, the final two lines, that the poet’s attention is turned inwards, as they imagine an ‘Amen’ responding from within the house to the play of lights and colours of Prague’s cityscape.

That it should be an amen that the poet imagines hearing, is appropriate enough. After all, the dome of Saint Nicholas’ church is a central part of the poet’s view and the literal centre of the poem itself. That gives this poem, or at least the feeling that is expressed within it, an unmistakable spiritual content. But the poem is not thereby a prayer. For one thing, unlike in actual prayers, the amen does not *conclude* the poem. Moreover, the amen that is spoken is not real, but simply a feeling, or a figment of the poet’s imagination (‘Mir ist. . .’).<sup>2</sup> This clearly falls short of the kind of religious feeling which is expected of believers. Believers, after all, must feel themselves to be connected to an actual, unimagined, yet otherworldly reality. The voice that the poet hears, by contrast, is imagined, yet unequivocally in the here and now (‘. . . in dem alten Hause / jetzt. . .’).

So what do we then make of the spirituality of the poem? My own sense is that the poet’s gaze *spiritualises* the material world, that is to say: makes something spiritual out of that which is not so. In turn, however, the content of the resultant spiritual belief is self-referential; it is a belief about itself. In short, what is spiritual about the city that catches the poet’s gaze is nothing other than the spiritualising of that city which, not being spiritual itself, nevertheless becomes endowed with spirit *through being gazed upon*. The poet’s imagined spiritual feeling thereby depends as much on an ‘other’, something to which it is essentially related but which remains ever external to it, as it does on the poet’s own imagination. And conversely, this other,

the object of the gaze, requires the imagination, for it to acquire the meaning ascribed to it.

I am aware that this is still rather abstract. But the upshot of this interpretation is that it allows us to read the poem as being about aesthetic interactions. According to this interpretation, the old house looking out over the city of Prague would symbolise the subject who is confronted and momentarily overtaken by an aesthetic object, the power of which ultimately comes from the subject themselves. This kind of spirituality therefore presupposes a complicated relation between self and other, a relation which can consequently itself be explored aesthetically, through poetry as above, but also through architectural constructions that explore the relations between an inside, the home, and an outside, the environment.

Accordingly, what would make a home spiritual, in line with Van Heijenoort's remark, depends on the relation that it bears to its environment. This view of the spirituality of architecture also seems to afford us some instructive thoughts on the way in which architecture responds to crises of social life. One such crisis concerns the environment as such, the climate crisis also mentioned by Van Heijenoort at the end of the interview. But another pressing crisis concerns the home, or housing as such. Where the climate crisis confronts us with the apocalyptic vision that there may not be an environment in which to build our houses, the housing crisis confronts us with the dystopian reality that leaves countless people without habitable shelter.<sup>3</sup>

This brings me to a second poem I wish to discuss, by Kurt Tucholsky, first published 1928 in *Arbeiter: Illustrierte Zeitung* (37), p. 10:

## ASYL FÜR OBDACHLOSE!

Und stehst du einmal am Ende  
und hast keine Bleibe, kein Brot –  
dann falte zufrieden die Hände,  
man sorgt für deine Not.

Es gibt für solche Zwecke ein Asyl  
–da findet der Mob  
ein eisernes Bett, eine Decke  
und einen alten blechernen Topp.

Hast du dein ganzes Leben  
geschuftet wie ein Vieh;  
und gehts dir im Alter daneben,  
entlässt dich die Industrie –:

dann heisst es noch lang nicht: Verrecke!  
Der Staat gibt dir sachlich und grob  
ein eisernes Bette, eine Decke  
und einen alten, blechernen Topp.

REFUGE FOR THE HOMELESS!<sup>4</sup>

And when you're finally at an end  
with neither bed, nor bread –  
then stay contently your hand,  
someone will care for your head.

There is, for this end, a refuge  
– where the crowds can sleep in  
iron beds, 'neath steel blankets  
on some old sheets made of tin.

Have you, a whole lifetime,  
toiled like an ox;  
do you wither, past your prime  
and laid off by the boss –:

that doesn't mean you will perish!  
The state provides coolly, dialed-in  
An iron bed and steel blanket  
And some old sheets made of tin.

Manche auf diesem Planeten  
 leben bei Sekt und Kapaun.  
 Ja, soll'n sie vielleicht dem Proleten  
 einen Palast aufbaun –?  
 Andre verrecken im Drecke.  
 Du hasts noch gut– na, und ob!  
 Du hast im Asyl eine Ecke,  
 ein eisernes Bett, eine Decke  
 und einen alten blechernen Topp!

Some of us live in luxuriance  
 Off champagne and fatten'd hen.  
 But is it their duty to proletarians  
 A palace to provide them –?  
 Others perish in bloodshed.  
 You're better off– all-in!  
 Your refuge comes with a banquet  
 An iron bed and steel blanket  
 And some old sheets made of tin!

Wohltaten, Mensch, sind nichts als Dampf.  
 Hol dir dein Recht im Klassenkampf –!

Charity, I tell you, is nothing but  
 twaddle.  
 Get what is yours in true class struggle  
 –!

The poem is not very cryptic, it speaks for itself. Tucholsky's cynicism about the state's efforts to assuage homelessness is counterpointed by the straight prescription with which the poem concludes in the final two lines. It is this straightness of meaning that makes me doubt that Theodor Adorno would have read and liked the poem. But other than that, it seems quite clear that he is referring to this poem in one of his most famous fragments from *Minima Moralia* titled, like the poem, 'Refuge for the homeless' (only without the exclamation point).

