Rethinking Architecture

A reader in cultural theory

Edited by Neil Leach

London and New York
German literary theorist and critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was a key theorist of modernity. He was above all a theorist of urban modernity. For Benjamin, it was through the jostling crowds of the city, and the decaying fabric of its buildings as they passed into obsolescence that one could understand modernity.

During the course of his life Benjamin became increasingly obsessed with the city. Following a series of inspired portraits of cities such as Berlin, Moscow, Marseille and Naples, Benjamin devoted himself to a lengthy and sprawling study of the Parisian arcades, the Passagenwerk, or 'Arcades Project', a study which sadly remained incomplete, when he committed suicide on the Spanish border while fleeing the Nazis. An extract of the fragmentary remains of this work, 'On Motifs in Baudelaire', is included here. The figure whom Benjamin associates most with the arcades is the flaneur, who, leisurly disinterest, is generated in opposition to – yet equally spawned by – the anonymity of modern existence. Unlike Simmel's blasé individual, the flaneur is not so much a creature of the crowd as someone who remains aloof from the crowd, and observes it from afar. Yet the flaneur is also to some extent blasé. The nerves of the modern metropolitan individual are constantly being bombarded with stimuli. Drawing on Freud, Benjamin explains how consciousness acts as a buffer, inducing an anaesthetizing defiance against the fragmentary, alienating nature of modernity.

Benjamin offers a novel insight into the modern metropolis. Benjamin's metropolis is one entwined with myth, a seemingly paradoxical position in that, for many, modernity is seen as the obviation of myth, the disenchantment of the world. For Benjamin the metropolis is a form of dreamworld, the intoxicating site of the phantasmagoric, the kaleidoscopic and the cacophonous. The metropolis is enslaved by myth, a myth that adopts new guises in the supposedly progressive, fashionable world of the commodity. For Benjamin it is precisely the fetishization of the commodity, the repetition of the 'nothing-new' within the fashion industry, and the 'deception' of progress which constitutes and fuels the 'myth' of the metropolis.

Benjamin's work has much in common with that of Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer. However, his position is markedly different to that of Heidegger, especially in relation to the work of art. The significance of Benjamin's thought should not be underestimated. Benjamin sowed the seeds of a critical engagement with the image which has influenced the work of Jean Baudrillard and many other subsequent theorists.
PARIS, CAPITAL OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The waters are blue and the vegetation pink;
The evening sweet to behold;
People are out walking, Great ladies promenade;
and behind them walk the small ladies.

Nguyen-Trong-Hiep: Paris, Capital of France (1897)

1. Fourier, or The Arcades

De ces palais les colonnes magiques
A l'amateur monstre de toutes parts
Dans les objets qu’étaient leurs portiques
Que l’industrie est rivale aux arts.

_Nouveaux tableaux de Paris_ (1828)

Most of the Paris arcades are built in the decade and a half after 1822. The first condition for this new fashion is the boom in the textile trade. The _magasins de nouveauté_, the first establishments to keep large stocks of goods on their premises, begin to appear, precursors of the department stores. It is the time of which Balzac wrote, ‘The great poem of display chants its many-coloured strophes from the Madeleine to the Porte-Saint-Denis.’ The arcades are a centre of trade in luxury goods. In their fittings art is brought in to the service of commerce. Contemporaries never tire of admiring them. They long remain a centre of attraction for foreigners. An _Illustrated Guide to Paris_ said:

These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-walled passages cut through whole blocks of houses, whose owners have combined in this speculation. On either side of the passages, which draw their light from above, run the most elegant shops, so that an arcade of this kind is a city, indeed, a world in miniature.

The arcades are the scene of the first gas lighting.

