

# Framing Lacan and Architecture

Andrew Payne

In the interest of clarifying my own sense of the thematic considerations that should animate this collection, I want to restate a remark I made in our last meeting concerning the singular status of works of architecture as cultural artifacts. That singularity concerns the fact that such works are simultaneously objects designed for aesthetic veneration and territorial dispositifs designed for accommodation of collective human conduct. A part of what I find promising in Lacan's thought is that it seems to offer tools for enriching our understanding of both of these dimensions of architectural theory and practice. Lacan's relevance to an analysis of the first is perhaps more obvious, since in the only two references to architecture to be found in his seminars and writings, both of which are in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, architecture is taken up in the context of an argument that artistic sublimations consist in "elevating an object to the status of a Thing." As for the second aspect, I believe that we can find in Lacan's seminars and writings the basis for an entirely new reading of architecture as a practice of territorialization. (I also believe that this conviction aligns to some degree with Loren's recent thinking around *Nebenmensch* and landscape.) In order to lend credibility to this claim, I would observe that the question of the peculiar rapport (or non-rapport) that the human organism enjoys with its surroundings was a central concern for Lacan from his pre psychoanalytic beginnings to his late speculations on the alethosphere. Permit me to say a few words concerning the development of Lacan's thinking on this matter.

Leon Chertok and Isabelle Stengers have helpfully characterized the pre-psychoanalytic phase of Lacan's thinking as ethological, going on to describe this ethology as organized around a neo-Spinozian conception of "personality" as affectability. This conception is set within the framework of a rapport, conceived on the model of the Estonian biosemiotician, Jacob von Uexküll's *Umwelt*, between the organism and its environment, a rapport of which the phenomenon of personality is thought to be an expression. In his doctoral dissertation, *De la psychose paranoïaque*, Lacan remarks:

In other words, personality is not parallel to neuralgic processes, not even to the global somatic processes of the individual: it is parallel to the totality constituted by the individual and his own milieu. Such a conception of a parallelism must, moreover, be recognized as the only one worthy of this name, if one doesn't forget that it corresponds to its original formulation and that this conception was first expressed by Spinozian doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

Lacan's transition from this ethology of the person to a psychoanalysis of the subject is predicated not only on his famous 'return to Freud' but also on a philosophical pivot from Spinoza to Hegel. It is with this pivot to Hegel—instigated by his attendance at his "only Master," Alexander Kojève's lecture's on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in combination with his acquaintance with that other great French Hegelian, Jean

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1932) 337. In their *A Critique of Psychoanalytic Reason*, Léon Chertok and Isabelle Stengers stress that the concept of milieu that is operative in Lacan's discourse is explicitly modeled on von Uexküll's theory of the *Umwelt*, with the caveat that the milieu of the human animal is "par excellence social" (p. 170). Lacan will be openly critical of von Uexküll's *Umwelt* theory in the psychoanalytic phase of his thinking.

Hyppolite—that brought Lacan's thinking concerning the dis-adjusted rapport between human organism and environment into the orbit of the thinking of Georges Bataille, who was also in attendance at Kojève's lectures. Elsewhere I have undertaken to illuminate the rapport between Lacan and Bataille concerning these issues. What matters for purposes of this discussion is that it is on Lacan's account precisely humanity's disadjusted rapport with its surrounding that brings into play the complex network of imaginary and symbolic compensations among which architecture is numbered. Architecture is thus a symptomatic product of this dysfunctional rapport that human animals have with their surroundings. A part of this rapport concerns the unique significance that human animals grant to objects in their negotiations with the milieux they inhabit. As Lacan observes:

What did I try to get across with the mirror stage? That whatever in man is loosened up, fragmented, anarchic, establishes its relation to his perceptions on a plane with a completely original tension. The image of his body is the principle of every unity he perceives in objects. Now, he only perceives the unity of this specific image from the outside, and in an anticipated manner. Because of this double relation which he has with himself, all the objects of his world are always structured around the wandering shadow of his own ego. They will have a fundamentally anthropomorphic character, even egomorphic we could say. Man's ideal unity, which is never attained as such and which escapes him at every moment, is evoked at every moment in this perception. The object for him is never the final goal . . . It thus appears in the guise of an object from which man is irremediably separated, and which shows him the very figure of his dehiscence within the world . . . it is in the nature of desire to be radically torn . . . . If the object perceived from without has its own identity, the latter places the man who sees it in a state of tension, because he perceives himself as desire, and as unsatisfied desire. Inversely, when he grasps his unity . . . it is the world which for him becomes decomposed, loses its meaning, and takes on an alienated and discordant aspect. It is this imaginary oscillation which gives to all human perception the dramatic subjacency experienced by a subject, insofar as his interest is aroused.<sup>2</sup>

If our volume should be about anything, I believe it should concern the potential that Lacan's thought has to illuminate this constitutively disadjusted rapport that the human animal enjoys with its surroundings and the role that architecture, as both object and territorial dispositif, has in creating and maintaining that rapport.

A final note: if we are to address architecture in its contemporary condition, I believe it is important to tackle both the transition from architectural object to objectile (the emergence of the serialized algorithmic object of non-standard production) and the massive transformation of human territorial practices at every scale that the so-called 'digital revolution' has brought into being, to wit, everything that goes by the name of a virtualization of human symbolic exchange. With respect to these issues, Lacan's 17<sup>th</sup> seminar would not doubt prove of some service.

This is of course not the only way of framing the rapport between architecture and Lacanian thought, but I believe that is an important one. My hope is that these few remarks, issued from a COVID addled brain, may induce other to add their own frames.

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II the Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-55* (New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1991), 165-66.