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Experience in-between architecture and context: the New Acropolis Museum, Athens

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Abstract

This article is an introduction to how architecture's context and conditions can be understood as signaletic with reference to Gilles Deleuze's concept of the signaletic material. The understanding of architecture's signaletic material addresses the process of becoming through the potentials of context and the requests towards function and programme, as well as through the methods for creating architecture—all seen as conditional components of a specific work of architecture and, consequently, as part of the signaletic material. A visit to the New Acropolis Museum is analysed to discuss how the potential of the in-between encounters of architecture, context and the experiencing subject can be part of the signaletic material and the process of becoming. This potential is actualised, for instance, in relation to the movement through the museum. The museum architecture affords experiences on potentially several levels spanning from the most pragmatic and functional use of the building as exhibition space, restaurant, book shop, etc. to the awareness of being part of an architectural intentionality as a moving body, a contemplating viewer and as a perceiver of relations between the museum building and its historical and geographical context. In the article the term "visitor" is used to emphasise this complexity of experiential potential that is made accessible by the museum's architectural design.



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Architecture creates and is created within, spatial contexts that allow for actions to take place. In addition to this, architecture creates, and is created within, experiential contexts. The relationality between architecture and context is subsequently

one of correlates. On one hand it concerns a relational process of responding to conditions and circumstances that are already present, and, on the other hand, it concerns the process of causing new conditions and circumstances to

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emerge and to be responded to. This correlation where spaces are outlined and outlining and where experience becomes inseparable from the building involves the presence of an experiencing subject in terms of a participating and sensing user. In this view, architecture works through an in-between building-creation involving both context and user, and through an immanent openness towards a relational exchange between the experiencing user and the architecture. Related to this are the presence and the potential movements of the user's body, without which the whole experiential potential of architecture could not become unfolded. These aspects of architecture are part of the architectural design and part of the architects' conditioning of the experiential potential; how this potential is actualised will depend on the individual user.

The multiplicity that belongs to these factors, the conditioning context of architecture and the conditions and potentials that architecture creates for experience, is what this article outlines as an architectural signaleptic material. It regards architecture as a process of becoming through the potential of context, conditions and circumstances, such as requests towards function and programme, the spatial layout, and the processes and methods for creating architecture. All are components of a specific work of architecture's signaleptic material.

THE SIGNALETIC MATERIAL AS PROCESS

Gilles Deleuze defines the concept of a signaleptic material in relation to the movement-image in cinema. The signaleptic material consists of two processes that are interdependent: differentiation and specification. Differentiation refers to the processual reconfiguring of the whole through its objects and parts, which means that the whole changes with the objects and parts it combines and through which it passes. The objects and parts that are combined, however, are different in kind and possess specific functions and roles in order to constitute the whole and drive the movement-image's sensory-motoric progression. Accordingly, in Deleuze's work on cinema the images are different in kind: the perception-image, the action-image and, in the interval between them, the affection-image.¹ They belong to the

process of specification.² Together, the components of the two processes constitute a signaleptic material which is a condition; it is a potential for conditioning but not yet conditioning anything specific. It is a virtual utterable, but not an actualised utterance. Subsequently, the movement-image not only creates narration, more importantly, it does so on the basis of its own process of creating potential for conditions and utterance. By understanding cinema's narration as actualising the two interdependent processes, differentiation and specification, Deleuze points towards a continuous becoming of "the signaleptic material."³

Experiences and events are part of architecture's signaleptic material as they are potentially conditioned by, as well as potential conditions of, architecture. In architecture's adaptation of event as concept, the unpredictability of what happens and what is experienced is related to temporality and processual becoming. The significance of temporality and process is for instance apparent in the works of Swiss-American architect Bernard Tschumi. The concept of event plays a key role in the early project "The Manhattan Transcripts," a work that consists of drawings, photographs, and text.⁴ Here, the event, and a methodological approach to working with the unpredictability of what happens, is a programmatic element and condition of the work that combined with movement and space creates an architectural narrative in which method and process are essential. This work efficiently points to experience and event as central to architecture, not only as a phenomenological experience afterwards when encountering architecture in a more traditional sense as a specific building, but also as part of the actual process of creation—a condition and a parameter. Experience and event are parts of a programmatic potential as well as form generating factors that introduce an understanding of architectural space as becoming; as process and method, and opposed to a more general conception of space as a three-dimensional continuum or container.⁵

