Disorientation and Disclosure

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My aim is to reconsider an important but neglected dimension of architecture's spatiality – *orientation* – and to do so by examining a range of interiors, buildings, and urban settings. My thesis is this: that the alternation between disorientation and orientation provides the key to the sense of contained space, or the "constitution of interiority".

One does not need an advanced degree in urban history to know that today's cities are troubled by conflicting patterns of order: remnants of pre-industrial settlements, fragments of modernist utopias, and post-industrial alternatives. Just about any large town presents a version of this patchwork, no matter which country you visit. While we might want matters to be otherwise, I believe we must accept this state of affairs as our point of departure in contemporary design and theory. Despite the inferior metal of our urban and suburban landscapes we must resist the magnetic pull of more attractive patterns that existed in the past or might come to be in future. Instead of possible realities we should focus on real possibilities. Why: because when creative work takes dissonant conditions as its starting point, it can disclose unforeseen continuities within the places and experiences of contemporary life. How: a basic premise will guide my answer; the places that are most likely to sustain the work of what I call 'world building' are those that initially seem unpropitious, because they resist simple description, lack clear structure, and defeat understanding – or seem to. Important, then, are not the rooms, buildings, and neighbourhoods that possess significance but the conditions under which they obtain it. No special preference for fragments prompts this interest, instead a hunch that situations of spatial disorder serve as the birthplace of spatial significance.

In the arguments that follow I will rely on an un-argued premise: that both the building and its interior are co-determined by the wider landscape that envelopes them. This co-determination does not defeat the work's internal definition, it only conditions it. In the traditional vocabulary of our discipline, the building's involvement in its encompassing milieu was named *orientation*. This familiar term assumes exactly what must be explained: how the work *achieves* its involvements, how its internal arrangements discover and define their place in a world that is beyond their control and not of their making.

The practical and expressive unity of a room or building gives it character or *decorum*; perhaps *mood* as well, as Le Camus de Mézières (1992), Adolf Loos (1982), and more recent architects have suggested. I propose calling this equipmental and expressive totality the *inner horizon*. Yet, unity of this kind never results from the configuration of architectural elements alone, but equally from the cultural and historical order of the situations and institutions they accommodate and represent. The same can be said for any *outer horizon*: for it, too, frames typical practices, a building's public or urban aspects. Unlike the inner, the outer horizon often changes in unforeseen ways, through several agencies, with results that are alternately welcomed and regretted. Orientation mediates these two horizons.

Orientation has been a familiar term in architecture for centuries. Temples, Vitruvius insisted, should be positioned on their sites "so that those who approach with offerings and sacrifices will look toward the image within the temple beneath the eastern part of the heavens" (Vitruvius 1999: 59). The verb 'to orient' derives from

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the Latin word for 'east' or 'dawn,' which in turn comes from the verb 'to rise,' and is closely related to 'origin.' Orientation, then, is inaugural, a movement that interrupts prosaic affairs, beginning something new. Obviously, the path of the sun is key in this etymology.

The beginning of this inauguration (my second point) is that orientation overcomes a prior sense of unawareness, indifference, or being lost. Disorientation may be said to be the beginning of the beginning. In conventional usage 'getting oriented' means making sense of new circumstances; more basically, noticing that the conditions have changed. The nautical task of 'finding one's bearings' seeks just this sort of awareness. Joseph Conrad wrote in *Mirror of the Sea* that embarkation requires all the skill of naval science, in the absence of which shipwreck is more or less certain (Conrad 1926). There is a geographical meaning of the term, too, coupling unfamiliarity with distance. For centuries pilgrims have sought the holy land in the orient, also paradise. Today this estimation survives in accounts of the east as exotic.

My next point refers to orientation's more local significance. It indicates a fundamental sense of direction, like the French and Italian versions of the English word 'sense'. When oriented, I know where I have been and where I am going, also what I have done and am about to do. Orientation determines and indicates one's inclination, also one's spatial relations to both things and people. Achieving orientation in this more local sense presupposes a landscape in which bearings can be discovered.