The second condition for the construction of the arcades is the advent of building in iron. The Empire saw in this technique an aid to a renewal of architecture in the ancient Greek manner. The architectural theorist Bötticher expresses a general conviction when he says, ‘with regard to the artistic form of the new system, the formal principle of the Hellenic style should be introduced. _Empire_ is the style of revolutionary heroism for which the state is an end in itself. Just as Napoleon failed to recognize the functional nature of the state as an instrument of domination by the bourgeois class, neither did the masters of his time perceive the functional nature of iron, through which the constructive principle began its domination of architecture. These builders model their pillars on Pompeian columns, their factories on houses, as later the first railway stations are to resemble chalets. ‘Construction fills the role of the unconscious.’ Nevertheless the idea of the engineer, originating in the revolutionary wars, begins to assert itself, and battle is joined between constructor and decorator, Ecole Polytechnique and Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

In iron, an artificial building material makes its appearance for the first time in the history of architecture. It undergoes a development that accelerates in the course of the century. The decisive breakthrough comes when it emerges that the locomotive, with which experiments had been made since the end of the 1820s, could only be used on iron rails. The rail becomes the first prefabricated iron component, the forerunner of the girder. Iron is avoided in residential buildings and used in arcades, exhibition halls, stations – buildings serving transitory purposes. Simultaneously, the architectonic scope for the application of glass expands. The social conditions for its intensified use as a building material do not arrive, however, until a hundred years later. Even in Scheerbart’s ‘glass architecture’ (1914) it appears in utopian contexts.

Chaque époque rêve la suivante.

_Michelet, Avenir! Avenir!_
Corresponding in the collective consciousness to the forms of the new means of production, which at first were still dominated by the old (Marx), are images in which the new is intermingled with the old. These images are wishful fantasies, and in them the collective seeks both to preserve and to transfigure the inconcreteness of the social product and the deficiencies in the social system of production. In addition, these wish-fulfilling images manifest an emphatic striving for dissociation with the outmoded—what means, however, with the most recent past. These tendencies direct the visual imagination, which has been activated by the new, back to the primaev past. In the dream in which, before the eyes of each epoch, that which is to follow appears in images, the latter appears wedded to elements from prehistory, that is, of a classless society. Intimations of this, deposited in the unconscious of the collective, mingle with the new to produce the utopia that has left its traces in thousands of configurations of life, from permanent buildings to fleeting fashions.

This state of affairs is discernible in Fourier's utopia. Its chief impetus comes from the advent of machines. But this is not directly expressed in his accounts of it; there have their origin in the morality of trade and the false morality propagated in its service. His phalanstery is supposed to lead men back to conditions in which virtue is superfluous. Its highly complicated organization is like a piece of machinery. The meshing of passions, the intricate interaction of the passions mécaustes with the passion égaliste, are primitive analogies to machinery in the material of psychology. This human machinery produces the land of milk and honey, the primaev wish symbol that Fourier's utopia filled with new life.

In the arcades, Fourier saw the architectonic canon of the phalanstery. His reactionary modification of them is characteristic: whereas they originally serve commercial purposes, he makes them into dwelling places. The phalanstery becomes a city of arcades. Fourier installs in the austere, formal world of the Empire the colourful idyll of Biedermeier. Its radiance lasts, though paled, till Zola. He takes up Fourier's ideas in Travail, as he takes leave of the arcades in Thérèse Raquin. Marx defends Fourier to Carl Grun, emphasizing his 'colossal vision of man'. He also draws attention to Fourier's humour. And in fact Jean Paul in Lévana is as closely related to Fourier the pedagogue as Scheerbart in his 'glass architecture' is to Fourier the utopian.

**LOUIS-PHILIPPE, OR THE INTERIOR**

**Baudelaire, 'Un martyre'**

Under Louis-Philippe the private citizen enters the stage of history. The extension of the democratic apparatus through a new franchise coincides with the parliamentary corruption organized by Guizot. Under its protection the ruling class makes history by pursuing its business interests. It promotes railway construction to improve its share holdings. It favours Louis-Philippe as a private citizen at the head of affairs. By the time of the July Revolution, the bourgeoisie has realized the aims of 1789 (Marx).

