

Chapter 10: The Pleasure of Architecture

Bernard Tschumi

Functionalist dogmas and the puritan attitudes of the modern movement have often come under attack. Yet the ancient idea of pleasure still seems sacrilegious to contemporary architectural theory. For many generations any architect who aimed for or attempted to experience pleasure in architecture was considered decadent. Politically, the socially conscious have been suspicious of the slightest trace of hedonism in architectural endeavors and have rejected it as a reactionary concern. And in the same way, architectural conservatives have relegated to the Left everything remotely intellectual or political, including the discourse of pleasure. On both sides, the idea that architecture can possibly exist without either moral or functional justification, or even responsibility, has been considered distasteful.

Similar oppositions are reflected throughout the recent history of architecture. The avant-garde has endlessly debated oppositions that are mostly complementary: order and disorder, structure and chaos, ornament and purity, rationality and sensuality. And these simple dialectics have pervaded architectural theory to such an extent that architectural criticism has reflected similar attitudes: the purists' ordering of forms versus art nouveau's organic sensuousness; Behrens's ethic of form versus Olbrich's impulse to the formless.

Often these oppositions have been loaded with moral overtones. Adolf Loos' attack on the criminality of ornament masked his fear of chaos and sensual disorder. And De Stijl's insistence on elementary form was not only a return to some anachronistic purity but also a deliberate regression to a secure order.

So strong were these moral overtones that they even survived Dada's destructive attitudes and the surrealists' abandonment to the unconscious. Tzara's ironical contempt for order found few equivalents among architects too busy replacing the *système des Beaux-Arts* by the modern movement's own set of rules. In 1920 – despite the contradictory presence of Tzara, Richter, Ball, Duchamp, and Breton – Le Corbusier and his contemporaries chose the quiet

and acceptable route of purism. Even in the early 1970s, the work of the architectural school circles, with their various brands of irony or self-indulgence, ran counter to the moral reminiscences of '68 radicalism, although both shared a dislike for established values.

Beyond such opposites lie the mythical shadows of Apollo's ethical and spiritual mindscapes versus Dionysius' erotic and sensual impulses. Architectural definitions, in their surgical precision, reinforce and amplify the impossible alternatives: on the one hand, architecture as a thing of the mind, a dematerialized or conceptual discipline with its typological and morphological variations, and on the other, architecture as an empirical event that concentrates on the senses, on the experience of space.

In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to show that today the pleasure of architecture may lie both inside *and* outside such oppositions – both in the dialectic *and* in the disintegration of the dialectic. However, the paradoxical nature of this theme is incompatible with the accepted, rational logic of classical argument; as Roland Barthes puts it in *The Pleasure of the Text*: "pleasure does not readily surrender to analysis," (Barthes, 1973)¹ hence there will be no theses, antitheses, and syntheses here. The text instead is composed of fragments that relate only loosely to one another. These fragments – *geometry, mask, bondage, excess, eroticism* – are all to be considered not only within the reality of ideas but also within the reality of the reader's spatial experience: a silent reality that cannot be put on paper.

FRAGMENT 1: A DOUBLE PLEASURE (REMINDER)

The pleasure of space: this cannot be put into words, it is unspoken. Approximately: it is a form of experience – the "presence of absence"; exhilarating differences between the plane and the cavern, between the street and your living-room; symmetries and dissymmetries emphasizing the spatial properties of my body: right and left, up and down. Taken to its extreme, the pleasure of space leans toward the poetics of the unconscious, to the edge of madness.

The pleasure of geometry and, by extension, the pleasure of order – that is, *the pleasure of concepts*: typical statements on architecture often read like the one in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1773: "architecture, being governed by proportion, requires to be guided by rule and compass." That is, architecture is a "thing of the mind," a geometrical rather than a pictorial or experiential art, so the problem of architecture becomes a problem of ordinance – Doric or Corinthian order, axes or hierarchies, grids or regulating lines, types or models, walls or slabs – and, of course, the grammar and syntax of the architecture's sign become pretexts for sophisticated and pleasurable manipulation. Taken to its extreme, such manipulation leans toward a poetic of frozen signs, detached from reality, into a subtle and frozen pleasure of the mind.

