

The Generic Eternal: Modernism, Alienation, and the Built Environment

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0. Introduction

The beginning of the 20th century marks a clear break in the conceptions of architecture and urbanism. The swiftly developing technological possibilities of that epoch spawned techno-utopias that contributed to a shift in how buildings were produced, and cities were planned. For once, a kind of “ideal world” seemed realizable, and technology and rationality would play key roles in bringing about a Heaven-on-Earth about. Prefabricated building parts, new construction methods, industrial component production and an almost unshakeable belief in social engineering forever changed the way humanity built its living environment. We are—I suspect—still in shock when confronted with the scale and consequences of this break and its unprecedented radicality. Almost a century after modernism, we can safely say that this rupture has not completely made good on its promises. Nevertheless, one of its effects is widely and diffusely experienced. It has thrown large parts of the built environment into an aesthetic condition I shall refer to as *the generic eternal*.

This is an “aesthetic” condition in the 18th century sense that Kant used that term, but that we also find in the work of Michel Serres.¹ “Aesthetic” in this sense broadly means “as experienced by all or any of the senses.” What is meant here are not merely the five senses, but also the mental dispositions they influence and form. From a contemporary point of view, *the aesthetic* in this sense can be easily expanded into *the essentially embodied*:² the senses and the mental capacities we possess do not work in isolation, separated from each other. On the contrary, they cannot either be thought or exist without bodily dispositions and realization. To think about aesthetics then, is to think about the fullness of experience itself—and how this experience is shaped by the environments we inhabit.

The timeless, ascetic, neutral, sublime quality that modernist architects and planners idealistically envisioned for their creations has been softened and harnessed to create a world that is austere, but not too sober; not divested from its ambition to be sublime, but palatable; rationalistic but not too unappealing; universally agreeable but unfortunately bland; purged of local features but not yet

¹ For instance, in his books *The Five Senses* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) and *The Incandescent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

² See, e.g., R. Hanna and M. Maiese, *Embodied Minds in Action* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

anonymous. It is generic in a similar sense that Apple laptops and Braun toothbrushes are—it is eternal because it seeks to embody a regular, industrial, futuristic and fashionable aesthetic without ever reaching for a specifically Romantic sublime experience. It is simultaneously generic *and* eternal—universal *and* faux-sublime.

The built environment it is not merely a neutral world in which we happen to find ourselves stranded. It actively reflects values and ideas about society and its organization. Simultaneously, the built environment is a tool for directing and controlling behaviour—values and ideas are built into it and elicit responses from users and operators alike. Finally, we are affected by our environment; it is a formative force in shaping our self-image and the experience of our subjectivity. If we put this differently and more formally, we can consider ourselves aesthetic beings, whose self-images are formed through essentially embodied experience, a process in which inhabited environments play a crucial role. Studying and describing the relationships between us and the built environment is a way of understanding ourselves through the artificial worlds we create. It follows from this line of thought that describing what the “generic eternal” is and how it came into being is an exercise in self-examination through that which we create.

This essay has five sections. The first section concerns two philosophical, foundational assumptions built into the technology-driven, modernist urban utopias from the beginning of the 20th century. This necessitates a short excursus into the 19th century, because architectural modernism did not fall from the heavens fully formed and operational. The second, third, and fourth sections concern three aspects of the generic eternal.

The second section shows how the two modernist assumptions were taken to their extreme end, resulting in a situation that Marc Augé has labelled “supermodernity.” This new development made modernity “liquid” or “omnipresent.” This development can be best epitomized by Marx’s famous dictum that “all that is solid melts into air.” What melts into air is the idea of *belonging* itself, culminating in a process of universal alienation. One of the causes of this alienation is that the built environment of supermodernity is replete with instructions, injunctions, tacit imperatives and direct commands, giving rise to the widespread phenomenon of “instructive spaces.”

The third section shows how the modernist assumptions and instructive spaces led to “ubiquitous alienation.” This phenomenon paved the way for a counter-response—a widespread urban condition that can be characterized as a softened modernism in search of authenticity. This type of modernism is again generic and eternal. It is characterized by a series of tensions: on the one hand, it seeks to negate the ubiquitous alienation resulting from modernity; but on the other,

it refuses to relinquish its modernist doctrines, reproducing the very phenomenon it attempts to overcome.

By way of concluding the central line of reasoning, the fourth section builds on the the first three sections, and characterizes the generic eternal as an aesthetic notion that harbours deep dialectical paradoxes, but that is also an existential, aesthetically experienced condition in today's urbanized world. This world is not sublime in the Romantic sense, merely pleasurable, or pleasing from an artistic point of view. Yet, the experiences it affords touch the core of our being, in determining in how we experience the world.

Finally, the fifth section summarizes the overall argument.