One of Tschumi's most recent works, the New Acropolis Museum in Athens (Figure 1), clarifies the relevance of regarding the conditions of experience and events as part of a signaleptic material that works through processes of differentiation and specification.⁶ The museum architecture proposes how contextual factors can be



Figure 1. The New Acropolis Museum, Athens. The museum expresses the processuality and relationality between the interior and the context. Here the proximity to the Acropolis Hill with the Parthenon Temple is seen as reflections in the part of the glass façade that encloses the museum's Parthenon Gallery. Photo: Annette Svaneklink Jakobsen.

understood as a conditioning of architecture. Furthermore, it presents an example of how this can be done in a way that integrates context beyond the representational. The architectural approach for integrating context in the design and design process of any building is always complex and raises a lot of questions with regard to how it is possible to design with awareness of the contextual conditions, and how to select which conditions to emphasize—or ignore. In Tschumi's words: "Context is not a fact; it is always a matter of interpretation."⁷ It is in the process of selection and interpretation that architecture has often found itself as the creator of a sign (as building) that represents certain delimited characteristics of the constraints that lie outside of the architecture itself: lines and directions that represent some specific content or meaning. Or more literally, communicating signs as in the works of American

architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown who have adapted the vernacular of American society in terms of commercial signs and billboards in their work. They state that: "The essential element of architecture for our time is no longer space, it's no longer abstract form in industrial drag: the essential architectural element is iconography."⁸ This approach belongs to one end of the scale to architectural representation of context, where the sign is radically positioned to architecture as communication. On the other end of the scale, architecture will have to discuss ways of being and becoming with contextual conditions in a manner that transcends the mimetic and representational so that the presence of the user or visitor is actualized not as a subject for receiving communication but as a subject that performs with architecture on a relational level.

The New Acropolis Museum involves the visitor relationally in its becoming. It strikes the visitor (i.e. this writer) as being a traditional work of architecture in many respects: it has a specific function (museum), it is a building (constructed of concrete, marble, steel and glass), and it fulfils specific programmatic needs as a place for exhibiting the archaeological findings of the Acropolis slope and hill. The physical and historical context of this work of architecture and the ways relations between architecture and context perform are however quite significant as a signaleptic process that builds on an experience of continuous differentiation and specification in accordance with the visitor's movement through the museum. The experienced relations between museum building and its context change; the visitor's moving body is clearly thought of as a potentially integrated part of the architecture's whole and, therefore, itself a tool to make changes occur.

The visitor follows a prescribed route that leads through the layers of the building, from ground level to the experiential culmination of the visit, the Parthenon Gallery on the top level. This movement route has the instrumental and conceptual aim that it ties the specific encounters with exhibits together in certain logics. It forms an overall architectural narrative; a whole. For the visitor of the New Acropolis Museum the architecture has pre-conditioned the experiences, which are revealed as situated specifications as one proceeds through the museum. The idea and intentions behind the museum building's spatial layout are experienced through the situated encounters with very different types of exhibition spaces and specific ways of bringing the visitor in contact with the exhibits, and not least, with the museum's context, the adjacent Acropolis Hill. The presence of the exhibits' origin, the slopes and temples of the Acropolis Hill, is the most important experiential motif of the museum and is constantly rethought and re-specified; this is due to the short distance between the museum and the Acropolis Hill and due to the actual visual contact, not only from the Acropolis towards the museum but also from the interior museum space towards the Acropolis. The museum's architecture physically interprets this connection by letting transparency, and layouts of movement patterns direct attention to the relational in-between-ness of architecture and context, and, consequently, also

by pointing towards the distance and separation between the Acropolis and the museum. For the experiencing visitor the architecture creates a conditional field of possible connections between the building, the exhibited archaeological artefacts, the adjacent hill, and the body and mind of the visitor. The character of these possible connections is experienced both spatially and temporally, because it is experienced here-and-now in Athens, in the twenty-first century and yet points towards the historic past, to ancient Greek culture.

