

# Simultaneous Perception and Experience: The Architectural Paradox

Brad Brogdon

Architectural Theory II

Within the black and white there is always gray. Now and again I find myself completely lost while walking the streets of Manhattan. It is at these times that I encounter the most exciting spaces. The ambiguity of certain spatial occurrences heightens my architectural thought, and though I do not fully understand my spatial surroundings, the immediacy of the experience is euphoric. I am completely lost as a single piece without the whole and I find it stimulating. There are other moments where I find myself grasping the qualities of my surroundings and understanding the nature of the space I am in. Walking up Brooklyn Bridge I am confronted with the vastness of the city. At once I understand the city in its conceptual form. There is no spatial ambiguity and I locate myself within the grid. These two conditions are argued as parallels. For the most part I think they typically are. The challenge that architecture is faced with is this: how to create spaces that merge these conditions. Is it possible to both question the nature of a space, while at the same time experiencing that space? This is where I think architecture becomes more than just idea and more than just the building. This merger creates an opportunistic spatial condition where concept meets concrete, where the metaphysical becomes physical. Ambiguity and clarity exist hand in hand and the condition of occupation is changed by, and changes the space. This is the space that every architect longs to create. Modern architecture's attempt at this type of space has been attempted often and regularly still is.

“By focusing on itself, architecture has entered an unavoidable paradox that is more present in space than anywhere else: the impossibility of questioning the nature of space and at the same time experiencing a spatial praxis.”<sup>1</sup> Tschumi highlights this paradox in architecture using Bataille's ideologies of pyramid and labyrinth. “Architecture is a thing of the mind, as dematerialized or conceptual discipline, with its linguistic or morphological variations (the pyramid); second, empirical research that concentrates on the senses, on the experience of space as well as on the relationship between space and praxis (the labyrinth).”<sup>2</sup> The notion of both pyramid and labyrinth as spatial and architectonic entities is one that requires analysis and discussion to thoughtfully approach. For Tschumi, this discussion is better and more readily understood from a theoretical perspective. This paradox is easier to explain using un-built work, texts, sketching and painting. All of these

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Tschumi, “The Architectural Paradox,” *Studio International*, Sept.-Oct. 1975

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Tschumi, “The Architectural Paradox,” *Studio International*, Sept.-Oct. 1975

have the luxury of existing solely on paper and for the most part existent two dimensionally. Here it is easier to explain rather than physically explore the metaphysical. The difficulty lies in describing this situation using the constructed realm. Seeing firsthand the spatial suggestions that may hint at questions and answers within Tschumi's paradox and seeking to find a solution. Therefore, it is necessary to delve into the built world to investigate and dissect suggested examples and projects that carry inherently the concept of pyramid and labyrinth.

There is no better juxtaposition of the two conditions, than as can be found in Manhattan. As Koolhaas describes it, "the twentieth century's Rosetta stone." The basic foundation of Manhattan is a rigorous grid construct. The construct holds meaning on both physical and metaphysical levels and one need look no further for a better example of the "pyramid of concepts". An organizing structure representing more than just physical boundary, the grid of Manhattan reveals metaphysical ideologies. This notion of grid carries with it the inherent qualities of prediction and understanding. "The grid is the most courageous act of prediction in Western Civilization."<sup>3</sup> Dividing unoccupied land, describing conjectural populations, locating phantom buildings, and framing the non-existent, the grid becomes a tool used to begin to understand and question the nature of space. This is why Manhattan is a great study and focal point of the pyramid and labyrinth discussion. It is one place where architectural ingenuity has continuously been pushed and challenged. This is even more relevant since the push for creativity in modern building exists within a strict and rigorous grid system. "The cumulative effect of such scattered episodes—and no doubt the cause of the anxieties they inspire—is that they discredit the idea of reality as an immutable and indestructible presence—of reality as an ultimate safety net under our flawed acrobatic performances. Instead, the hysterical structures of the Metropolis represent a free fall in the space of human imagination, a fall with unpredictable outcome, not even the certainty that it will end on the ground."<sup>4</sup> Koolhaas notes that the limits of these creations are completely unknown, and that the goal of this Metropolis that is completely fabricated