I implicitly assume some things in the latter part of the essay. Notably, I am committed to the view that the environments that we create shape us in return; that the built environment as a whole is readable or at least interpretable; that it obliquely or directly reflects cultural and societal values, even if the creators of these environments may not commit themselves to these values personally; and finally, that by careful analysis, a philosophical reflection about the human condition can be formulated, based on meticulous observation combined with theoretical speculation.³

1. L'Esprit Nouveau: An Age of Velocity Under Two Assumptions

Everything is accessible to man; and man is the measure of all things. Here is an affinity with the Sophists, not with the Platonists; with the Epicureans, not with the Pythagoreans; with all those who stand for earthly being and the here and now. The scientific world-conception knows no unsolvable riddle. Clarification of the traditional philosophical problems leads us partly to unmask them as pseudo-problems, and partly to transform them into empirical problems and thereby subject them to the judgment of experimental science.⁴

If anything, the quote above is about velocity and change. The windows are opened, and fresh air is let in, doing away with the old order and its pseudo-problems. From now on, every problem is accessible and solvable. Nothing will

³ A note for Anglophone readers: in the Dutch/German speaking part of Europe, the approach adopted here goes by the name *cultuurfilosofie* or *Kulturphilosophie* and is an integral part of philosophical practice. The idea is that philosophy is well-suited to describe and designate (*duiden/deuten*) cultural phenomena, especially when it teams up with adjacent disciplines like sociology or geography. The writings of, e.g., the Frankfurt School and philosophers of modern media like Régis Debray or Axel Honneth are representative of this tradition.

⁴ (Mach 1929: 6/16).

stand in the way of the high-speed train of progress. This thought is unparalleled in its radicality. History itself is shown the door and was to be replaced by an account of progress, a list of accomplishments and breakthroughs. Only cutting-edge information would suffice to realize the secure “progress of progress.” How did we get to the point where a radical thought like this one could be formulated? Part of the answer to this question lies in two basic ontological assumptions of modernity, namely *natural mechanism* and its closely-related *compositional atomism*.

These two assumptions are paradigmatically visible in Descartes’s *Meditations* and *Discourse on Method*. Descartes supplied the metaphysical backbone for what was to become the modern, scientific worldview: namely, reality as presented through a doubly-inflected dualism: mental vs. material, under two aspects. First, material (essentially non-mental) reality is a mechanistic totality, under strict natural laws, that can be manipulated and measured by a detached, objective observer, drawing a fundamental line between the master and the matter he manipulates. Second, material (essentially non-mental) reality is the physical domain of physical causes and effects that are fundamentally distinct from the mental domain of mind and cognition.⁵ Since only humans (and actual or possible angels) possess souls, all other beings and systems can be regarded as machines, confining reason to mastery of an inert environment. Descartes is quite explicit on this point: animals are to be regarded as mechanical objects, and every operation of the human body can be explained by reference to mechanical operations. The muscles, sensations, and emotions can be seen as workings of valves, levers, and pressure vats.⁶ The physical world is exclusively mechanical, and every action is necessary and caused by some prior event. As mechanical events can be predicted by means of mathematics or the application of *a priori* truths, the distant observer can manipulate and guide the world with an unparalleled certainty and purpose. As such, *Laplace’s demon* is a hallmark personality of modernity, its ideological core personified in an all-knowing, all-seeing manipulator of worlds. The promise of prediction, in turn, framed rationality in instrumental terms: if an appeal to rationality is made, it is purely on practical, human-interests-driven (aka “pragmatic”), means→ends, predictive or prudential grounds. In short, *instrumental rationality* becomes the ground of justification—an action is justified precisely to the extent that it is rational according to the canons of instrumental reason.

In turn, Descartes’s idea that the physical world is essentially mechanistic entails that entities can be decomposed into their constituent parts. This logic seemingly works well for conducting scientific investigations in the realms of physics and chemistry. Molecules can be reduced to atoms and atoms to subatomic

⁵ (Bamford 2002: 247-248).

⁶ Notably in the *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences*, part V.

particles. Organisms can be dissected, and their individual organ functions can be mapped and described. This approach, however, provides no handholds for creative activities like painting, inventing, tinkering, or designing. Architectural theorist Greg Bamford notes perceptively that sometimes designing relies on actions of decomposition and re-composition, but that we end up in a different place than where we began.⁷ When an architect decomposes a problem, it may be to advance to a next stage of problem-solving instead of recomposing the problem in the same way it is encountered. The distinction here is between *designing* and *assembling*: designing cannot be reduced to assembling premade parts into a whole whose shape is known in advance. Someone who has assembled a car cannot for that reason alone be said to have designed one.



Figure 1: Designing or assembling? The ontology of Modernism deeply influenced architectural practice, and the idea of assembling a building by multiplying a standard unit became quickly established. Cecilienplatz, Hellersdorf-Süd, Berlin, DE (author's photograph).

This atomist ontology underpins the radical faith in mankind proposed by the Vienna Circle. Descartes's simple, materialist ontology, minus the realm of the mental, is married to symbolic logic to create a pure, unified, reductionist science of precise concepts:

The scientific world conception is characterised not so much by theses of its own, but rather by its basic attitude, its points of view and direction of research. The goal ahead is unified science. The endeavour is to link and harmonise the achievements of individual investigators in their various fields of science. From this aim follows the emphasis on collective efforts, and also

⁷ (Bamford 2002).

the emphasis on what can be grasped intersubjectively; from this springs the search for a neutral system of formulae, for a symbolism freed from the slag of historical languages; and also the search for a total system of concepts. Neatness and clarity are striven for, and dark distances and unfathomable depths rejected.⁸

Strange as it may seem, this radically scientific doctrine influenced the fine arts *even more* than it influenced the scientific practices from which it derived. The marriage of objectivity and artistic creation seems like an incompatible combination, but modernist authors, artists, and architects viewed this issue very differently. The most sublime or aesthetic qualities would emerge *through* instrumental rationality, not *in spite of* it. History itself would be erased by the velocity of progress, resulting in a sublime, neutral system of formulae that would absolve of the world of its sins, shortcomings, and imperfections. This sanitized new world would represent the pinnacle of aesthetic perfection.