Neither the pleasure of space nor the pleasure of geometry is (on its own) the pleasure of architecture.

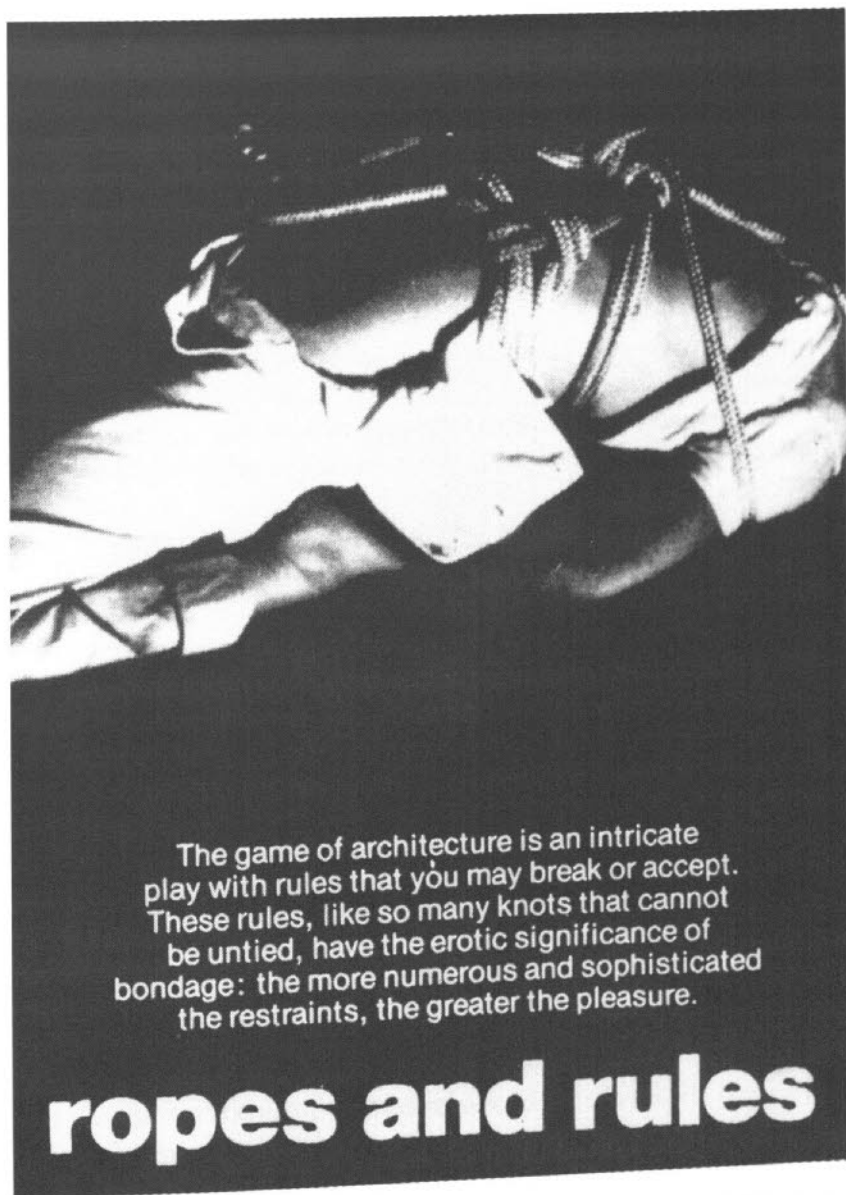


Figure 10.1
Bernard Tschumi, knots.
From *Advertisements for
Architecture*.
Photo: Bernard Tschumi.

The game of architecture is an intricate play with rules that you may break or accept. These rules, like so many knots that cannot be untied, have the erotic significance of bondage: the more numerous and sophisticated the restraints, the greater the pleasure.

ropes and rules

FRAGMENT 2: GARDENS OF PLEASURE

In his *Observations sur l'architecture*, published in The Hague in 1765, Abbé Laugier suggested a dramatic deconstruction of architecture and its conventions. He wrote:

Whoever knows how to design a park well will have no difficulty in tracing the plan for the building of a city according to its given area and situation. There must be regularity and fantasy, relationships and oppositions, and casual, unexpected elements that vary the scene; great order in the details, confusions, uproar, and tumult in the whole.