Earlier I suggested that orientation mediates inner and outer horizons. An outer context can provide direction, but also a framework for practical, historical, and cultural action. Orientation is the means by which a person aligns him or herself with or against others and things. The outer horizon in which we find our bearings is not only encompassing, but differentiated into a field of contrasting values. Facing, Levinas has shown, is particularly poignant when the person being confronted is especially different, desired maybe, or despised (1969). Part of my aim is to show that interiority also depends on a field of differentiated figures.

Before I turn to specific rooms and buildings, I want to say a little more about differentiation. Etymologically, to differ means "to set, carry, or tear apart or away". Wholeness is cleaved through differentiation. When understood temporally, differing means deferring, as Derrida often argued (1982: esp.1-28). Like differing, deferring creates distance; people or things are put off, delayed, set before or after. Behind is before, ahead, not yet. This realisation indicates that time and history are essential dimensions of the horizon to which we orient ourselves.

Here, with the matter of difference, it is plain that I have approached a rather large philosophical problem. Heidegger devoted an entire volume to the matter of identity and difference (1969). Derrida's early work largely hinges on this issue. And Levinas returned to the theme repeatedly; a key chapter in his *Totality and Infinity* addresses the face of the other, notably the asymmetry of the relationship (1969: esp. 194-208). In a paper called "Meaning and Sense", he described orientation as a form of movement: a movement "going outside the identical toward an other which is absolutely other" (1987: 91). This was also for him the very definition of a *work*.

For my part, I want to show that architectural settings depend on differentiation, in the midst of which orientation can be discovered. My thesis, again, is that architectural settings – especially interiors – make sense when orientation is disclosed in the midst of discordant conditions. In what follows, I will introduce and

interpret several buildings. I have organised my examples in three pairs: the first two will indicate different ways in which a building's situations are co-determined by its *spatial* horizon, the second two will describe a work's dependence on its *historical* horizon, and the third pair will take up the problem of the project's *cultural* horizon. While these three dimensions will be treated separately, the distinctions are artificial. Architectural orientation depends on all three together. I will conclude by arguing that the building is largely defined by its measure of engagement with conditions it cannot possibly comprehend. I believe that this unfulfilled reach is the building's fate and essence. I will try to show that orientation puts us in touch with places we do not occupy but still feel part of. Good design requires a kind of seeing that grasps what is unapparent.

Orientation/Disorientation

Left: Frank Lloyd Wright, Robie House, 1910, approach walk. Photo: Carlos Eduardo Comas

Right: Frank Lloyd Wright, Robie House, 1910, living room. Photo: Author

Anyone who has visited Frank Lloyd Wright's "prairie style" houses and early public buildings will remember the disorienting character of their entry sequences. Wright was not the only modern architect to use a labyrinth to join sidewalk to fireplace, nor did he acknowledge the long tradition of the labyrinth's use as a spatial type, he just employed it repeatedly. Not only do his vestibules, halls, and passages turn in on themselves, their ceilings are also strikingly low, like the lighting levels, the darkness of which slows one's pace and quickens one's anticipation. Coloured or faceted glass in the windows not only denies brightness but prevents external markers from providing wider awareness. Entry into the Robie House in Chicago is strikingly indirect. Joseph Connors wrote:

> The Robie House confounds expectations of what a house should look like. It has no street façade and no obvious door ... getting in ... is no easy matter, since the doors are located in out of the way places ... one [must] walk deep in under the shelter of the house before encountering the doors ... and the visitor is forced close up against massive blocks of brick, so much so the simple act of ascending is turned into an intense experience, something like scaling the face of a cliff. (1984: 30)

The sense of being out of place in such a passage does not result from indefiniteness of location, but from the fact that the space *in itself* is all that is known or felt. The sense of being un-situated results less from being enclosed than being isolated. Wright knew this perfectly well. His entry meanders were preparatory – delayed, deferring, and discomforting – but for that reason were perfect pretexts for arrival, making the first full disclosure all the more striking and significant. Here, the spaces of approach and arrival form *contrasting complementarities*.