The positivist conception of universal logical and/or natural laws as the highest good had a decisive impact on ideas about speculation and exactitude, for example in the writings of Theo van Doesburg (1923) and Le Corbusier (1929):

Our epoch is hostile to every subjective speculation in art, science, technique, etc. The new spirit, which already governs almost all modern life, is opposed to animal spontaneity, to nature's domination, to artistic flummery and cookery. In order to construct a new object we need a method, that is to say, an objective system.⁹

The use of the house consists of a regular sequence of definite functions. The regular sequence of these functions is a traffic phenomenon. To render that traffic exact, economical and rapid, is the key effort of modern architectural science.¹⁰

According to Van Doesburg, subjective speculation is portrayed as animalistic, and an objective system is proposed to break away from this oppressing hold of subjectivity. In addition, Van Doesburg equates method (in this case: a systematic approach) with objectivity. He regards subjectivity and systematic approaches as mutually exclusive. Le Corbusier shares this emphasis on objectivity, when he speaks of usage as a regular sequence of *definite* functions. The conviction that the usage of a house (or city) can be fully determined in advance directly

⁸ (Mach 1929: 5/16).

⁹ (Cross et al. 1981: 195); the original text is by Theo van Doesburg, and is titled "Towards a Collective Construction," published in *De Stijl* in 1923.

¹⁰ (Cross et al. 1981: 195); the original text is by Le Corbusier, presented at the 2nd Congress of CIAM in Frankfurt, 1929.

mirrors the idea that no problem is outside the reach of science or engineering – with the engineer taking on the role of Laplace’s demon. Le Corbusier treats architectural design as a practice that manipulates fully determinate and exact symbols in configurations that are themselves fully determinate and exact. Elsewhere he evokes the language of engineering as one of the great lessons to be learned from modern architecture: “[via] the use of the sliding rule; for with it we can resolve every equation. The laws of physics are at the base of all human achievement.”¹¹ The Positivists held that every problem could be solved by science; and, in turn, many modernist architects and designers subscribed in various degrees to the view that engineering could solve every design problem.

This attitude signals a clear break with the Romantic aesthetic ideals, according to which the sublime is often located beyond rationality, not inside it. Sheer instrumental reason would provide the new aesthetic ideal, justified by its cogency, coherence, and functionality, solving all the problems of mankind and thereby providing a life free of cares and filled with scientific sublimity. Of course, these ideals had to take a physical shape; correspondingly, we find the first guidelines for modernist practices in architecture appearing in the 1920s and 1930s:

As history has shown, the forces liberated by centuries of agitation and disorder are now uniting and orientating themselves in a common effort. Thus, we see looming a great epoch. A great epoch has just begun, because all forms of human activity are finally organizing themselves according to the same principle. The spirit of construction and synthesis, of order and conscious will are again manifesting themselves; it is no less indispensable to display it in the arts and letters, in the pure and applied sciences, and even in philosophy.¹²

Modernist design practice and Positivist philosophy were in agreement on at least the following point: order was the hallmark of everything rational, and since rationality was amenable to atomist-reductionist analyses, inference from first principles became its dominant mode of construction. In turn, a structure that was through-and-through rational in this sense displayed a kind of unity: this would be some sort of unifying, perceptible aesthetic quality that the eye would behold and recognize instantly. Le Corbusier derived it from the unity of classical Roman architecture. The human scale of doors, windows and steps would be the measure for the dimensions of a building or the open space surrounding it. Suffused with instrumental rationality, such spaces would directly trigger the aesthetic sensibility of the inhabitant. Of course, such an aesthetic vision is tremendously ambitious, placing a heavy load on the part of “visible rationality”: the more that instrumental

¹¹ (Le Corbusier 1987: 147).

¹² (Ozenfant and Jeanneret 2008: 182).

rationality is visible, the more that aesthetic sensibilities would be activated. But how could one render instrumental rationality visible? The answer to this practical question was twofold: austerity and exactitude. A building without superfluous parts would already *appear* instrumentally rational. If the necessity of each part could be *easily perceived*, then instrumental rationality itself would emerge:

This contemporary style, which exists throughout the world, is unified and inclusive, not fragmentary and contradictory like so much of the production of the first generation of modern architects.¹³

Unity manifests itself in different domains: in stylistic characteristics, in its functional programme, in its conception of one coherent vision, and in the avoidance of any contradictions. Precisely these characteristics would later be criticized by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown in their 1965 book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Modernism, however, insisted on unity as a supreme aesthetic principle.¹⁴ The “inclusivity” mentioned in the quotation above is worth exploring. When Modernist planners insisted on inclusiveness, they actually meant the application of building templates that were through-and-through instrumentally rationalized and exact. The idea was that when all available scientific data were integrated in the guidelines for building and city planning, nothing could go wrong and a perfect instrumentally rational space would be realized.