(Laugier, 1765: 312–13)

Laugier's celebrated comments, together with the dreams of Capability Brown, William Kent, Lequeu, or Piranesi, were not merely a reaction to the Baroque period that preceded them. Rather, the deconstruction of architecture that they suggested was an early venture into the realm of pleasure, against the architectural order of time.

Take Stowe, for example. William Kent's park displays a subtle dialectic between organized landscape and architectural elements: the Egyptian pyramid, the Italian belvedere, the Saxon temple. But these "ruins" are to be read less as elements of a picturesque composition than as the dismantled elements of order. Yet, despite the apparent chaos, order is still present as a necessary counterpart to the sensuality of the winding streams. Without the signs of order, Kent's park would lose all reminder of "reason." Conversely, without the traces of sensuality – trees, hedges, valleys – only symbols would remain, in a silent and frozen fashion.

Gardens have had a strange fate. Their history has almost always anticipated the history of cities. The orchard grid of man's earliest agricultural achievements preceded the layout of the first military cities. The perspectives and diagonals of the Renaissance garden were applied to the squares and colonnades of Renaissance cities. Similarly, the romantic, picturesque parks of English empiricism pre-empted the crescents and arcades of the rich urban design tradition of nineteenth-century English cities.

Built exclusively for delight, gardens are like the earliest experiments in that part of architecture that is so difficult to express with words or drawings; pleasure and eroticism. Whether romantic or classical, gardens merge the sensual pleasure of space with the pleasure of reason, in a most *useless* manner.

FRAGMENT 3: PLEASURE AND NECESSITY

"Uselessness" is associated only reluctantly with architectural matters. Even at a time when pleasure found some theoretical backing ("delight" as well as "commodity" and "firmness"), utility always provided a practical justification. One example among many is Quatremère de Quincy's introduction to the entry on architecture in the *Encyclopédie méthodique* published in Paris in 1778. There you will read a definition of architecture that contends that

amongst all the arts, those children of *pleasure and necessity*, with which man has formed a partnership in order to help him bear the pains of life and transmit his memory to future generations, it can certainly not be denied that architecture holds a most outstanding place. Considering it only from the point of view of *utility*, architecture surpasses all the arts. It provides for the salubrity of cities, guards the health of men, protects their property, and works only for the safety, repose and good order of civil life.

(De Quincy, 1778: 109)

If De Quincy's statement was consistent with the architectural ideology of his time, then two hundred years later, the social necessity of architecture has been

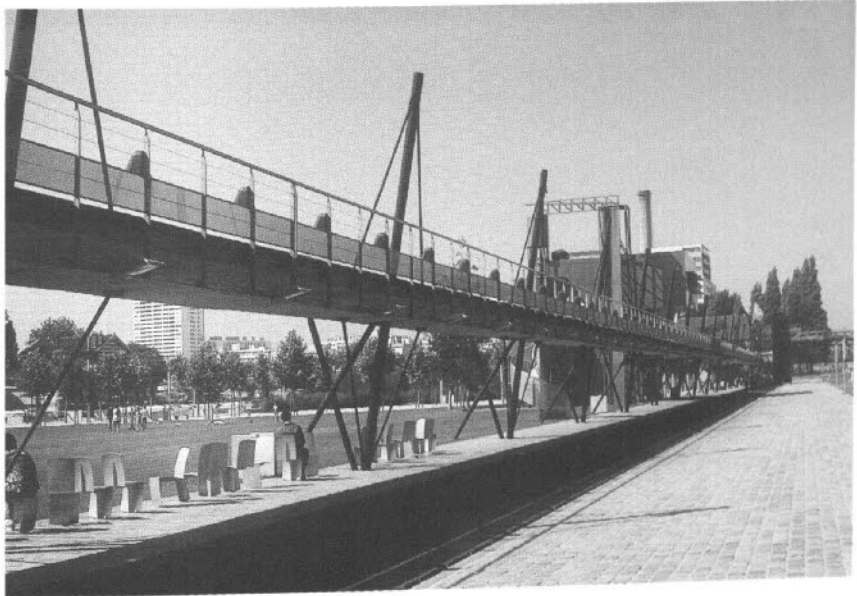


Figure 10.2
Bernard Tschumi,
North-South covered
walk, Parc de la Villette,
Paris, 1989.
Photo: Andrew
Ballantyne.