Orientation depends on isolation and overcomes it through a spatial *de-severance* that creates continuity between a setting and its horizon, an interior and topography. I will explain this further and deepen the problem with reference to another well-known building from the early twentieth century.

Cut into one of the hills of Prague, Adolf Loos' Villa Müller hides its entry below street level. The absence of upper level apertures and the simple planarity of the volume make the building look top-heavy, and no evidence of adequate support is apparent from the street. One reason for the concealed base is the sloping site. Another is the street wall, the height of which nearly aligns with the canopy over the entry. Any hill climber knows the safest descent is diagonal, thus the angle of the sloping drive, which inclines a full two metres. Entry involves losing sight of the street and the houses nearby. Orientation begins with a preliminary reduction of awareness, a blinkered prolepsis.

At the edge of the driveway, the entry steps through a low wall, down to a walk that rings three sides of the house. The canopy shelters and shades the approach, while a travertine vault carved into the façade's thickness encloses and compresses it. If thought of as a half-grotto, it is oddly symmetrical: a raised planter on the right, a bench in the middle, and the entry door on the left. While symmetry and centrality are asserted by the façade and proposed by the cave, the latter fails to yield entry at its centre, for that spot is occupied by the bench. Shifting sideways and entering, two rooms lie ahead: first a narrow vestibule, then a larger coat room, which opens sideways. If the entire passage is seen as axial, the coat room's spread to the left balances the porch's spread to the right, but sensing that requires spatial recall. Movement occurs at the margins of the setting, suggesting that places are central, not passage. Space does not *flow* in a *Raumplan* – rather, settings are stable and *movement* is structured. Straight ahead, the path terminates in steps that twist in half-light. Like the travertine embrasures out front, this threshold is equipped with over-sized frames that squeeze passage. Approach is again compressed into the thickness of a wall, having been delayed twice and deprived of external reference. All of this makes the salon magnificent: twice the height of the passage, filled with light, lined on the long side with a symmetry of three windows.

The strong sense of orientation that arises at the moment of arrival is based on the preceding lack of wider awareness – the blinkering. A series of delays caused this, as did denials. From a distance the façade seemed deprived of its base. Inside the gate, the descending drive detached itself from the street. The half-grotto was unmatched to the façade, even though it borrowed some of its thickness. The entry passage was both marginalised and phased, and the whole sequence immunised

against lateral contacts. Arrival to the main room reversed all of this by renewing connections: the street level is regained, natural light and amplitude of dimension are restored, the prospect to distant locations reopens, and a set of new opportunities (conversation, reading, and dining) makes itself apparent. As with the Robie House approach, a complementarity of contrasting conditions is significant here, but even more important is the role of preliminary isolation and absence of reference, without which orientation could not be regained. With these two examples in mind I now want to discuss a few cases that achieve orientation differently.

Spatial orientation

Giuseppe Terragni's Asilo Sant' Elia was designed to occupy as much of its corner site in Como as possible. The entry façade is oblique to each street, the extreme edge of the front canopy was to extend all the way to the corner. As built, though, the canopy is a rather minor affair. The little canopy casts a shallow shadow, even though its vertical reach is no more than half the height of the frame to the left. That frame covers a long thin porch on which children wait for their parents. Although skeletal, this apparatus was intended to reduce interior solar gain. Between the bony frame and the chunky stones, the entry doors rest lightly on a raised platform, three steps above a gravel path. For all its delicate functionality, this entire contrivance seems almost incidental to the glass screen. The glazing is so insistent on its own geometry that its pattern determines the size and shape of the main door. Yet, it can be said to be inaugural, for it is the first of several window walls that succeed one another through the plan.

