

Those of us who had given up on talk of essences, because they always seem to depend on some inaccessible, mystifying core, are in for a pleasant reawakening. Essence(s) is(are) back. In retrospect, this turn was inevitable. Continental philosophy's militant perspectivalism, starting with Nietzsche, was bound to invite a backlash. Meanwhile, an influential cohort of architects has become frustrated "that architecture is increasingly justified solely by its relations and not by its own particular and autonomous qualities."<sup>1</sup> That is to say, to the degree that architecture is justified by its performance, it recedes into the background as a mere tool, as 'equipment' in Heideggerian terms, and it loses its potential as a foreground element in the process.

Concerns for architecture's autonomy usually emanate from economic recessions, but, interestingly, not this time. Times are good in the profession, architects have plenty of work, and yet their ambitions for their work are still frustrated. This suggests that something else is afoot. That something else may be the sheer oppressive weight of performance expectations these days: climate, social betterment, profit motives, work productivity, context, and more besides that coalesce to crowd out conceptions of what architecture *can be* by those of what it *facilitates*. Those pushing the performative aspects of architecture think that giving up a little autonomy for a lot more relevance is well worth the trade. But it is a question of degree.

Thus, architecture and philosophy have found

new common ground. Each author in this volume approaches the topic of essence uniquely in order to demystify what they see as a thoroughly useful concept.

The opening essay, Benjamin Bross's *Essentialism and Spatial (Re) Production*, argues that the essence of space and place does not have to be approached holistically but can be usefully analyzed into component parts without losing the overall in the process. So, for example, a door: It's formal properties are an obvious source of its essence. But also, What is its final cause--what was it brought into the world to do? What is its efficient cause--who creates it and how do they do this? And what are its temporal properties both in its production and its use over time? Taken together, he thinks, these properties tell us the door's essence in a way that becomes normative. That is, they help us tell a good one from a bad one.

Clearly, Bross is attempting an essentialism quite different from the one the Pragmatist tradition sought so strenuously to put to bed. Pragmatists disliked essences because they seemed to presume a metaphysics of objects beyond all human intentions that in turn required a complicated epistemology merely to explain how we come to know of these essences. Bross's project is perhaps better thought of as determining an object's functional essence—a much more tractable problem. His ultimate purpose is to identify the “essential parts (that) can contribute to the continuation and innovation of spatial production.”

In Ashley Woodward's explanation of Jean-François Lyotard's thoughts about architecture, it is the keenly felt absence of what at one time, and in a more hospitable context, were the essential boundaries of domesticity and of the town that drive his thinking about architecture. In the face of an example such as Southern California, Woodward explains, Lyotard is dismayed that “Space is no longer between a ‘here’ (home) and ‘elsewhere’ – the border zone seems to have expanded indefinitely, such that ‘there is nothing left but surroundings.’” Dismayed, and yet simultaneously (and so typically Lyotardian) he is suspicious that nostalgia for those idealized enclosures may lead to violence against perceived others. Certainly, recent refugee crises at the U. S. Border with Mexico and across Europe testify to the reality of such suspicions. Since idealizations of cities are inherently suspicious in his view, architects should eschew projects that trade in such wishful thinking in favor of “non-projects” born out of an attitude of non-domination over others.

In case Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), as promoted by Graham Harman and others, has passed underneath the reader's attention, the conversation here transcribed between Harman and Simon Weir will

serve as a good introduction to the thought of SCI-Arc's Distinguished Professor of Philosophy (and more recently, the school's Liberal Arts Coordinator.) Among the tenets of OOO is that objects have qualities, but they cannot be reduced to their changeable qualities, hence they have an essence. Humans are also objects--a realization that should lead to collapse of the subject-object distinction and towards a de-anthropocentric outlook. Harman recognizes the roots of these ideas in Aristotle, but also that he departs from Aristotle. "I emphasize the inaccessible elusiveness of real objects, and while Aristotle has more awareness of that than many people realize, he does not emphasize the gap between the mind and the object to the same extent that OOO does (coming as we do after both Kant and Heidegger)."

An important interest in OOO for architects should come from its promise of restoring a degree of non-instrumental dignity to buildings. Although created by humans and for humans, once created, buildings have their own trajectories that are impossible to reduce to the intentions of any particular human constituency. As Harman asserts, "you just can't reduce any object, including an architectural one, to its backstory as a project." As Mark Foster Gage observes of the attraction of OOO: "That architecture and discrete buildings are connected to the larger world is not in dispute, but whether buildings can be legitimized as architecture by these relations should be."<sup>2</sup> Take, for example, a building's LEED score, carbon neutrality or other measures of its environmental performance. No level of environmental sensitivity it exhibits could actually justify its existence, because the ultimate environmental sensitivity is to not exist in the first place. The reasonable conclusion to draw then, is that a work of architecture must justify itself *qua* architecture—assuming we understand and can defend what that means. Because a work of architecture's essence exceeds (or withdraws from) all

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attempts to definitively encapsulate it, including attempts by its creators, it is suggested that architects do well to allude to what it might be.

A further aspect of the interest in OOO for architecture, however, is not so much in the building objects themselves, but in what Harman postulates happens when two objects collide or otherwise make contact. A sensual object functioning as an intermediary emerges from these collisions. Architects are dreamers of both types of objects. To round out this foray into the thought of Graham Harman is a book review of a volume edited by Joseph Bedford on the relevance of OOO for an architectural audience entitled *Is There an Object Oriented Architecture? Engaging Graham Harman*.

Taken together, the pieces in this issue begin to explore both the benefits and hazards, what is potentially gained and what may be lost, when architecture deals in essences and when essentials are applied to architecture. While each essay chips away at the mystique that often accompanies talk of essences, and in the process allays some concerns, what is not yet settled, however, is whether those concerns can be dispelled altogether.

This issue, 5.2, with fewer essays than past issues, has given *Architecture Philosophy* a chance to experiment with longer-form pieces. Its production also crosses paths with the 5th biannual ISPA conference (postponed one year by Covid) held at Monte Verità overlooking Lake Maggiore in Ascona Switzerland. Despite travel restrictions and other uncertainties, the conference was an impressive demonstration of both ISPA's staying power and its creativity. By the time this issue is in print, work will have begun on readying the thoughts and ideas for print emanating from that successful event.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Mark Foster Gage, "Killing Simplicity: Object-Oriented Philosophy in Architecture," *Log* 33. 2015, 95.
2. Gage, 100.