reduced to dreams and nostalgic utopias. The “salubrity of cities” is now determined more by the logic of land economics, while the “good order of civil life” is more often than not the order of corporate markets.

As a result, most architectural endeavors seem caught in a hopeless dilemma. If, on the one hand, architects recognize the ideological and financial dependency of their work, they implicitly accept the constraints of society. If, on the other hand, they sanctuarize themselves, their architecture is accused of elitism. Of course, architecture will save its peculiar nature, but only wherever it questions itself, wherever it denies or disrupts the form that a conservative society expects of it. Once again, if there has lately been some reason to doubt the necessity of architecture, then *the necessity of architecture may well be its non-necessity*. Such totally gratuitous consumption of architecture is ironically *political* in that it disturbs established structures. It is also pleasurable.

FRAGMENT 4: METAPHOR OF ORDER-BONDAGE

Unlike the necessity of mere building, the non-necessity of architecture is undissociable from architectural histories, theories, and other precedents. These bonds enhance pleasure. The most excessive passion is always methodical. In such moments of intense desire, organization invades pleasure to such an extent that it is not always possible to distinguish the organizing constraints from the erotic matter. For example, the Marquis de Sade’s heroes enjoyed confining their victims in the strictest convents before mistreating them according to rules carefully laid down with a precise and obsessive logic.

Similarly, the game of architecture is an intricate play with rules that one may accept or reject. Indifferently called *système des Beaux-Arts* or modern

movement precepts, this pervasive network of binding laws entangles architectural design. These rules, like so many knots that cannot be untied, are generally a paralyzing constraint. When manipulated, however, they have the erotic significance of bondage. To differentiate between rules or ropes is irrelevant here. What matters is that there is no simple bondage technique: the more numerous and sophisticated the restraints, the greater the pleasure.

FRAGMENT 5: RATIONALITY

In *Architecture and Utopia*, the historian Manfredo Tafuri recalls how the rational excesses of Piranesi's prisons took Laugier's theoretical proposals of "order and tumult" to the extreme (Tafuri, 1973). The classical vocabulary of architecture is Piranesi's chosen form of bondage. Treating classical elements as fragmented and decaying symbols, Piranesi's architecture battles against itself, in that the obsessive rationality of building types was "sadistically" carried to the extremes of irrationality.

FRAGMENT 6: EROTICISM

We have seen that the ambiguous pleasure of rationality and irrational dissolution recalled erotic concerns. A word of warning may be necessary at this stage. Eroticism is used here as a theoretical concept, having little in common with fetishistic formalism and other sexual analogies prompted by the sight of erect skyscrapers or curvaceous doorways. Rather, eroticism is a subtle matter. "The pleasure of excess" requires consciousness as well as voluptuousness. Neither space nor concepts alone are erotic, but the junction between the two is.

The ultimate pleasure of architecture is that impossible moment when an architectural act, brought to excess, reveals both the traces of reason and the immediate experience of space.

FRAGMENT 7: METAPHOR OF SEDUCTION – THE MASK

There is rarely pleasure without seduction, or seduction without illusion. Consider: sometimes you wish to seduce, so you act in the most appropriate way in order to reach your ends. You wear a disguise. Conversely, you may wish to change roles and *be* seduced: you consent to someone else's disguise, you accept his or her assumed personality, for it gives you pleasure, even if you know that it dissimulates "something else."