For the private person, living space becomes, for the first time, antithetical to
the place of work. The former is constituted by the interior; the office is its complement. The private person who squares his accounts with reality in his office demands that the interior be maintained in his illusions. This need is all the more pressing since he has no intention of extending his commercial considerations into social ones. In shaping his private environment he represses both. From this spring the phantasmagorias of the interior. For the private individual the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theatre.

Excursus on art nouveau. About the turn of the century, the interior is shaken by art nouveau. Admittedly the latter, through its ideology, seems to bring with it the consummation of the interior – the transfiguration of the solitary soul appears its goal. Individualism is its theory. In Van der Velde the house appears as the expression of personality. Ornament is to this house what the signature is to a painting. The real meaning of art nouveau is not expressed in this ideology. It represents art’s last attempt to escape from its ivory tower, which is besieged by technology. Art nouveau mobilizes all the reserves of inwardness. They find their expression in mediumistic line-language, in the flower as the symbol of naked, vegetal nature confronting a technically armed environment. The new elements of iron building, girder forms, preoccupy art nouveau. In ornamentation it strives to win back these forms for art. Concrete offers it the prospect of new plastic possibilities in architecture. About this time the real centre of gravity of living space is transferred to the office. The de-realized individual creates a place for himself in the private home. Art nouveau is summed up by The Master Builder, the attempt by the individual to do battle with technology on the basis of his inwardness leads to his downfall.

Je crois... à mon âme: la Chose.
Léon Deibel, Oeuvres (Paris 1929)

The interior is the retreat of art. The collector is a true inmate of the interior. He makes the transfiguration of things his business. To him falls the Sisyphean task of obliterating the commodity-like character of things through his ownership of them. But he merely confers connoisseur value on them, instead of intrinsic value. The collector dreams that he is not only in a distant or past world but also, at the same time, in a better one, in which, although men are as unprovided with what they need as in the everyday world, things are free of the drudgery of being useful.

The interior is not only the universe but also the etui of the private person. To live means to leave traces. In the interior these are emphasized. An abundance of covers and protectors, liners and cases is devised, on which the traces of objects of everyday use are imprinted. The traces of the occupant also leave their impression on the interior. The detective story that follows these traces comes into being. His ‘philosophy of furniture’, along with his detective novellas, shows Poe to be the first physiognomist of the interior. The criminals of the first detective novels are neither gentlemen nor apaches, but private members of the bourgeoisie.

BAUDELAIRE, OR THE STREETS OF PARIS

Tout pour moi devient Allegorie.

Baudelaire, ‘Le cygne’
MODERNISM

PARIS

Baudelaire’s genius, which is fed on melancholy, is an allegorical genius. In Baudelaire Paris becomes for the first time a subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is not regional art; rather, the gaze of the allegorist that falls on the city is estranged. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose mode of life still surrounds the approaching desolation of city life with a propitiatory lustre. The flâneur is still on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class. Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd. Early contributions to a physiognomics of the crowd are to be found in Engels and Poe. The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city lures the flâneur like a phantasмагoria. In it the city is now a landscape, now a room. Both, then, constitute the department store that puts even flânerie to use for commodity circulation. The department store is the flâneur’s last practical joke.

In the flâneur the intelligentsia pays a visit to the marketplace, ostensibly to look around, yet in reality to find a buyer. In this intermediate phase, in which it still has patrons but is already beginning to familiarize itself with the market, it appears as bohemianism. The uncertainty of its political function corresponds to the uncertainty of its economic position. This is most strikingly expressed in the professional conspirators, who are certainly a part of Bohemia. Their first field of activity is the army; later it becomes the petit bourgeoisie, occasionally the proletariat. Yet this stratum sees its opponents in the real leaders of the latter. The Communist Manifesto puts an end to their political existence. Baudelaire’s poetry draws its strength from the rebellious emotionalism of this group. He throws his lot in with the asocial. His only sexual communion is realized with a whore.