EXPERIENCING THE NEW ACROPOLIS MUSEUM

*"The fact is that the beginning always begins in-between, intermezzo."*⁹⁹

The visitor enters the museum in the spatial interval between the museum and the Acropolis Hill, unaware that this is the same interval that he or she will later be guided to look *over*, towards the Parthenon Temple (Figure 2). The entrance plaza points towards the Acropolis site; the excavations below are partly covered with glass as part of the plaza. Between the Acropolis and the museum, between above and below, the arriving visitor is brought from the public area outside and into the interior of the museum. From the entrance space on ground level an architectural setting of the exhibition spaces begins by leading the visitor towards a subway-like threshold and here introducing a visual overview of the vertical layering of the exhibition spaces and, subsequently, of the other visitors already inside, studying the exhibits on different floors. Here, a dominant consciousness of distance between the visitor on one side, literally on the outer side of the entrance threshold, and the exhibition and the other visitors' contemplation of the exhibition on the other side is specified. The visitor crosses the threshold and enters the actual exhibition area. The physical distance, which is emphasized by the combination of a literal threshold and the visual overview given before entering, raises expectations; the act of crossing the threshold performs as an inclusion of the individual visitor. The sense of distance is reversed to nearness in the Archaic Gallery on level two of the museum;



Figure 2. The Parthenon Temple is a significant cultural and historical landmark in Athens. In the New Acropolis Museum, vistas of the temple are integrated in the exhibition experience and part of the architectural design. Photo: Annette Svaneklink Jakobsen.

here, the visitor is invited by the openness of the space to circulate freely among the archaic sculptures. The keyword is contemplation, the possibility of close observations of ancient sculptures, which are placed at the visitor's eye level. This, obviously, addresses the body as a matter of scale and the subject as a face-to-face investigator of our historical predecessors. Whilst informing of and presenting archaeological findings, the exhibition layout addresses the visitor with regard to reflections on matters of identity and body when proceeding from one sculpture to the next, from object to object. The architecture of the space enhances this experience by its openness and fluidity and by letting the columns and lighting system, placed in the ceiling, perform as objectified elements that underline the so to speak pointing character of the architecture.

The process of specification applies to the entrance plaza, the threshold situation, and to the Archaic Gallery—as well as to the circulation system that provides for the movement between them. This culminates where the exhibition route leads into the Parthenon Gallery on the top floor. The visitor enters the Parthenon Gallery beneath the exhibited Parthenon Frieze's west side. Here, the visitor is met with a panoramic view of the Acropolis and the Parthenon temple,

looking over the space in-between them. This entrance symbolically leads into the political context that the museum is also built within: it has been clear from the initial plans for building a New Acropolis Museum, to replace the former and smaller museum at the Acropolis Hill, that a new museum should be large enough and technologically capable of housing the entire Parthenon Frieze, including the parts of it that are currently still exhibited at the British Museum in London. In this sense, the new museum has been built partly as a proof of Greece's ability to take care of its own cultural past, and as a means of applying political pressure on the cultural world, and specifically on the British Museum, to return to Greece what was once removed from the Acropolis.¹⁰

Apart from this, the setting of the Parthenon Gallery has a very direct impact as an event of a striking experiential quality. It makes a sudden change in the visitor's way of contemplating the exhibits; the contemplative promenade through the exhibition spaces where the objects are presented in a logical order is grounded on a separation between the two parts, the object and the subject, as if belonging to two worlds. In this sense, the contemplation setting is completely surpassed by a real lived experience arising from

the fact that the visitor suddenly finds herself activated relationally in the middle, in-between building and context, where the presence of the Parthenon Temple plays an active role in the exhibition of the Parthenon Frieze. Thus, the historic context no longer belongs to the past but instead to the present experience.