Architecture is no different. It constantly plays the seducer. Its disguises are numerous: façades, arcades, squares, even architectural concepts become the artifacts of seduction. Like masks, they place a veil between what is assumed to be reality and its participants (you or I). So sometimes you desperately wish to read the reality behind the architectural mask. Soon, however, you realize that



Figure 10.3
Bernard Tschumi,
fragmentation, Parc de la
Villette, Paris, 1989.
Photo: Andrew
Ballantyne.

no single understanding is possible. Once you uncover that which lies behind the mask, it is only to discover another mask. The literal aspect of the disguise (the façade, the street) indicates other systems of knowledge, other ways to read the city: formal masks hide socioeconomic ones, while literal masks hide metaphorical ones. Each system of knowledge obscures another. Masks hide other masks,

and each successive level of meaning confirms the impossibility of grasping reality.

Consciously aimed at seduction, masks are, of course, a category of reason. Yet they possess a double role: they simultaneously veil and unveil, simulate and dissimulate. Behind all masks lie dark and unconscious streams that cannot be dissociated from the pleasure of architecture. The mask may exalt appearances. Yet by its very presence, it says that, in the background, there is something else.

FRAGMENT 8: EXCESS

If the mask belongs to the universe of pleasure, pleasure itself is no simple masquerade. The danger of confusing the mask with the face is real enough never to grant refuge to parodies and nostalgia. The need for order is no justification for imitating past orders. Architecture is interesting only when it masters the art of disturbing illusions, creating breaking points that can start and stop at any time.


Certainly, the pleasure of architecture is granted when architecture fulfills one's spatial expectations as well as embodies architectural ideas, concepts, or archetypes with intelligence, invention, sophistication, irony. Yet there is also a special pleasure that results from conflicts: when the sensual pleasure of space conflicts with the pleasure of order.

The recent widespread fascination with the history and theory of architecture does not necessarily mean a return to blind obedience to past dogma. On the contrary, I would suggest that the ultimate pleasure of architecture lies in the most forbidden parts of the architectural act; where limits are perverted and prohibitions *transgressed*. The starting point of architecture is distortion – the dislocation of the universe that surrounds the architect. Yet such a nihilistic stance is only apparently so: we are not dealing with destruction here, but with excess, differences, and left-overs. *Exceeding* functionalist dogmas, semiotic systems, historical precedents, or formalized products of past social or economic constraints is not necessarily a matter of subversion but a matter of preserving the erotic capacity of architecture by disrupting the form that most conservative societies expect of it.

FRAGMENT 9: ARCHITECTURE OF PLEASURE

The architecture of pleasure lies where concept and experience of space abruptly coincide, where architectural fragments collide and merge in delight, where the culture of architecture is endlessly deconstructed and all rules are transgressed. No metaphorical paradise here, but discomfort and the unbalancing of expectations. Such architecture questions academic (and popular) assumptions, disturbs acquired tastes and fond architectural memories. Typologies, morphologies, spatial compressions, logical constructions – all dissolve. Such architecture is perverse because its real significance lies outside utility or purpose and ultimately is not even necessarily aimed at giving pleasure.

**Sensuality has been known
to overcome even the
most rational of buildings.**



**Architecture is the ultimate erotic act.
Carry it to excess and it will reveal
both the traces of reason and the sensual
experience of space. Simultaneously.**

VILLA SAVOYE, 1931

Figure 10.4
Bernard Tschumi,
overcome by sensuality.
From *Advertisements for
Architecture*.
Photo: Bernard Tschumi.

The architecture of pleasure depends on a particular feat, which is to keep architecture obsessed with itself in such an ambiguous fashion that it never surrenders to good conscience or parody, to debility or delirious neurosis.

FRAGMENT 10: ADVERTISEMENTS FOR ARCHITECTURE

There is no way to perform architecture in a book. Words and drawings can only produce paper space and not the experience of real space. By definition, paper space is imaginary: it is an image. Yet for those who do not build (whether for circumstantial or ideological reasons – it does not matter), it seems perfectly

normal to be satisfied with the representation of those aspects of architecture that belong to mental constructs – to imagination. Such representations inevitably separate the sensual experience of a real space from the appreciation of rational concepts. Among other things, architecture is a function of both. And if either of these two criteria is removed, architecture loses something. It nevertheless seems strange that architects always have to castrate their architecture whenever they do not deal with real spaces. So the question remains: why should the paper space of a book or magazine replace an architectural space?