---

<sup>3</sup> Rem Koolhaas, "Life in the Metropolis," *Architectural Design* 47, no. 5 (August 1977)

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Vidler, "From the Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely" (Cambridge MIT Press, 1992)

by men is in fact “to live inside fantasy”. In essence, the idea that no concept of building is off limits and should in fact be attempted. The grid is a thing of the mind, dematerialized and existent as a conceptual idea. The actual built city of Manhattan exists atop, below, within, and all around that conceptual construct. This is where the labyrinthine parallel enters the equation and challenges the concept of pyramid. “The dark corners of experience are not unlike a labyrinth, where all sensations, all feelings are enhanced, but where no overview is present to provide a clue about how to get out.”<sup>5</sup> When built work occupies this grid, the overall understanding of place and space starts to become blurred. “I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I’m at the spot where I find myself.”<sup>6</sup> The ability to question the nature of space and experience the space simultaneously becomes difficult if not impossible. This is the paradox.

Tschumi argues that the concretization of the pure and conceptual may not be completely possible; neither does the labyrinth carry inherent concept, but rather fragmented experiences. “Such an architecture not only creates the ‘sets’ of everyday life, but also it defines its contents with all possible means and disciplines such as literature, psychology, etc. Through the magical arrangement of human activities on all possible levels, it writes a scenario for script-less Metropolitan extras.”<sup>7</sup> In Manhattan, Koolhaas and Tschumi both suggest that the city is understood through different nodes of experience. These are often fragmented and separate, almost never understood holistically. Koolhaas suggests that “movement in the metropolis becomes ideological navigation between the conflicting claims and promises of “islands” of a metaphoric archipelago”.<sup>8</sup> These occurrences contribute collectively to create the labyrinth. Wandering through the city, you find spaces you have never seen. Your body and senses can perceive it when you are there. You are lost but you find new ways of working, operating, and thinking. “Indeed architecture constitutes the reality of experience while this reality gets in the way of the overall vision. Architecture constitutes the abstraction of absolute truth, while this very truth gets in the way of feeling. We cannot both

---

<sup>5</sup> Rem Koolhaas, “Life in the Metropolis,” *Architectural Design* 47, no. 5 (August 1977)

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Vidler, *From the Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge MIT Press, 1992)

<sup>7</sup> Rem Koolhaas, “Life in the Metropolis,” *Architectural Design* 47, no. 5 (August 1977)

<sup>8</sup> Rem Koolhaas, “Life in the Metropolis,” *Architectural Design* 47, no. 5 (August 1977)

experience and think we experience. The concept of dog does not bark; the concept of space is not space.”<sup>9</sup> So how do we decide whether or not this statement is correct? Can you simultaneously experience and think you experience? Can you exist within both pyramid and labyrinth? The modern architecture that most successfully breaches this realm nearly always does so using levels of phenomenal transparency.

“Transparency means a simultaneous perception of different spatial locations. Space not only recedes, but fluctuates in continuous activity.”<sup>10</sup> It involves “spatial penetration, and the ubiquitous flow of air, light, and physical movement.”<sup>11</sup> Phenomenal transparency is the condition that begins to try and solve Tschumi’s spatial paradox. “Recognizing the physical plane of glass and concrete and this imaginary (though scarcely less real) plane that lies behind it, we become aware that here a transparency is effected not through the agency of a window but rather through our being made conscious of primary concepts which interpenetrate without optical destruction of each other.”<sup>12</sup> This consciousness evoked by the architectural language is exactly what Tschumi says we are searching for. “The phenomenology of light and dark, clear and obscure, his insistence on the operation of power through transparency, the panoptic principle, resists exploration of the extent to which the pairing of transparency and obscurity is essential for power to operate. For it is in the intimate associations of the two, their uncanny ability to slip from one to the other, that the sublime as instrument of fear retains its hold—in that ambiguity that stages the presence of death in life, dark space in light space.”<sup>13</sup> These transparencies contribute to allowing the occupier suggestions about the whole, while experiencing a single space. A hint at the pyramid, while existing in the labyrinth.