CONNECTIONS ARISING FROM THE INTERIOR

There are two main aspects of a movement–time relation in Deleuze’s work on cinema; in the movement-image, movement is spatially relating while constituting a whole, and time only indirectly derives from this movement; in the time-image, time presents itself directly and the narrative whole is substituted by temporal circuits.¹¹ There are also two main ways of considering a movement–time relation in the New Acropolis Museum. There is the preconditioning of a movement pattern, which makes the visitor’s moving body perform as a sensory-motoric means of disclosing the exhibition and combining the exhibition parts to a narrative whole, but there is also the directness of experiencing time when the visitor is placed as an in-between-ness of the relation-awareness that the Parthenon Gallery specifies.

The specific situation that is architecturally staged as a relational process in-between museum visitor, the Parthenon Gallery and the Parthenon Temple points to an expression of the irreducibility and indivisibility that also characterizes the non-representational directness of time, in the circuits of the crystal-image.¹² In the crystal-image, Deleuze refers to Henri Bergson’s understanding of time as itself splitting into present and past, a present which is now already passing and a past which is preserved in the new present.¹³ The actual and the virtual are according to Deleuze equally indivisible and indiscernible in the crystal-image; the point of indiscernibility is a small internal circuit of exchange between the actual and the virtual; never divisible, and yet they are split.¹⁴ It is a circuit and a split—or a fusion and a tear: “[...] the visual and the sound do not reconstitute a whole, but enter into an ‘irrational’ relation according to two dissymmetrical trajectories. The audio-visual image is not a whole, it is ‘a fusion of the tear’.”¹⁵ The experience of the correlate between the Parthenon Gallery and the Parthenon

at the Acropolis is the experience of a perfect crystal-image: a crystal-image understood as an indivisible exchange between the two inseparable, yet split, parts of the setting; perfect in a Bergsonian sense as an intuitive experience that stems from an: “[...] *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible.”¹⁶

When Deleuze’s philosophy on cinema proceeds further into the potential of new, electronic images these:

[...] no longer have any outside (out-of-field), any more than they are internalized in a whole; rather, they have a right side and a reverse, reversible and non-superimposable, like a power to turn back on themselves. [...]. They are the object of a perpetual reorganization, in which a new image can arise from any point whatever of the preceding image. The organization of space here loses its privileged directions, and first of all the privilege of the vertical which the position of the screen still displays, in favor of an omni-directional space which constantly varies its angles and co-ordinates, to exchange the vertical and the horizontal.¹⁷

Those new images will have to be based on “yet unknown aspects of the time image.”¹⁸ Yet unknown aspects also apply to architecture’s signalitic material since it is a becoming of the conditions and influences that apply to architectural creation at a certain stage of time or in a specific context. The connections of space and time that are performed in the museum bear for instance strong witness of contemporary architecture’s familiarity with the sense and understanding of space and time in cinema and media theory. Cinema was a source of inspiration for the younger Tschumi. Especially Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and Eisenstein’s montage theories have been a recurring source of inspiration and is traceable in the way the museum invites the visitor to partake in an architectural montage through the processes of differentiation and specification.¹⁹ From the process of the visitor’s body moving through the museum exhibits and thereby creating narration to the directness in experiencing the temporality of the Parthenon Gallery, there is a change in approach to perception. This change obviously involves the status and meaning of the body’s

movement in space. Media theorist Paul Virilio has proposed the term “trans-appearance” to describe perception through real-time media; a term that questions the status of geographical distance, and therefore the status of the body’s movement in space, as it incorporates the idea of negated distance created by transmission media. It is a transparency of time, based on absence and disappearance of spatial grounding and geographical belonging.²⁰ The literal appearance of the Parthenon as one enters the Parthenon Gallery is not sufficient to describe the experience, the bringing together of visiting subject, the museum space and the vistas towards the temple that the architecture brings forth here. The experience is more one of being part of a becoming here-and-now, which affects the visitor directly by bringing together elements that are actually separate, in space and in time. The museum, the visitor’s own body moving and the history of the site seem to unite in this fluctuating direct expression of time. According to architectural theorist K. Michael Hays, this is a potential, which is also present in Tschumi’s earliest works where there is a mirroring:

