

The Use of Space, parts I & II

Court-métrage, 13 minutes

What exactly do we mean when we speak about Space?

Turning to the nearest dictionary, we stumble upon the following:

Space : (uncountable) : an amount of an area or of a place that is empty or that is available for use. The whole area in which all things exist and move.

However inaccurate, we can leverage this definition as a basic position from which to fork, distinguishing between two separate aspects: Specific Space and General Space.

An agricultural parcel is an instance of a Specific Space. A greenhouse nested within this parcel, would constitute its own Specific Space.

Both have their own conditions: humidity, heat, set of social relations, etc. Both Spaces belong to the same category. But the conditions of the second are relative to the first. The greenhouse is a Specific Space of higher level than the agricultural parcel.

The General Space is a strange kind of Specific Space. It includes all the others. The whole earth, social relations, and by implication the currently dominant mode of production:capitalism.

Architectural constructions are nothing less than Transformed Specific Spaces; these kinds can be navigated according to two modes: that of use and that of information.

Let us now turn to how the last forty thousand years have consistently reduced the information content of the Transformed Specific Space.

We begin underground. Approximately forty thousand years ago, our ancestors, using an assortment of pigments, left a series of marks in a cave located in present-day Indonesia. On the surface of the rock, one can see human figures chasing a wild pig.

Such a painting is inseparable from its canvas, the cave. What was a physical location, now bound together with the painting, came to form one of the oldest known Transformed Specific Space.

It could therefore be navigated both in terms of use and information. Indeed, habits and rituals were established synchronously within this Space : there protection was to be found, there interpretation took place.

What the Cave provided could be abstractly modelled and artificially replicated, at a lower level of intensity and durability, but increased variance.

Those replicas are the humans constructed shelter.

They provided protection from the environmental conditions of the Lower-Level Specific Space, in which humans were evolving into, like hunting grounds, extended surroundings, etc.

From this differential structuration of Space, a polarity is established between two archetypes, specifically human and spatially distinct:

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On one hand, the cave which combines the return of a nomadic population to a fixed Space with symbolic markings: a form of proto-writing.

This kind of immutable spaces are able to durably store data, support its transmission, allow for its accumulation.

On the other hand, the external shelter, which would be assembled, disassembled, transported, and sometimes abandoned.

This modified replication of the cave thus engenders new configurations, which leaves an imprint on movements, customs, and perceptions.

Being both Transformed Specific Spaces, they contain use and information.

But each archetype is characterised by its own distribution of use and information.

What fundamentally distinguishes them is that the shelter is primarily for use, while the cave is primarily for information.

From this starting point, we can unfold a series of major stages in the development of Spatiality in its relation to use.

About 10,000 years ago, with the emerging triad of agriculture, sedentarism, and writing, the Specific Space in its immutability is met with a decisive rupture, which we might call the first in a series of crises: it becomes real estate.

As clay tablets are passed from hand to hand, contracts and debts form the bulk of information.

Architecture, as an invention, merges our two archetypes, thereby forming typologies.

Some of them would retain the need to express beyond their use. They are the places of power, religious buildings, palaces, any construction whose functioning implies the necessity of projecting an external representation of their social substance.

Despite the variations, this configuration of writing as technique and architecture as social and symbolic function gets maintained.

Setting our sights to the Middle Ages in Europe, we see the Christian Church disseminating itself.

From the papyrus of Antiquity to the parchment of the Middle Ages, reproducing writing became tedious and expensive.

The biblical narrative is encoded ad libitum by monks on illuminated pages, and figured by secular artisans on its outer walls. Writing, both inside the Church as institution and on the facade of churches as physical elements, allows communication while restraining the ordinary user's ability to decode anything other than explicit representations.

As pure signs are no longer an option, we see a flourishing of architecture as writing ; a counter-intuitive return to the scene of the cave, but in a hierarchical and highly structured setting.

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Architecture mobilised as an effective vector of information exhibits itself in all the terrible glory of the Millennium, one last time, before commencing its long descent into the abyss.

From here our rhythm contracts, as our gaze grows in intensity.

In the Renaissance, Gutenberg's printing press allows low-cost reproducibility of information.

The comparative distribution of resources available to information in books and architecture becomes entirely one-sided, the former's speed and generativity spinning out of any potential equivalence.

Concurrently, political spatiality undergoes an irreversible break, as European powers begin to map the entire world through exploration and conquest, locating it in astronomical coordinates, remodelling and populating it in their colonial ventures. Earth gets circumnavigated, territorialized, surrounded: that is to say, globalised, as the new figure comes into view. More abstractly, a new model of relationship that Space accretes: General Space.

Throughout the 19th Century, illiteracy rates in France drop from 70% to about 5%. The generalisation of reading ability among the masses constitutes a seismic shift for architecture. The information content of Transformed Specific Spaces becomes increasingly unsustainable to justify, especially in terms of economical investment, as industrial capitalism takes hold of the social form in Europe.

In 1831, Victor Hugo meditates in melancholy on the decay of the ancient form, sketching a dialectic of history in the famous chapter of Notre-Dame de Paris titled "This will kill That".

From the vantage point of modernity, a prophetic archdeacon of 1482 muses that the invention of the printing press will render the building obsolete:

"It was a presentiment that human thought, in changing its form, was about to change its mode of expression; that the dominant idea of each generation would no longer be written with the same matter, and in the same manner; that the book of stone, so solid and so durable, was about to make way for the book of paper, more solid and still more durable. In this connection the archdeacon's vague formula had a second sense. It meant, "Printing will kill architecture."

Ironically, Hugo's elegy around the death of Architecture will be a major factor in the revitalising of architecture as an enduring trace of history, under the emerging category of patrimony.

At the height of what was once known as modernity, Benjamin suggests in 1935 that buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by touch and by sight. We inflected it towards that of use and information.

Whereas it is often understood as an eternal equivalence, our hypothesis is that the optical aspect, which means the informational component of architectural constructions, has continued to decline despite any contemporary formal gesticulations, and that this decline is related to an economic concern: the less it provides, the less it is funded.

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By anchoring the optics of symbols to the statics of the cave from its very genesis, humanity has produced a maximal initial state that will never be reached again.

The last 40,000 years have been marked by a steady reduction in the information content of the Transformed Specific Space.