

TIME FOR ARCHITECTURE
On Modernity, Memory and Time
in Architecture and Urban Design

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FOREWORD

TIME, ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN

We are born and we die. The passage from birth to death moves us through stages in life that take us unavoidably to our demise.

This fact lies at the core of our existence and our awareness of it is the foundation of our understanding of time. We see time in our everyday experience. All life shares our mortality, some for less time and some for more. We experience events that reliably repeat themselves: the sun marks out the days, the moon the months and the seasons the years. Light and darkness determine our activity. Seasons and tides have guided us as hunters, farmers and seafarers. Time regulates our lives, from the cosmos to the cells in our bodies.

Our journey through our surroundings takes place in time. Where we start will be in the past and where we are going will be in the future. As we move forward, we look back for guidance to past events. Our judgements are founded on the understanding that every event or movement has a cause that precedes it. From this we predict the likely outcome of changes in our surroundings and decide what our future actions should be.

Although it is in the essence of our being and understanding, time cannot be grasped independently of its effects. It can be seen only when something changes or moves. And the pace of change can vary: lightning can strike in an instant; crops grow in a season and trees in decades; landscape changes almost imperceptibly; heavenly bodies move across the sky but seem never to change. Civilization has brought us the means of managing these variations by dividing time into equal measurable parts: from the hour, to the minute, to the second and eventually to a unit of Planck Time (the speed of light across a Planck length - about 10^{-20} times the diameter of a proton).

However we divide it, the arrow of our time on earth flies in only one direction. Our lifetime may be finite, but our vision of the world is not. We know that the lives of our ancestors have come before us and we live with their inheritance. Our descendants will take our memory beyond our death, but still we seek immortality in deeds and religion. As the future becomes the past and relentlessly takes us to our grave, that knowledge leads us to the denial

of time. In our imaginations, and fearful of the finality of death, we have created places without time where some hope that a spiritual essence of ourselves may live forever.

Science has taken us to measurements of space and time beyond anything we can experience and has led us to question time itself. As Albert Einstein demonstrated that time is relative to the speed and location of the observer, it followed that our present can be someone else's future and another's past. Perhaps then time has no direction, only relationships between different moments. As we theorise on the origin of the universe we come to a moment, the singularity, when not only the universe but all laws of physics, including time, seem to have come into existence.

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Buildings are created, decay and eventually perish. Villages, towns and cities are founded, flourish, decline and sometime will disappear. This same mortal passage defines all life and perhaps all things in the universe. It lies at the centre, not only of biology, but also physics. As it is the fate of all human beings, it shapes our perception of life and the organisation of society and becomes a primary subject of philosophy, anthropology and sociology. Architecture and urban design not only share their mortality with the rest of the universe, they serve societies that are shaped by their understanding of time. A better understanding of the impact of time on architecture and urban design can be achieved with an understanding of time as revealed in science, ideas and social behaviour.

In contemporary architecture, a vision of the future lies at the centre of design theory. An ideal future is put forward that turns away from our past and gives us our concept of modernity. At its heart, this is a proposition for the adoption of a particular intellectual and social relationship between the past, present and future and so is a theory of how we should behave in relation to the passage of time. This idea of modernity is only one aspect of our experience of the present, how it is informed by the past and where it will take us in the future. This is such a fundamental feature of our negotiation with our surroundings that it has been widely explored in philosophy, sociology and anthropology, all of which can enrich our understanding and response to modernity.

As the future is only ever speculation, it must be based on our experience of the past. The past no longer exists, except as personal memory or the survival of past objects and practices. The buildings and places we experience, individually and as a community, are physical reminders of the past and our understanding of them creates memories that are both personal and shared. These shared memories are how a community collectively identifies with a particular place. The design of new buildings and places affects this identity and affects how a community takes its past into the future. The way we remember, and the relationship between memory and identity, have widespread implications and are the subject of sociological, anthropological and perceptual analysis. These studies can help us manage the relationship between new buildings and existing places and respond to the memories and identities of those who will live with them.

As buildings and towns come into existence, change and pass away, we can measure the passage from creation to extinction with hours, years and centuries. As places change with the passage of time they do not do so at the same rate or evenly. Parts of buildings and places change rapidly and others survive for long periods of time. Seen as the measure of change, time moves at different speeds with different phenomena. This is well-recognised in geology and biology and has now been identified as a feature of historical change. Urban geographers see variable change as an essential part of the urban condition and more recently it has been recognised as a key aspect of sustainability. We see long-lasting phenomena in a different light to ephemeral events and an understanding of the unevenness of time and how it affects the ways we use and understand buildings and places can make design more relevant, flexible and enduring.

Most architects and urban designers understand that movement through a place takes time and is a progressive experience. As people enter and pass through a building or place, they will see their surroundings in a sequence and that will be part of the way the place is designed. As this is repeated time after time, the perception of the place will change. It will change from newness to familiarity, and possibly from enthusiasm to apathy and even to dislike. This change in the way an identical object is regarded can take place over years or generations. While some things that go out of fashion are simply discarded, buildings and places often survive long after enthusiasm for them fades. Time changes our use and understanding of the things around us.

The way a building or place can, without any significant physical change, move from being admired to being despised is often so disconcerting to designers that it barely impinges on how they make these places. It is as if our buildings and places spring into an eternal present where decay, transformation and decline are banished in favour of a perpetually benign future. In common with the reassuring imagination of places where our souls can reside forever, there are propositions that some principles of design and beauty are perpetual and timeless. These share a very wide range of theories of the unreality of time from philosophy and cosmology to anthropology and myth.

Before any discussion of how to manage time in relation to the design of buildings and places can proceed, the first task must be to examine the idea that their design can be, in any respect, free from time itself.