A striking example that illuminates the consequences of directly translating theoretical doctrines into architectural practice can be found in the 1946 research publication *De Stad Der Toekomst, De Toekomst Der Stad* (“*The City of the Future, The Future of the City*”) in which the application of modernist ideas to develop so-called “neighbourhood units” in urbanism were theorized and investigated by a study group working for the municipality of Rotterdam.¹⁵ The idea was that the neighbourhood would be the prime organizational unit of the city, further subdivided in units for clusters of families and individual families.¹⁶

¹³ Hitchcock and Johnson 2008: 166

¹⁴ One qualification is necessary here: when I refer to “modernism,” I will mean the body of ideas developed by CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) between 1928 and 1959, as well as the ideas developed by its main proponents, broadly construed. Modernity in architecture is of course a multifaceted development—it cannot be adequately treated as a monolithic block, but should be regarded as an assembly of different schools of thought. Nevertheless, as I’ve indicated, this essay deals with the CIAM-based line of thought, broadly construed.

¹⁵ (Bos 1946).

¹⁶ (Zweerink 2004: 17).

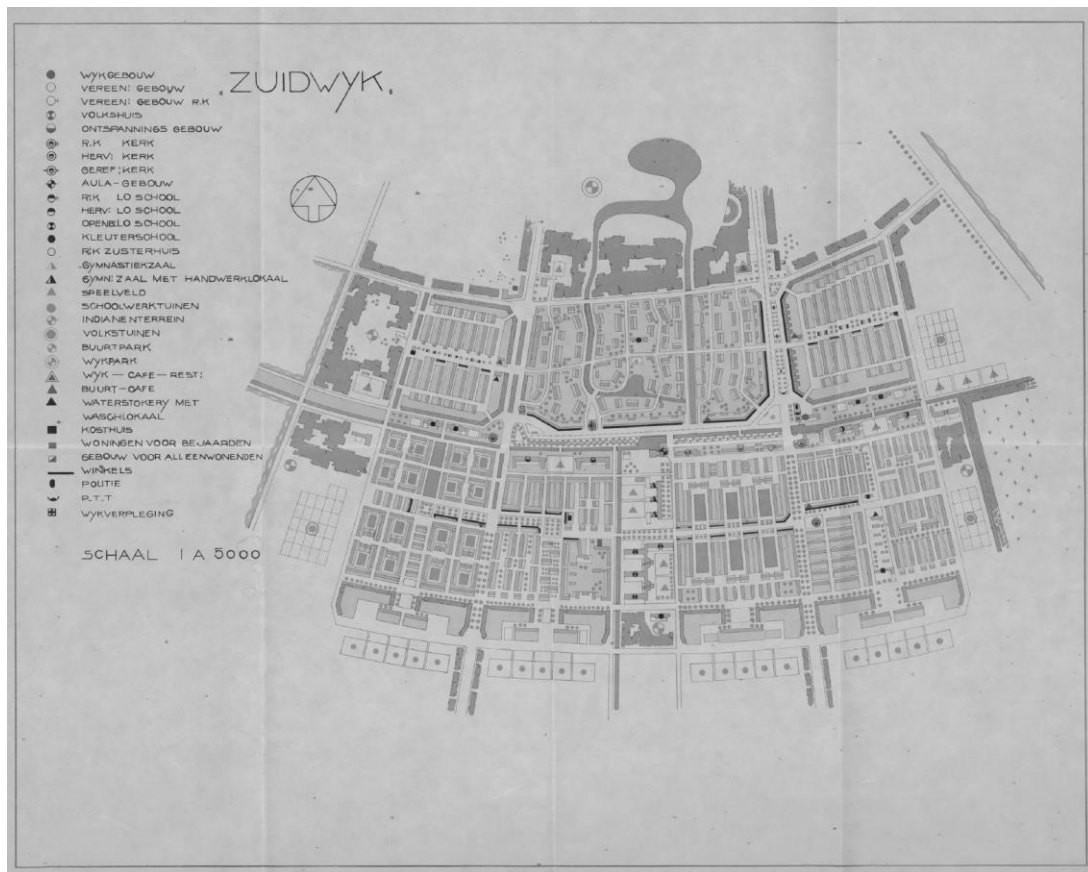


Figure 2: The neighbourhood of Zuidwijk (Rotterdam, NL) was built slightly later than Pendrecht, but departed largely from the same assumptions about the structure of society and the precise allocation of functions—based on idealized descriptions of everyday activities (source: Bos 1946).

The whole study was based on socio-cultural and urban research that included factors like the necessity for societal life, the optimum size of neighbourhood communities, the influence and importance of greenery, a survey of the city before and after 1800 and an investigation of the urban inheritance of the 19th century. The approximate size of the envisioned families was based on the “modern American family.”¹⁷ The resulting spatial grid that emerged was laid out according to a theoretical hierarchy with distinctly atomist tendencies. The atomist ordering of society provided compositional principles and a spatial distribution of buildings and functions.