Facilis descensus Averni

Virgil, Aeneid

What is unique in Baudelaire’s poetry is that the images of women and death are permeated by a third, that of Paris. The Paris of his poems is a submerged city, more submarine than subterranean. The chthonic elements of the city – its topo-graphical formation, the old deserted bed of the Seine – doubtless left their impression on his work. Yet what is decisive in Baudelaire’s ‘deathly idyll’ of the city is a social, modern substratum. Modernity is a main accent in his poetry. He shatters the ideal as spleen (Spleen et Idéal). But it is precisely modernity that is always quoting primaeval history. This happens here through the ambiguity attending the social relationships and products of this epoch. Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectic image therefore a dream image. Such an image is presented by the pure commodity: as fetish. Such an image are the arcades, which are both house and stars. Such an image is the prostitute, who is saleswoman and wares in one.

Le voyage pour découvrir ma géographie

Note of a madman (Paris 1907)

The last poem of the Flowers of Evil, ‘The Journey’: ‘Oh death, old captain, it is time, let us weigh anchor.’ The last journey of the flâneur: death. Its destination: the new. ‘To the depths of the unknown, there to find something new.’ Novelty is a quality independent of the intrinsic value of the commodity. It is the origin of the illusion inseverable from the images produced by the collective
unconscious. It is the quintessence of false consciousness, whose indefatigable
agent is fashion. The illusion of novelty is reflected, like one mirror in another,
in the illusion of perpetual sameness. The product of this reflection is the
phantasmagoria of ‘cultural history’, in which the bourgeoisie savours its false
consciousness to the last. The art that begins to doubt its task and ceases to be
‘inseparable from utility’ (Baudelaire) must make novelty its highest value. The
snob becomes its arbiter novarum rerum. He is to art what the dandy is to
fashion. As in the seventeenth century the canon of dialectical imagery came
to be allegory, in the nineteenth it is novelty. The magasins de nouveautés are
joined by the newspapers. The press organizes the market in intellectual values,
in which prices at first soar. Nonconformists rebel against the handing over of
art to the market. They gather around the banner of ‘L’art pour l’art’. This
slogan springs from the conception of the total artwork, which attempts to
isolate art from the development of technology. The solemnity with which it is
celebrated is the corollary to the truism that glorifies the commodity. Both
abstract from the social existence of man. Baudelaire succumbs to the infatua-
tion of Wagner.

HAUSSMANN, OR THE BARRICADES

J’ai le culte du Beau, du Bien, des grandes choses,
De la belle nature inspirant le grand art,
Qu’il enchante l’oreille ou charmé le regard;

Baron Haussmann, Confession d’un lion devenu vieux

The blossomy realm of decoration,
Landscape and architecture’s charm
And all effects of scenery repose
Upon perspective’s law alone.

Franz Bohle, Theatrical Catechism

Haussmann’s urban ideal was of long perspectives of streets and thoroughfares.
This corresponds to the inclination, noticeable again and again in the nine-
teenth century, to ennoble technical necessities by artistic arms. The institu-
tions of the secular and clerical dominance of the bourgeoisie were to find their
apotheosis in a framework of streets. Streets, before their completion, were
draped in canvases and unveiled like monuments. Haussmann’s efficiency is
integrated with Napoleonic idealism. The latter favours finance capital. Paris
experiences a flowering of speculation. Playing the Stock Exchange displaces
the game of chance in the forms that had come down from feudal society. To the
phantasmagorias of space to which the flâneur abandons himself, correspond
the phantasmagorias of time indulged in by the gambler. Gambling converts
time into a narcotic. Lafargue declares gamling an imitation in miniature of the
mysteries of economic prosperity. The expropriations by Haussmann call into
being a fraudulent speculation. The arbitration of the Court of Cassation,
influenced by the bourgeois and Orleanist opposition, increases the financial risk
of Haussmannization. Haussmann attempts to strengthen his dictatorship and
to place Paris under an emergency regime. In 1864 he gives expression in a
parliamentary speech to his hatred of the rootless population of big cities. The
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latter is constantly increased by his enterprises. The rise in rents drives the
proletariat into the suburbs. The quartiers of Paris thus lose their individual
physionomies. The red belt is formed. Haussmann gave himself the name of
‘artist in demolition’. He felt himself called to his work and stresses this in his
memoirs. Meanwhile, he estranges Parisians from their city. They begin to be
conscious of its inhuman character. Maxime du Camp’s monumental work
Paris has its origin in this consciousness. The Jérémades d’un Haussmannisé
give it the form of a biblical lament.