[. . .] back to the viewer as marks of a specific, even unique and personal, affective architectural encounter—an event: *this* moment of experience, *this* sensation of architecture condensed *here*, *this* spacing for architecture that happened for *me* just *now*.²¹

While accentuating the distances and proximities, the museum’s location in relation to its context and the exhibits’ displacement from their original context are brought together through visual contact. This experience goes beyond the phenomenological appearance, for it is not only directed towards an encounter between parts but most of all it points towards the correlational ontological becoming of building, context and visitor. Subsequently, the experience includes more than what can be explained by Virilio’s conception in regard to perception, transappearance. Rather, it points towards the processes and becoming of its signaletic material including the geometrical and functional conditions of the Parthenon temple such as the procession along the frieze, interpreted in the museum as the visitor’s walk along the frieze around a core of the museum building, the measurements of which correspond to the walls of the Parthenon where the frieze was originally placed.

In this way, geometrical and functional conditions are rethought and reactivated in the museum.

The architecture of the New Acropolis Museum invites the visitor into this in-between of the museum building and its context; it invites to relate to the literal physical intervals, the distances and proximities, through the visitor’s own experience and conception. The architecture keeps actualizing the visitor as a subject in various types of encounters with the exhibited artefacts, with the present and with the past, by inviting to participate in the apparent fusion of the tear, however, maintaining the parts being just that: split.

Notes

1. The concepts of image and affection-image in relation to The New Acropolis Museum were discussed in a previous article by this writer: Annette Svaneklink Jakobsen, “Close-up and expanded context: Potentials of ‘image’ – in production of architectural space”, in *The International Journal of the Image, Volume 1, Number 1*. (Champaign: Common Ground Publishing, 2011).
2. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2, The Time-Image* (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 29.
3. “These components of the movement-image, from the dual point of view of specification and differentiation, constitute a *signaletic material* which includes all kinds of modulation features, sensory (visual and sound), kinetic, intensive, affective, rhythmic, tonal, and even verbal (oral and written)”. Ibid., 29 (italics in the original). See also Bodil Marie Stavning, Thomsen’s article “The Signaletic, Haptic and Real-Time Material” in this supplementary of *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*.
4. Bernard Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts* (London: Academy Group, 1994).
5. Cf. Bernard Tschumi, “The Architectural Paradox”, in *Architecture Theory since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 219.
6. The New Acropolis Museum opened to the public in 2009.
7. Bernard Tschumi, *Event-Cities 3* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 12.
8. AMOMA and Rem Koolhaas, *Content* (Köln: Taschen, 2004), 150.
9. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Continuum Books, 2004), 362.
10. A debate on the Parthenon Frieze and the politics of the topic is found here: <http://www.elginism.com> (accessed November 21, 2011).
11. Cf., Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1, The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: The Athlone Press and University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Deleuze, *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*.
12. Deleuze, *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, 78.

13. Cf. Ibid., 82.
14. Cf. Ibid., 71.
15. Ibid., 268.
16. Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), 7 (italics in the original).
17. Deleuze, Cinema 2, The Time-Image, 265.
18. Ibid., 266.
19. See Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts*, 7 and xxiii.
20. See Paul Virilio, *La Machine de Vision* (Paris: Editions Galilee, 1988); Paul Virilio "Indirect Light", in Paul Virilio. *From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond*, ed. John Armitage (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 57–70.
21. K. Michael Hays, *Architecture's Desire, Reading the Late Avant-Garde*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 146–7.