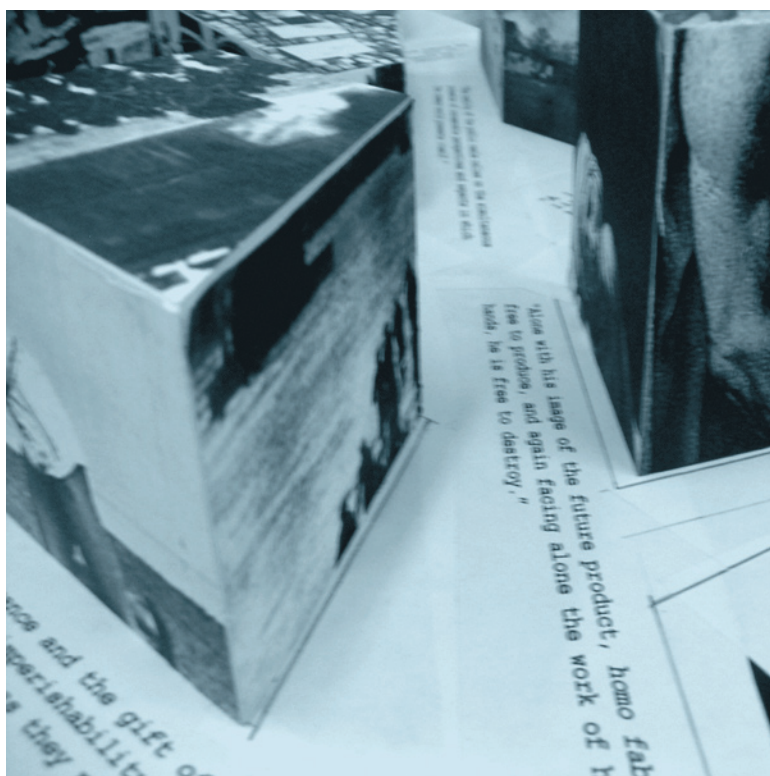


The Value Of Appearance

“Could it not be that appearances are not there for the sake of the life process, but, on the contrary, that the life process is there for the sake of appearance? Since we live in an appearing world, is it not much more plausible that the relevant and meaningful in this world of ours should be located precisely on that surface?”



Surface and Human Appearance

“Does God judge us by appearances? I suspect he does.”
-W. H. Auden

Architecture appears to the world in the form of images: as our visual perceptions of the built environment, as imprints upon photographic negatives, in drawings, in ruins, and as flashes of memory. The visual dimension of architecture is inescapable; architecture appears within a human world, a world which it solidifies and encloses. This attribute of building, that is has the capacity, and the necessity to appear, is the one of the greatest powers of architecture. However, no appearance can truly be secure, and no reality can be truly real, without an observant world, in whose perception it must ‘seem’ to exist. If architecture is to bear meaning for the cultures which erect it, then its appearance, and therefore its existence must be guaranteed through its relationship with an autonomous public realm. Therefore, what is the role of appearance, with regard to being? Is it merely secondary, an effect of a higher cause? Can appearance stake a claim to truthfulness, above and beyond its relationship to cause? Finally, to what extent is appearance the preserve of the visual, of the sensual realm of perception, and in which ways may it transcend that which we can only see? Secondly, what is the appearance of architecture, namely, its surfaces? How should these epidermal constructions be treated, and regarded within the composition of a building? At what point do surfaces, as agents of appearance, gain autonomy from tectonic obligations?

Beyond the Private, Before the Public

In The Human Condition Hannah Arendt clearly distinguishes between the public and private realms, where the human activities of labour, work and action take place. “Labour is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body ... The human condition of labour is life itself. Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence ... work provides an “artificial” world of things ... Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” As a product of work which transcends pure functionality, architecture has a powerful role to play as the reification of collective memory. “Acting and speaking men need the help of homo faber in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all.” The public realm, in opposition to the private, is a place in which humanity and its artifice appear. This realm provides a “space of appearance” which “comes into being whenever men are together in the manner of speech and action.” Architecture has a two-fold role in the manifestation of this public realm: a product of work, it stabilizes the public realm and separates it from the private. As well, architecture provides a physical appearance for this “space of appearance.”

The Value of Appearance

Arendt’s conception of appearance, formulated largely in political terms in The Human Condition, is developed in relation to being in The Life of the Mind (1971). In the first chapter, she recognizes appearance as the guarantor of reality, commonly held between all beings; in fact being and appearance are coincidental. What is living, as well as that which is not living, depends for its existence on both its own appearance, and the capacity of other beings (who themselves appear) to perceive this appearance. Existence is a constant duality between the object (which appears) and the subject (to which it seems to appear). Arendt tackles the question of (mere) appearance’s traditional secondary position in relation to (true) being; humans are constantly seeking the truth (reality) which supposedly lies behind appearance (perception). Usually, these efforts, be they philosophical or scientific, are rewarded only with the revelation of new appearances. Turning to the oft-proposed analogy with the living organism, Arendt takes her construction of appearance beyond that of the merely functional. Whereas some might characterize the skin as a shield, a cloak which protects the essential life processes which are hidden from view, she declares “It follows from (Swiss zoologist Adolf) Portman’s findings that our habitual standards of judgment, so firmly rooted in metaphysical assumptions and prejudices – according to which the essential lies beneath the surface, and the surface is ‘superficial’ – are wrong.”

The Agent of Appearance

Taken together, Arendt’s writings lead us to a conception of the role of architecture as an entity which, while it provides a permanence and stability for the public realm, serves a greater value as a physical appearance within and of this realm. If we accept Arendt’s (and Portmann’s) postulations, then we may apply this corporeal analogy to the building. In so doing, the façade (that which is presented to the exterior) becomes far more than mere cladding, and serves a role far beyond that of protecting the interior. Rather, it is the structure, the services, the interior spaces which serve the façade; all else exists so as to permit the surface to fulfill its role, and to appear. This analogy can be taken one step further: if architecture is at the service of certain functions (clients, institutions, users), and these functions are constantly in need of appearance to assert their being in the public realm, then architecture’s highest aim must be to provide them with this public appearance for the human affairs which will transpire within the privacy of the physical container. Or perhaps it is the other way around: our world of institutions and bodies exists for the creation of appearances to satisfy a basic human need, one which architecture is privileged to satisfy. Our buildings carry the appearance of our public lives, and the memory of their conception.