The true purpose of Haussmann’s work was to secure the city against civil
war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in Paris impossible for all
time. With such intent Louis-Philippe had already introduced wooden paving.
Yet the barricades played a part in the February Revolution. Engels studies the
 technique of barricade fighting. Haussmann seeks to prevent barricades in two
ways. The breadth of the streets is intended to make their erection impossible,
and new thoroughfares are to open the shortest route between the barracks and
the working-class districts. Contemporaries christen the enterprise ‘strategic
embezzlement’.

Fais voir, en déjouant la ruse,
O République, à ces pervers
Ta grande face de Méduse
Au milieu de rouges éclairs.

Workers’ song (about 1850)

The barricade is resurrected in the Commune. It is stronger and better secured
than ever. It stretches across the great boulevards, often reaching the height of
the first floor, and covers the trenches behind it. Just as the Communist
Manifesto ends the epoch of the professional conspirator, the Commune puts
an end to the phantasmagoria that dominates the freedom of the proletariat. It
dispels the illusion that the task of the proletarian revolution is to complete the
work of 1789 hand in hand with the bourgeoisie. This illusion prevailed from
1831 to 1871, from the Lyons uprising to the Commune. The bourgeoisie never
shared this error. The struggle of the bourgeoisie against the social rights of
the proletariat has already begun in the Great Revolution and coincides with the
philanthropic movement that conceals it, attaining its fullest development
under Napoleon III. Under him is written the monumental work of this political
tendency: Le Play’s European Workers. Besides the covert position of phi-
anthropy, the bourgeoisie was always ready to take up the overt position of class
struggle. As early as 1831 it recognizes, in the Journal des Débats, ‘Every
industrialist lives in his factory like the plantation owners among their slaves.’
If, on the one hand, the lack of a guiding theory of revolution was the undoing
of the old workers’ uprisings, it was also, on the other, the condition for the
immediate energy and enthusiasm with which they set about establishing a new
society. This enthusiasm, which reached its climax in the Commune, for a time
won over to the workers the best elements of the bourgeoisie, but in the end led
them to succumb to their worst. Rimbaud and Courbet declare their support
for the Commune. The Paris fire is the fitting conclusion to Haussmann’s work of
destruction.

My good father had been in Paris.

Karl Gutzkow, Letters from Paris (1842)
Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie. But only Surrealism exposed them to view. The development of the forces of production reduced the wish symbols of the previous century to rubble even before the monuments representing them had crumbled. In the nineteenth century this development emancipated constructive forms from art, as the sciences freed themselves from philosophy in the sixteenth century. Architecture makes a start as constructional engineering. The reproduction of nature in photography follows. Fantasy creation prepares itself to become practical as commercial art. Literature is subjected to montage in the feuilleton. All these products are on the point of going to market as wares. But they hesitate on the brink. From this epoch stem the arcades and interiors, the exhibitions and panoramas. They are residues of a dream world. The realization of dream elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thinking. For this reason dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Each epoch not only dreams the next, but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking. It bears its end in itself and unfolds it – as Hegel already saw – with ruse. In the convulsions of the commodity economy we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.