According to the hierarchical logic employed in modernist urbanism, the city consisted of neighbourhoods, while neighbourhoods could be subdivided into further modules of a fixed size, with presupposed behaviour-patterns by inhabitants. Each unit existed independently but had fixed relations to others on the same level and the level above it. Consequently, the applied logic is also atomistic and mechanistic in its form, relating back to the idea of the malleable society, as well as the atomism inspired by the scientific conception of the world. Later on, this

¹⁷ (Zweerink 2004: 17).

atomist, idealized approach in modernist architecture became a focus for criticism, the critics pointing out that modernists made unrealistic, overly instrumental-rationalist assumptions about “the typical human.”¹⁸ In any case, this approach became broadly known as functionalism, or the idea that for each activity in a city, a precise shape and design could be made.

However, the term “functionalism” itself underwent significant changes in meaning, or at least in connotation, in the period from 1920 to 1950. During the 1920s, when architects spoke of function, they aimed at *exactitude*: an organizational and spatial descriptive geometry that could be precisely determined before realization.¹⁹ The degree to which the belief in the precise ascription of functions shaped modern architecture (and subsequently problem-solving) can be clearly discerned in, e.g., the *CIAM Declaration of La Sarraz* (1928) and the *Athens Charter* (1943). Both documents present the foundations of an all-encompassing architectural approach aimed at spatially ordering the built environment, by direct reference to (and directly inferred from) empirical data. The positivist idea that problems could be solved by decomposing them into discrete empirical questions and then logically combining the findings so as to yield scientific proposals thereby received a specifically architectural expression.

The focus on unity and exactitude leads via reductionism to a kind of purist aesthetic that looks sleek and austere.²⁰ Every element that is deemed superfluous is removed (although this led later on to conflicts about the purity or impurity of the style), and since buildings and cities became prefabricated industrial products, economic thinking on shape, size, properties and costs was required. Le Corbusier is quite insistent on this point when he invokes the efficiency of ocean liners, cars, and airplanes to underline efficient use of materials in finding solutions by invoking the alliance between “cold reason” and “imagination.”²¹ The upshot of his argument is that the application of instrumental rationality to a given problem inevitably yields a solution, and that the universal laws of mathematics and economics guide such design efforts to an *optimal* solution. This solution is beautiful by virtue of its elegantly addressing an issue in the most economical way possible. Beauty is thereby converted into a function of efficiency. Not surprisingly, the archetypal figures of this kind of modernism were engineers and architects—the two main

¹⁸ (Paans and Pasel forthcoming).

¹⁹ (Nowicki 2008: 284). Whether all proponents of architectural modernism viewed functionalism in the same way seems debatable. E.g., theorists like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in his book *The Office Building* (1923) and Adolf Behne in his book *The Modern Functional Building* (1926) had a definitely more flexible conception of functionalism—in their view, modernist functionality *enabled* flexible usage.

²⁰ This tendency is also visible in Adolf Loos’s book *Ornament and Crime* (1908), in which Loos defends an extremely austere and purist aesthetic ideal suited to modern times.

²¹ (Le Corbusier 1986: 109).

actors in the alliance between cold instrumental reason and imagination. This modernist dichotomy between “the engineer” who manipulates materials in the most efficient way possible and “the architect” who evokes “plastic emotions” precisely re-inscribes Descartes’s mind-body dualism in the architecture of the early 20th century. It is a continuous duality between instrumentally rational, efficient manipulation of the physical world on one hand, and the existence of a “spiritual,” Platonic world of eternal Forms and ideality on the other. Again, not surprisingly, it was exactly at this juncture that the ideological underpinnings of the modernist project would start to crack: how much emotion can a building display without becoming superfluous, subjectivist or “irrational”? The way to avoid this conundrum was to emphasize unity, exactitude and clarity – just as positivist thinkers had done in their philosophy.



Figure 3: Le Corbusier's *Cité Radieuse de Marseille* (1947-1952) in Marseille (FR) embodied the ontological assumptions of architectural modernism. Notably, the emphasis on repetition and an idealized basic unit is easily perceivable. The sculptural ventilation-stacks on the roof illustrate the tension between form, emotion, and function—their form is not strictly functionally determined (author's photograph).

The emphasis on unity, exactitude and clarity led easily to *austerity* as an aesthetic ideal. However, even this ideal was not just the result of an emphasis on unity and clarity. It was also based on the more fundamental metaphysical notion of *neutral formulae* in positivism. The “neutral set of formulae” that would be the basis of all building was perceived as a coherent code that provided a direct insight into the structure of the universe. Le Corbusier held that the laws of physics determined

human behaviour, and that engineering possessed the tools for universal problem solving. In turn, this attitude necessitates the assumption of a direct structural realism, a kind of immediate metaphysical insight into the structure of the universe that enables humankind to manipulate the world at will. For instance, the unit-based and individual house-based structure of many modernist cities was intended to function as a predictable, machine-like structure, recursively generated from many parts according to a step-by-step computational algorithm. If each part behaved as predicted, the ideal functional city would realize itself through careful assembly, while its aesthetic qualities would be guaranteed just by adhering to strict compositional principles. The role of the urbanist was to supply the boundary conditions for the functioning of the machinery, and, once in place, then the whole system would function in an utterly deterministic way, like a series of cogwheels. Each step would be predictable in advance, as the behaviour of individual parts was known from the outset. Modernist public spaces consequently had an ultra-logico-mathematical, regular outlook. Although the modernist approach to architecture and city planning matured on paper, its large-scale implementation had not yet taken place. The Second World War delayed the realization of many modernist ideas that had been developing in the 1920s and 1930s. The application of these ideas had to wait until the early 1950s, when European town planners started to look beyond the immediate concerns of reconstruction and rebuilding.