Left: Giuseppe Terragni, Asilo Sant' Elia, 1937, entry façade. Photo: Author

Right: Giuseppe Terragni, Asilo Sant' Elia, 1937, interior. Photo: Author

Once entry is gained – it takes just a second – another thin layer of space parallels the entry wall. This one is not defined by a glazed partition but a line of columns and skylight above. These three supports are coupled with another set deeper in plan, which divide the entry hall from the building's centre. Beyond this edge, a line of classrooms begins on the right and the refectory hall on the left. Having reached this point, one can say arrival has been accomplished, but the space, at least the view through the space, continues into the courtyard garden ahead and obliquely into the dining hall. In fact, there is no final limit to the expanse, for the rear of the garden court is open toward the block interior and the hills in the distance. Has orientation been achieved through these means? Do the glazed partitions, lines of columns, and skylights reset awareness? Inaugurate a new sense of the world? Before answering these questions, let me turn to a different case.

The Brazilian Press Association (ABI) in Rio, designed by the Roberto brothers, also occupies a corner site, though much more urban than the prior examples. The block lies within the city's central district planned by Alfred Agache, whose guidelines stipulated both dimensions and configuration, notably, accessible block interiors. The massive building gives the impression of great solidity, though a structural frame supports it. The weighty walls never meet the ground, but shade the

Left: Marcelo and Milton Roberto, Brazilian Press Association (ABI), 1938, street level. Photo: Author

Right: Marcelo and Milton Roberto, Brazilian Press Association (ABI), 1938, entry loggia. Photo: Author

shops and entry below. Within the bays of the entry façade, a number of possibilities present themselves: retail shops at both ends, a driveway to the block interior in the second bay, and the entry loggia. Each of these conforms to the measure of the structural bays, but changes in elevation signify the relative importance of each to the neighbourhood and institution: the loggia is two-storeyed, the shops just over half that. The loggia's prominence is also indicated by changes in materials: whereas the main body of the building is rendered concrete, the walls of the loggia and the columns are clad in Brazilian granite. The deepest wall, which surprisingly presents elevators to the upper floors – as if this were the building's lobby – is clad in stainless steel. Halfway into the depth of the loggia there is an intermediate cross axis, with the members' meeting room on the left and the concierge desk on the right. Each of these is recessed, however, and this cross-axis is barely noticeable. What is apparent, though, despite its depth in plan, is the elevator wall, partly because of its surface, which must have been very striking in 1938. The writing on the wall also endows it with prominence, as do the elevator doors, clad in the same expensive Brazilian woods as the interiors to indicate their decorum.

Although ambiguous as a type (lobby, loggia, walk, and court) the space has fascinating content. Because no physical barriers other than a short step separate it from the sidewalk, it can be said to widen the street. Moreover, the driveway into the block interior extends traffic through the space. Still, the cantilever and ceiling darken, quiet, and cool it, giving it room-like character. The writing on the wall puts the Press on the street. The steel elevator wall is penetrable – only not by one's view, as was Terragni's building.

Consider the two buildings together. The first shows almost everything, the second almost nothing. Differences between what is in- and outside have been largely eliminated in Como, greatly strengthened in Rio. If we shift from spatial differing to temporal deferring, we can say that Terragni rushes us through his project as soon as we enter it, while the Roberto brothers interrupt passage, re-starting the entry clock with the close of the elevator doors. The first building offers its engagements without delay, the second makes us wait. On the matter of depth, the space of the first is largely un-occluded, that of the second indifferent to the principle of continuity – despite its adoption of the structural frame and so-called free plan. Lastly and most generally, the first insists on affirming the same kind of setting throughout, and the second makes promises about upper level settings being different from those on the street. Although these projects construe orientation differently, neither makes use of preliminary disorientation, as did the Robie and Müller houses. They rely on the city for that.