Another piece of the solution is to create buildings where the driving force of conceptualization becomes realized. One where space is understood on both a physical and physiological level. In Manhattan, one is often confronted with the enormity of the skyscraper. Gaining spatial clarity of the project as a whole

---

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Tschumi, “The Pleasure of Architecture,” *Architectural Design* 3 (March 1977) p.218

<sup>10</sup> Rowe and Slutzky, “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal,” *Perspecta*, Vol. 8, (1963) pgs. 45-54

<sup>11</sup>Anthony Vidler, “From the Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely” (Cambridge MIT Press, 1992)

<sup>12</sup> Rowe and Slutzky, “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal,” *Perspecta*, Vol. 8, (1963) pgs. 45-54

<sup>13</sup>Anthony Vidler, “From the Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely” (Cambridge MIT Press, 1992)

while inside is extremely difficult. However, there are instances where surface articulation and detail, the shifting of planar systems, and the reveal conceal relationships found in architecture reach for the spatial answer. Where a certain ambiguity and understanding, a questioning and answering, a conceptual and a physical, a labyrinth and a pyramid exist simultaneously. It is this space that is the most longed for. The simultaneous experience of ambiguity and understanding create such spatial and mental clarity that the architecture becomes much more. “The experience of architecture is wedged in a gap between two architectural surfaces, two edges of the pyramid and the labyrinth, two types of pleasure, one conceptual, culturally conservative, and rule-bound, the other sensual, transgressive, even violent. It is that gap that is erotic.”<sup>14</sup> This gap has become and should continue to be the goal of modern architecture.

Perhaps one way to help bridge this gap is to investigate Victor Burgin’s ‘paranoiac space.’ “Paranoiac space is transformed into panic space, where all limits become blurred in a thick almost palpable substance that has substituted itself, almost imperceptibly, for traditional architecture.”<sup>15</sup> This solution is both exciting and terrifying simultaneously. Vidler analyzes Burgin’s work in order to introduce his own narrative and analysis of dark space and the profound effect it has on occupation. “While light space is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is ‘filled’, it touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him: hence the ‘ego is permeable for darkness while it is not so for light’. Dark space envelops me on all sides and penetrates me much deeper than light space, the distinction between inside and outside and consequently the sense organs as well, insofar as they are designed for external perception, here play a totally modest role.”<sup>16</sup> It is this moment in time where Vidler’s argument becomes synonymous with Tschumi’s. The dark space conception coincides with the lost and hopeless ignorance one encounters within the labyrinth. Vidler’s argument based in Romantic ideology and thought process takes on the psychoanalytic realm of architecture. There are psychopathologies existent in modern space placing emphasis on conditions such as agoraphobia and claustrophobia. Though slightly extreme,

---

<sup>14</sup> K Michael Hays, “Intro to The Architectural Paradox,” Architecture Theory Since 1968, MIT press

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Vidler, “From the Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely” (Cambridge MIT Press, 1992)

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Vidler, “From the Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely” (Cambridge MIT Press, 1992)

these conditions embrace the far ends of the pyramid and labyrinth's thought provocation. "To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, and digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar. And he invents spaces of which he is the convulsive possession."<sup>17</sup> Vidler here turns to Caillois whose discussion on schizophrenia and its spatial implications is hauntingly similar to the notion of labyrinth. Where one separates himself from thought because understanding is impossible. There merely exist as part of space neither clear nor understood but overwhelming and enveloping. The striking quality of this Vidler discourse is its daring dive into the fairly uncommon aspects of dark space and how it has an inherent impact on those within it. Previously studied by the likes of Boulee and Piranesi, this type of spatial condition is one commonly sought to be understood and is a driving factor within Tschumi's suggested paradoxical solution. "But to pursue this distasteful demonstration to the logical point where the distinction between argument and metaphor become blurred, it is my contention that the moment of architecture is that moment when architecture is life and death at the same time, when the experience of space becomes its own concept."<sup>18</sup>