To understand why this modernist-functionalist approach did so well with the town planners and the general public, we need to take into account the societal structure and corresponding ideology about private life during the 1950s and '60s. In the reconstruction period following the Second World War, state institutions became more and more influential in organizing people's private lives, which kick-started a development that would culminate into the post-War welfare state.²² So, a social-institutional and biopolitical grid, guided and represented by an ideologically hegemonic "high-modernist scheme,"²³ emerged between state and citizen, controlling various aspects of private life. Healthcare, education, birth control, housing, and social work were increasingly organized and professionalized. The emergence of this grid, combined with the "high-modernist" belief that society could be transformed at will, are characteristic of this historical period.

An article written about the urban expansion of Pendrecht, located in Rotterdam, is typical for its displaying of generally prevailing views on society and its relation to the built environment. Pendrecht consisted of modular building types (typically distributed on calculated expected family sizes) and continuous open and half-open spaces. Its urban designer commented: "Our democratic system preferably

²² (van Winkel 1999: 25).

²³ (Scott 1998).

excludes 'not-partaking.' We stand in space and are a part of it."²⁴ In a plea for realizing flats (1953) she argued that a high-rise "frees" the soil of anything which is "owned." "It removes the private, but it gives the public, the collective back to us."²⁵ Clearly, public concerns are deemed more important than private concerns. The idea that the public space is there for the individual was non-existent at the time. Public space is the platform for "the collective." Here, in keeping with the atomist convictions of modernism, a kind of social atomism is at work. Individuals are taken to form groups, and groups to form collectives. A collective with strong bonds is taken to be a society. The atomist tendencies assumed in building cities were without hesitation projected on society as a whole.

The basic idea is that a neutral, repetitive, or even recursive, and collective structure would be a background for all activities engaged in by inhabitants:

We've decided very consciously that we don't use any variation in buildings, because it makes no sense. We trust that the diversity and the social configurations of the inhabitants will manifest itself, so that the apparent similarity and monotony will be negated.²⁶

The social-institutional and biopolitical grid is envisioned as something emergent, not imposed, something that is able to develop on its own in a neutral and supportive spatial setting. Put differently, it is "an empty stage on which a continuously changing image of publicness and citizenship will present itself."²⁷ So, the "generic eternal" outlook of much post-war urbanism in Western Europe was not only a tangible result of industrialized building methods and an austere aesthetic ideal, but also a self-conscious design decision inspired by social atomism. The assumption was that "life itself" would take over, so that the outlook of the environment was irrelevant. Functionality and instrumental rationality were not only employed as tools, but the whole outlook of architecture was subsumed under these two principles. In turn, life itself would develop and flourish when the city was instrumentally rational. Instrumental rationality itself, however, was increasingly defined in terms of discrete functions and spatial programmes.

²⁴ (van Winkel 1999: 30). The text cites an unpublished 1958 lecture of urbanist Lotte Stam-Beese.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 31.

²⁷ Ibid. The text cites Lotte Stam-Beese's publication, "*Aantekening bij het uitbreidingsplan Pendrecht*" ("*Note accompanying the urban extension plan Pendrecht*").



Figure 4: The strictly functionalist tenets of modern city planning resulted in highly uniform public spaces. A photo just like this could have been taken in many modernist city expansions. This particular example is from Overvecht (Utrecht, NL) (author's photograph).

For the generations of architects working after the 1920s, the concept of functionality became synonymous with flexibility expressed in a fixed, open-grid structure, as this open ground plan and the utilization of load-bearing columns allowed for multiple forms of spatial organization. Although the underlying theory was deterministic, the results looked surprisingly flexible and malleable. Therefore, “the discovery of formal symbols of the unchanging laws of the universe seems to replace the invention of form without precedent.”²⁸ Modernist architectural practice relied on the underlying unified, law-like basis given by laws of the universe itself. Once again, there is a clear link with the positivist idea that the exact (i.e., natural and formal) sciences are the measure of all things, including architectural production and design. In this regard, Le Corbusier speaks in *The Modulor* (1950) of metric systems derived from the human body as “precise measures which constitute a code, a coherent system: a system which proclaims an essential unity.”²⁹ Earlier, he had already remarked that the engineer’s aesthetic derived from mathematical law, and *therefore* possessed harmony.³⁰

Likewise, Janik and Toulmin record the following philosophical insight about the building methods of the Bauhaus—an insight that highlights the pervasive presence of precise measures and abstract structures:

²⁸ (Nowicki 2008: 286).