Historical orientation

Le Corbusier's Swiss Pavilion sits at the edge of the Cité Universitaire in Paris. A park-like campus and sports fields can be seen from the student rooms, but just in front of the building runs one of the university's access drives. The land on which the building sits is not exactly level. Le Corbusier's reluctance to waste resources was the cause of its unevenness: he decided that the earth excavated for foundations should be kept on the site to re-shape it. I note this because it affected the design of the entry sequence: mounds of earth prevent direct access and views, or, put positively, this new topography allows for a number of vantages along a meandering approach.

The building's base platform surmounts these preliminaries. It is level, slightly larger in plan than the block above, built of rough aggregate and paved with tile where shadows are cast – the same tile as the entry hall. The outer spread of this second, tiled surface is limited by lines that extend the hall's geometry. Standing on the platform in shadow, one has arrived somewhere but not yet to the building. As with the ABI, arrival is delayed, but less categorically, given the continuities of material and geometry. Orientation for Le Corbusier has a temporal index, it involves perception of what is directly apparent, coupled with recall of what can be seen no longer and anticipation of what is yet to come into view.

Entering the enclosure means leaving the deck. The glass entry wall is co-planar with the raised block's rear façade. Paralleling the continuation of the floor are the co-planar ceilings of the entry hall and block underside. The typical emblem of arrival – a dramatically raised ceiling height – was unnecessary in this case. Instead, Le Corbusier opened the horizon and presented its opportunities in an intimate but panoramic foyer: a small lounge to the immediate right, an enclosed garden beyond that, the bar and administration rooms diagonally ahead to the right, the refectory straight on (terminating in a painting that replaced a photo mural), and, on the left, first the elevator, then (obliquely) an opening into the distance, the stairway up to the rooms, and the stair down to the basement.

All in all, the low and sweeping space offers a spectrum of availabilities, inviting choice, but providing one's decision with full understanding of what is at hand. Within the panorama, one surface advances from the horizon, the photo mural (now a painting) that frames the building's common space. This room allows students to overcome the isolation of their rooms above. Given the content of the mural, one suspects that Le Corbusier also meant the place to restore a lost sense of community among the residents, maybe even identity, for the representations included emblems of their homeland, Switzerland. Orientation is not only co-ordination of the several opportunities within the building, but with others far beyond, such that the students re-establish both community and communication.

Left: Le Corbusier, Swiss Pavilion, 1932, entry platform. Photo: Author

Right: Le Corbusier, Swiss Pavilion, 1932, entry hall. Photo: Author

Left: Carlo Scarpa, Querini Stampalia,
1963, entry bridge. Photo: Author

Right: Carlo Scarpa, Querini Stampalia,
1963, exhibition/lecture hall.
Photo: Author

Communication with distant locations and times is also evident in the next building, the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice by Carlo Scarpa. The project, a conversion of an old palazzo, involved re-arranging the Foundation's ground floor and rear garden. Scarpa's design also provided the building with a new entrance, while keeping the lower entry for boat arrivals. Entry commences with the bridge, but it preserves canal passage below. Despite the elegance of the approach, the new doorway is marginal on the façade, for the pre-existing paired doors remain significant and central, with their prominence reinforced by the grand balcony above. Yet, the point of arrival is not lacking in importance for orientation: it opens onto the only straight vista from the building's front to back. It connects the *campo* on the landside to the canal and foyer, and each of these to the elements that give the building even greater depth: the stair, rear garden, and ancient well-head. This well-head was the historic centre of the palazzo, serving as the source of fresh water and social encounter.

The foyer itself has a double orientation, forward but also sideways, toward the old entry and its lower level, but still further to the northeast room, the site's most ancient. An oblique view opens beyond the threshold to the left, into the main exhibition/lecture hall. Water isn't confined to the front room, however. The well-head is in the distance and the room ahead, with its patterned floor, is ringed by a channel that conducts flood water. Floating ceiling panels brighten and lighten the space, through reflection and the impression of weightlessness. The whole ensemble can be described as a mixing of opposites: several shifting levels below (each of them quasi-liquid) and weightless brightness above. Paradoxically, the garden sits above all of this, providing an upward orientation to movement, while the interiors seemingly sink.