Tschumi's further catalogs possible solutions through his own analysis of the paradox. It should be our goal to seek different ways to experience space and practice space as architects. It is here that Tschumi starts to suggest how we can begin to create these intriguing spaces. The introduction of the notion of cross programming has a direct relationship with this spatial quandary we find ourselves in. At the very basis of Tschumi's analysis and way of building is the idea that occupation completely changes space. "When you move through a space you completely change the static feeling of that space. Architecture is not like a painting. It's really an active relation between the visitor and the space. For instance when I enter a room, the

---

<sup>17</sup>Anthony Vidler, "From the Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely" (Cambridge MIT Press, 1992)

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Tschumi, "The Pleasure of Architecture," *Architectural Design* 3 (March 1977) p.218

movement of my body in that room changes the relationship with it. The room is different if there is nobody, if there is one person or if there are 100 people. So the relationship between the people in the room and the room itself is very important in the reading of architecture.”<sup>19</sup> Vidler also reflects on the occupational condition. “There can be no doubt that the perception of space is a complex phenomenon: space is insolubly perceived and represented. From this standpoint it is a double dihedral changing at every moment in size and position: a dihedral whose horizontal plane is formed by the ground and the vertical plane by the man himself who walks and who, by this fact carries the dihedral along with him; and a dihedral of representation determined by the same horizontal plane as the previous one (but represented and not perceived) intersected vertically at the distance where the object appears.”<sup>20</sup>

Placing an emphasis therefore on occupation, Tschumi begins to consider space in a completely unique way. Using activities to describe spatial conditions in which that activity would almost never take place: Pole vaulting in a cathedral, bicycling in a Laundromat, skydiving in an elevator shaft. These seemingly absurd suggestions give new awareness to spatial qualities that may have been previously described or thought of rather lethargically. This new way of thinking about spatial conditions is the first step in not only reaching a different understanding of the occupational threshold, but also thinking about creating spaces in a new light. It is in the in this realm that an answer to the architectural paradox exists.

“These techniques refuse the distinctions between concept and percept, container and action, and install the new process of event space.”<sup>21</sup> This notion of event space is what leads Tschumi to the architecture of pleasure, the ultimate goal of the designer. “The architecture of pleasure lies where conceptual and spatial paradoxes merge in the middle of delight, where architectural language breaks into a thousand pieces, where the elements of architecture are dismantled and its rules transgressed.”<sup>22</sup> This architecture changes the inherent qualities of the space. As Vidler notes, “It is with represented space that the drama

---

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*. (Cambridge MIT Press, 1996)

<sup>20</sup>Anthony Vidler, *From the Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge MIT Press, 1992)

<sup>21</sup> K Michael Hays, “Intro to the Architectural Paradox,” *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, MIT press

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Tschumi, “The Pleasure of Architecture,” *Architectural Design* 3 (March 1977) p.218

becomes specific, since the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself.”<sup>23</sup> This architecture of pleasure is the solution to the spatial paradox. “Sensuality is as different from eroticism as a simple spatial perception is different from architecture. Eroticism is not the excess of pleasure, but the pleasure of excess. This popular definition mirrors our argument. Just as the sensual experience of space does not make architecture, the pure pleasure of the senses does not constitute eroticism. On the contrary, the pleasure of excess requires consciousness as well as voluptuousness. Just as eroticism means a double pleasure that involves both mental constructs and sensuality, the resolution of the architectural paradox calls for architectural concepts and, at the same instant, the immediate experience of space. Architecture has the same status, the same function, the same meaning as eroticism. Architecture is the ultimate erotic object, because an architectural act, brought to the level of excess, is the only way to reveal both traces of history and its own immediate experiential truth.”<sup>24</sup>

For Tschumi, the goal of the architect is finding this in between we long for. Where one can understand their place within the whole, while enjoying the fragmented nodes of experience. Where transparency leads to both ambiguity and clarity. Where dark space is enveloping, while the light space is open. Where experience and concept are not separate, but completely simultaneous. Where pyramid and labyrinth are understood spatially and enjoyed cohesively. It is a solution that serves as a bridge between the two, and is constituted by the ultimately erotic architectural space.

---

<sup>23</sup>Anthony Vidler, “From the Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely” (Cambridge MIT Press, 1992)

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Tschumi, “The Pleasure of Architecture,” *Architectural Design* 3 (March 1977) p.218