The answer does not lie in the inevitability of the media or in the way architecture is disseminated. Rather it may lie in the very nature of architecture.

Let's take an example. There are certain things that cannot be reached frontally. These things require analogies, metaphors, or roundabout routes in order to be grasped. For instance, it is through *language* that psychoanalysis uncovers the unconscious. Like a mask, language hints at something else behind itself. It may try to hide it, but it also implies it at the same time.

Architecture resembles a masked figure. It cannot easily be unveiled. It is always hiding: behind drawstrings, behind words, behind precepts, behind habits, behind technical constraints. Yet it is the very difficulty of uncovering architecture that makes it intensely desirable. This unveiling is part of the pleasure of architecture.

In a similar way, reality hides behind advertising. The usual function of advertisements – reproduced again and again, as opposed to the single architectural piece – is to trigger desire for something beyond the page itself. When removed from their customary endorsement of commodity values, advertisements are the ultimate magazine form, even if somehow ironically. And, as there are advertisements for architectural products, why not for the production (and reproduction) of *architecture*?

FRAGMENT 11: DESIRE/FRAGMENTS

There are numerous ways to equate architecture with language. Yet such equations often amount to a *reduction* and an *exclusion*. A reduction, in so far as these equations usually become distorted as soon as architecture tries to produce meaning (which meaning? whose meaning?), and thus end up reducing language to its mere combinatory logic. An exclusion, in so far as these equations generally omit some of the important findings made in Vienna at the beginning of the century, when language was first seen as a condition of the unconscious. Here, dreams were analyzed as language as well as through language; language was called "the main street of the unconscious." Generally speaking, it appeared as a series of *fragments* (the Freudian notion of fragments does not presuppose the breaking of an image, or of a totality, but the dialectical multiplicity of a process).

So, too, architecture when equated with language can only be read as a series of fragments that make up an architectural reality.

Fragments of architecture (bits of walls, of rooms, of streets, of ideas) are all one actually sees. These fragments are like beginnings without ends. There is always a split between fragments that are real and fragments that are virtual, between memory and fantasy. These splits have no existence other than being the passage from one fragment to another. They are relays rather than signs. They are traces. They are in-between.

It is not the clash between these contradictory fragments that counts but the movement between them. And this invisible movement is neither a part of language nor of structure ("language" or "structure" are words specific to a mode of reading architecture that does not fully apply in the context of pleasure); it is nothing but a constant and mobile relationship inside language itself.

How such fragments are organized matters little: volume, height, surface, degree of enclosure, or whatever. These fragments are like sentences between quotation marks. Yet they are not quotations. They simply melt into the work. (We are here at the opposite of the collage technique.) They may be excerpts from different discourses, but this only demonstrates that an architectural project is precisely where differences find an overall expression.

A film of the 1950s had a name for this movement between fragments. It was called desire. Yes, *A Streetcar Named Desire* perfectly simulated the movement toward something constantly missing, toward absence. Each setting, each fragment, was aimed at seduction but always dissolved at the moment it was approached. And then each time it would be substituted by another fragment. Desire was never seen. Yet it remained constant. The same goes for architecture.

In other words, architecture is not of interest because of its fragments and what they represent or do not represent. Nor does it consist in *exteriorizing*, through whatever forms, the unconscious desires of society or its architects. Nor is it a mere representation of those desires through some fantastic architectural image. Rather it can only act as a recipient in which your desires, my desires, can be reflected. Thus a piece of architecture is not architectural because it fulfills some utilitarian function, but because it sets in motion the operations of seduction and the unconscious.

A word of warning. Architecture may very well activate such motions, but it is not a dream (a stage where society's or the individual's unconscious desires can be fulfilled). It cannot satisfy your wildest fantasies, but it may exceed the limits set by them.

NOTE

- 1 Editor's note. The quotation is not actually from Barthes, but is a paraphrase from Richard Howard's introduction to the English edition, from a point at which he quotes Willa Cather ("a writer Barthes has never heard of") (Barthes, 1973, vi).