Adorno's fragment derives its fame from its final line, 'there is no right life in the false', an epigram that has become almost synonymous with Adorno's name and thought. But the focus on this final line is unfortunate to the extent that considerations regarding Adorno's philosophy as a whole obstruct the view on what the fragment itself is really about: homelessness and, more philosophically, the inability to feel oneself at home, or to use a slightly archaic term: 'to dwell', in the contemporary world.

It will not come as a surprise that Adorno is thoroughly pessimistic about life at home: 'dwelling, truly, is no longer possible at all'.<sup>5</sup> This is so, Adorno believes, because there is no type of building left to accommodate living in anything but the bare minimal sense of the term: traditional homes no longer bring about a feeling of homely safety [*Geborgenheit*], 'they have acquired something unbearable'. Modernist architecture, on the other hand, has explicitly abandoned the hope of enabling people to feel at home in the world:

[Homes in the New Objective style], the ones that start from a clean sheet, are nothing more than expertly manufactured containers for philistines, or factory sites that have mistakenly wound up in the sphere of consumption, devoid of all connection to the inhabitant, even the yearning for independent existence, which nobody feels any more anyway, they slap in the face.<sup>6</sup>

Adorno is often faulted for being cynical, and rightly so, even if there is a kernel of truth in Adorno's rejection of the cold demand for efficient use of space in functionalist architecture. Compare Adorno's harsh judgement on functionalism with a remark by Van Heijenoort from the interview which rather exalts the idea of introducing the ideas of industrial architecture to residential spaces:

What I found to be sterile and uninteresting because of its predictability and lack of quirky little spaces, others might cherish as efficient and uncluttered. In hindsight, the beauty of it was taking concepts that made a great deal of sense for large institutional buildings, such as offices and schools, and showing that they could be applied to residential architecture.

It has to be admitted, of course, that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whose architecture Van Heijenoort is speaking of, was a good deal more amenable to aesthetic concerns than the most orthodox proponents of New Objectivity (Hannes Meyer comes to my mind). But even the sternest New Objective modernism, I believe, would still be capable of a kind of beauty pertaining simply to the application of industrial concepts to residential architecture. The idea of efficiently housing the masses was admirable at least, even if such projects often fell short in practice.

Still, what I take to be the enduring insight in Adorno's fragment on dwelling, one echoed also by Van Heijenoort, is that there is something impoverished about an architectural style that simply aligns itself with the demands of the housing market, which remain demands for efficiency in the last instance. Even the contemporary taste for modernist architecture seems to confirm this. Think, for instance, of how desirable it is to live in lofts converted from old warehouses; people prefer to be stored rather than housed. And if indeed they are lucky enough to rent a space that is brutally calculated to economise on space, their lifestyle becomes centred around perpetually 'de-cluttering' their home simply because it is too tiny to leave it messy.<sup>7</sup>

By no means is this meant as a blanket rejection of modernism. But it does make clear, if and when modernist architecture does succeed, that this is because it is able to connect those it is meant to house to their environment. That brings me back to the aesthetic experience of art, in which a work requires the interaction of a subject (an audience, a reader, a dweller, etc.) for its completion. The poet's gaze in Rilke's *In the old house* spiritualises what it finds in the material world and thereby endows it with its proper meaning. I take Adorno to argue, likewise, that the proper functioning of a house requires what cannot be captured in a functionalist description of the structure's ends, or whatever idea the architect may have had about a particular space's use.

This is where the aesthetic aspect of architecture comes in, as Jörg Gleiter argues in his contribution to this special issue: where there remains a 'surplus

of form' over and beyond the given function of an artefact or space. Something apparently superfluous to what this object essentially is, nevertheless turns out to be a crucially relevant problem space for the architect and ultimately that which can endow an object or space with a meaning beyond mere function. But how could such a meaning be found appropriate to an object or space (and more than merely a subjective imagining) other than by responding to a function that it really has? That is, I think, the paradox in the Rilke poem, and one reverberating through Tucholsky's poem, as well as Adorno's fragment. This is a paradox that is at the same time the constitutive predicament of aesthetic art: that its true being is more than what it truly is. The aesthetic form of a structure should be more than its form, the shelter provided by a house should be more than mere shelter, a poem should say more than what it says, etc. The aesthetic meaning of a thing always remains just out of reach as it were, and it is as if this slippage of meaning is the only thing guaranteeing us that it truly resides within the object itself. Or rather, to use an idiom appropriate to the built environment: the spirit of a house does not reside within it, it haunts it.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Rilke 2008, 2-3

<sup>2</sup>The English translation sacrifices the semantically correct rendition of ‘It seems to me as if...’ ‘in order to preserve metre and rhyme, turning it into ‘... when / I sense...’

<sup>3</sup>And, of course, these crises turn out to be related, as the climate crisis also renders more and more parts of the earth un-

inhabitable, more and more people homeless.

<sup>4</sup>Translation mine.

<sup>5</sup>Adorno 2003, 42

<sup>6</sup>Adorno 2003, 42, my translation

<sup>7</sup>Full disclosure: at the time of writing me and my partner have recently purchased a set of upcycled scaffolding tubes for use as clothes hangers (thereby decluttering my home *and* adding an industrial flair at the same time).

## REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor W. 2003. *Minima Moralia*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. 2008. *Offerings to Lares*. Translated by Alfred de Zayas. Los Angeles: Red Hen Press.

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