The past cannot be escaped in Venice any more than the sea, and Scarpa seems preoccupied with both. The stature this palace once enjoyed is gone. But the new entry, the extended prospect, and the connections to past practices are both recalled and renewed – practices of arrival and departure, collecting water, commerce, and gathering around the well. Jan Patočka (1998: 35) writes that horizons allow us to live amid possibilities, to transcend self-givenness. I believe this little foyer is an instance of a setting transcending itself into its historical foundation, the consequence of which is a profound sense of where one is in the city and the world – even if that wider location and deeper history seem not to be actually present. Here, latent depth is vividly manifest.

My last two examples were finished recently, one in Ireland and the other in England. In their different ways this pair will allow me to show how orientation serves as a source for finding one's bearings in a cultural milieu, even if that horizon seems profoundly disorienting.

John Tuomey and Sheila O'Donnell designed the Lewis Glucksman Gallery at University College Cork to take advantage of its position on the edge of campus, alongside a small river, facing the city and surrounding hills. In plan, one line of movement connects the river to the road that climbs to the campus. This line edges the entry platform, which is at once an elevated deck and an open forecourt that offers views of the town and campus. But the key function of the deck is to give access to the building. The entry is positioned between the marginal walk I just mentioned and two rather massive stairway blocks. All of this passes below the wide wooden bulk of the galleries because their base aligns with the canopy of the trees all around.

The doorway, then, opens below an arboreal boat. It is one among a number of passages that run horizontally and vertically. Inside the door, there is a comparable

Left: O'Donnell and Tuomey, Lewis Glucksman Gallery, 2004, entry platform. Photo: Author

Right: O'Donnell and Tuomey, Lewis Glucksman Gallery, 2004, entry hall. Photo: Author

doubling of prospects: straight ahead, a view toward the town on the other side of the river; above, the gallery (with works on show, plus a patch of sky); to the right, the grand stair that ascends to the galleries; and further to the right, the elevator. Between the stair and the elevator, a door opens into a river-side room. I have listed these opportunities as I did those of the Swiss Pavilion because I think this space is similarly panoramic. But added to Le Corbusier's horizontal style of presentation is a vertical arrangement. The glass wall to the left reveals the lateral descent to the river, while the stair on the right ascends to the mezzanine, which in turn opens toward the gallery window and tree tops above.

Sky and soil are thereby coupled with campus and city, unsettling and orienting a collection of paintings and sculpture. The transparencies and accelerated views allow comparison with Terragni's school, except for the fact that the enclosures to the extreme right and left, to say nothing of those below the platform, shelter settings and images still to be discovered, the content of which is only intimated at the point and time of arrival. The foyer seems equally dedicated to quickened and delayed disclosure, showing and suggesting what the building and its vicinity have to offer, the crossover and coordination of conditions and sensibilities that are generally thought to be opposed: a collection, campus, and city.

Eric Parry's Office Building at Stockley Park near Oxford also sits on a site that connects artificial and natural conditions. Wider oppositions are also present. Once surrounded by farm lands, the site is now reached by a major motorway, a route that joins England's north and south, and is spliced by one of the world's major airports, Heathrow, the horizon of which is global. Orientation in this case reaches toward each of those distances and – I will show – still farther.

The side approach to the building turns toward the actual entry at a bend in the front façade, a bend that divides the plan, or slides a wedge between two halves, opening them. The left (north) side of the building has been left open to allow for future expansion, and the right (south) is flanked by terraces for parked cars. What might be called a double-bar plan type unfolds on either side of a two-part central space – basically an entry vestibule and an atrium sandwiching a stairway. Rentable office space opens on either side, on both floors. The other salient aspect of the building's basic configuration is a skylight that parallels the entry axis, the alignment of which appears from a distance, when looking at the main façade.