²⁹ (Le Corbusier 2008: 302).

³⁰ (Le Corbusier 1986: 15).

Far from being functional, the resulting structures have been, one might say, the nearest thing yet seen to the physical realization of a pure Cartesian system of geometrical coordinates. The architect defines merely the structural axes of reference, and within these the occupier is free to pursue an effectively unlimited range of lives or occupations.³¹

In this case the Bauhaus—and other proponents of modernity—conceived of functionality as the creation of grids or enabling structures that allowed for multiple courses of action.³² Not unlike Laplace's demon, the architect is conceived as a manipulator of possible worlds. Within the grids he creates, endless possibilities unfold. Apart from the economic efficacy of modernist building practices, Janik and Toulmin also note how the very substance of architecture seems to melt into thin air. The materials of modernism are merely coordinates—so as far as materiality is concerned, *it does not get any more insubstantial than this*. The “neutral set of formulae” was used to create systems of relations that would be eternally useful because of their openness and rational setup.

Just as the universe provides a coherent code in the form of an essential unity of laws, so architectural production had to match this unified ideal. Not unlike a “unified science,” in the positivist sense, modern architecture would employ its problem-solving methodology to define a “unified architecture,” based on the findings of the sciences.³³ Indeed, in 1947 Siegfried Giedion emphasized how scientific planning, the formulation of “the architectural problem of today” must lead to a “new idea of architecture” to be instilled in “technical, economic and social thought.”³⁴ These CIAM-inspired models for producing architecture were deeply instrumental-rationalist and highly abstract. They provided a formal framework producing organizational guidelines, and an architectural expression that had a deeply austere, functional relationship to materiality.³⁵

From all this, we can glimpse some of the core assumptions that led to the built environment as we now know it. Modernism relied on an ideal of purity, just as their positivist counterparts emphasized a kind of conceptual clarity and methodological rigor. This attitude represented—and necessitated—a radical break

³¹ (Janik and Toulmin 1973: 253).

³² Interestingly enough, this was not *the starting point* of Bauhaus education, but a development *away* from its original goals.

³³ For a critique of the very idea of a unified science, see (Adorno and Horkheimer 2017). Currently, this ideal is still alive in, e.g., E.O. Wilson's concept of *consilience*.

³⁴ (Giedion 2008: 318).

³⁵ So much so, that Ernesto Rogers's work elicited a harsh critique from Peter Smithson when Rogers presented the BBPR designs for the 1956 *Torre Velasca* in Milan at the CIAM conference in 1959. The fact that the tower could be interpreted as a direct (or, even worse, historicizing) reference to traditional medieval towers built in the region sufficed, for Smithson, to justify calling the proposal “immoral.”

with the past and the embracing of progress. Naturally, the engineering sciences and natural sciences were held up as examples of “beauty through rationality.” The aesthetic ideal for progress became austerity, because this was the clearest expression of neatness, instrumental purpose, unity, and clarity.

It should be emphasized how de-historicizing this vision essentially is. The emphasis on starting with a clean slate, the universality of scientific instrumental rationality, the overall applicability of modernist design guidelines and the purported superiority of the modern over the traditional has shaped well over a century of architectural practice. For us, these tenets are ingrained in our built environment. Hotels, airports, hospitals, housing tenements, highways, and shopping malls all have been thoroughly influenced by these ideals.



Figure 5: The austere and repetition-based aesthetic of modernism on full display. In this case, the ahistorical vision of modernity is quite visible, as this hotel is located next to the historic inner city of Dresden (DE) but does not even attempt to fit in or refer to its rich history (author’s photograph).

Modernism promised not merely to start with a clean slate: it rejected the past in favour of a new world enabled and ultimately constituted by technology. The radical thought with which this essay started could be developed only because reality itself was deemed inherently open to mastery by technical means. In realizing the re-creation of reality, history was seen as residue that needed to be removed, an obstacle on the high road of progress. The ideals of the 1920s and 1930s have had a tremendous influence on city planning and the conception of buildings. With the rise of globalization, modernity entered a new phase. Its core assumptions started to affect its own products, a situation that Ulrich Beck labelled “reflexive modernity,”

and that Marc Augé called “supermodernity.” I’ll examine the consequences of this important development in the next section.

2. The Generic Eternal, First Aspect: Instructive Space

During the 1990s, globalization became an increasingly prominent theme in debates about place and placemaking. The fact that you could travel to a vast array of places around the globe and buy exotic foods and clothes in the shop around the corner, made the whole idea of fixed places with separate identities appear superfluous. In geography (the science which is usually occupied with the definition of place), the usual conception of a place as a fixed location (say Berlin, Los Angeles or Shanghai) had to be reconceived. A first attempt in this direction was made by Doreen Massey.³⁶ Massey defined place as the product of the flows which pass through it, a theme that – given the visibility of mobility – is well understandable.

With ever-increasing means of mobility, the speed of the mass-media also increased commensurately. Globalization was not only a matter of more physical traffic between different points on the globe, but it was also an endless and omnipresent stream of information. If an earthquake has taken place on the other side of the planet, then you would know about it in one hour after it happened. Information created connections in space and time, connecting the globe through a network of messages –a kind of continuous and ubiquitous level of background noise in which everything was steeped.