As it stands now, the atrium is a reduced version of what the architect intended. Originally, the skylight was to be paralleled by a channel of water cut into the slate floor, emerging from a low wall behind the stair, running through the vestibule and the base of the façade, into the depression that is now filled with lavender, and then into the weir, over the falls, and into the lake. Along its length it would have mirrored the sky, matching not only its brightness but darker aspects, from clear blue to cloudy, or placid to rumbling. Budget restrictions prevented the construction of this channel, but one can detect its intended course in the alignment of some of the building's key elements: the skylight and stairway, as I have said, but also the columns and short wall on the right side of the vestibule, the bend in the façade, and lavender parterre. Still another significant figure is missing from the atrium in its present form. Originally there was a mural at the far end of the atrium, covering the full height of a slightly concave wall. The building's first tenants painted it, as well as the other coloured walls, white.

The intentions behind this exedra-like curve are fascinating. In a small diagram, Parry indicates that he saw the whole building as a *camera obscura*, with the façade as the lens and this curve as the mirror. His brief text describes the subject matter captured in the curve as *foundational*, which partly explains why the image he painted depicted *The Rape of Europa* (Parry 2002). Presumably, the hills of Crete are what we see far away, the Mediterranean blue in the middle distance, and Europa astride Zeus-as-a-bull in the foreground, with a pair of dolphins leading the way. Many versions of the story report that the virgin kept her balance by holding a horn. Here we see just the un-held one, also a single eye (lens-like), and a spread of acorns that shields and shows Europa's maternal abundance – Acadians were known as acorn-eaters.

What sense do these distant references or references to distance make? The building houses rental offices. The companies who lease them have global interests. Office work here is largely telecommunication. The main axis of the building parallels one of England's main motorways and points toward Heathrow. The atrium seems to grant orientation and obtain definition by centralising the site's several distances. Vertically, the atrium connects clouds and dirt through its skylight and slate, also the blue and brown of the mural. The water channel would have strengthened these connections. Horizontally, there are complementary connections, or displacements. The plan accelerates the perspective toward the wall on which the mural was painted. The curve, however, returns the view toward the landscape behind and still farther toward Heathrow. Ever wider horizons were opened by the subject matter of the mural. Perhaps this latter range of distances also explains the effort to make the upper level of the front façade appear to float (the lowest range of glass blocks hides the edge of the floor slab), also why the wall's height is divided so consistently by a ribbon window and levelled off at the horizon of office work inside the building and the base of the hills in the distance, coupling, once again, near and far. Obviously, this coupling is not a matter of fact, far is not near. Nor is the inscription of several distances into a small atrium plainly evident. The Greece to which the mural refers is mythical, but it is not for that reason insignificant.

The building is what we see, what we see is the building. Obvious and unassailable as this truism seems, it amounts to an admission of defeat. Architecture's task is to offer more content than a building can reasonably give. Its job is to augment the reality it interiorises by showing how the conditions it limits are part of a wider horizon, part of something entire, a topography that has the potential to overcome banality and restructure the discordance of our lives.

At the outset, I said that orientation is the way we find our place in the world. That definition is trivial. What is less well-known, but apparent in the examples I have described is another sense of orientation in which we not only find our bearings in given conditions, but witness a richer world coming into being, once its latent depth – spatial, historical, and cultural – has been disclosed. For this to be understood one must overcome the categorical view of things. Window walls spread into the depth of an urban block, for example, must be allowed to accelerate passage and bring what is far near, overcoming metric distance. Public spaces and opaque surfaces must be seen to imply or indicate the qualities of private territories and intimate surroundings. Present conditions must transcend themselves into their historical grounds, and the prosaic affairs of our lives must evoke their mythical foundation. Orientation in these larger and deeper senses is what the better buildings of our time offer experience. They do so because they accept as given conditions that evoke a sense of profound disorientation.

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