As I mentioned already, Augé calls this state of affairs *supermodernity*. It was as if the modern project had accelerated its speed, bringing more and more people and events together. Where the drawings of Le Corbusier featured cars rushing towards the horizon on an endless highway, globalization pushed the envelope even further – airplanes took the place of cars. On top of this, digital communication put temporality itself into question. Information can cross the globe without travel time and short-circuits older conceptions of time. The world has become simultaneous instead of sequential.

The increased means of mobility obviously required a new infrastructure built for speed. Le Corbusier could confidently maintain that a city built for speed was built for success. Nowadays, this statement is applied to the world –a world built for speed is built for success. When the steam train was invented, railroads had to be constructed for its efficiency to unfold. With the mass production of the car, elaborate highway networks had to be made. When air travel was introduced, airports and runways had to be constructed. With globalization, the presence of those places becomes increasingly visible. The amount of time we spend in those

³⁶ (Massey 2005).

“in-between” locations is significant. Imagine the number of hours we have been waiting in airport seats, on a train platform, stuck in a traffic jam on the highway, or simply immobilized in an airplane waiting on a tarmac, while the time passes by. The same logic applies to places like office corridors, parking garages, shopping malls, and hotels. All these places are “in-between”, and bear the stamp of stalled temporality, of tentative stability. They all play a role in some part of our daily lives. The office is a space for spending the time allocated for work, the highway or the subway is the space for spending time allocated for travel. Residential areas allocated destinations for relaxation or leisure, as are gyms and shopping malls.

Augé tries to characterize these so-called non-places with some precision. This is a difficult task, as non-place is simply a phenomenon that is ever-present, but simultaneously subjective: one person might say that J.F. Kennedy airport is a non-place, while someone else disagrees and experiences the same location completely differently. This makes it hard to create a list of clear criteria for what counts as a “place” or “non-places.”

In its geographical sense, the concept of place is defined by its elements, which makes it possible to discriminate between “here” (a set of properties) and “there” (another set of properties).³⁷ With penetrating anthropological acumen, Augé notices that there is a third way of defining places: traditional societies define a dense network of history, relations, and identity, that ties them to the place where they are living. For instance, many African tribes have elaborated “founding myths” which explain why they live on this particular spot on the Earth. Stones, rivers, trees and hills are features of the landscape with which these tribes have connections, and which mean something to them. A particular tree might not bear any significance for the average person, but for a particular tribesman it might be a powerful symbol loaded with meaning. The elements of a particular location are inherently physical and yet also belong to a unifying narrative. They are not reproducible but are invariably tied to a location and a history.

This logic functions today just as strongly as in the past. Couples who celebrate their anniversary might return to the place where they first met. To anyone else, this location is just as generic as any other spot, but not to the two people who embedded this location in their long-term memories. The same principle applies to street names: Red Square in Moscow will always be associated with its communist past, as does the piece of Berlin Wall that still stands. Michel de Certeau described this characteristic eloquently:

³⁷ See, most notably, Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1976); Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (2004); Doreen Massey, *For Space* (2005); and Kevin Lynch, *Good City Form* (1981).

[T]hese words slowly rose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them, but their ability to signify outlives its first definition.... A strange toponymy that is detached from actual places and flies high over the city like a foggy geography of meanings, held in suspension, directing the physical deambulations below.³⁸

Histories direct actions and partially determine attitudes. The idea that place can be described as a network of history, social and intersubjective relations, and identity is anthropological in approach, but has important dispositional consequences. It saliently determines the meaning people attach to a physical location, a level of meaning that transcends the physical, readily identifiable characteristics of a location. The “anthropological place” is deeply historical and narratively constituted, in contradistinction to the proliferation of new places created under the aegis of supermodernity.

Our societies are by no means traditional any longer. The condition of supermodernity profoundly and irrevocably changed the relationship that we have to history and to intersubjective relations in a dramatic way. The non-place — “there’s no *there* there” — is a pervasive spatial phenomenon by which we experience supermodernity in its full depth. It is the polar opposite of anthropological place. It is constituted by two characteristics: the discouragement of lasting social relations, and the imposition of a new mode of existence on individuals.

Discouraging lasting social relations

Non-places are not made to actually develop rich and prolonged human social relations in. You can move through them (in the case of the highway or the hotel corridor), you can stay a short time (in the case of hotel rooms, or conference centres) and you are able to consume or satisfy your immediate needs (supermarket, shopping mall). In the case of post-war residential areas, public spaces are conceived as utilitarian non-places, thereby undercutting the belief that the collective would emerge naturally on them.

Augé describes this urban condition in terms that point towards alienation: “The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations, only solitude and similitude.”³⁹ This description is fitting because it emphasizes how directly the doctrine of atomism structures the contemporary — yet modernist — built environment. Each of the users is as it were a social atom in an environment composed of repeated, similar entities. The logic of those environments is replicated on functional grounds, creating a world of similitude and predictability. This

³⁸ (De Certeau 1984: 104).

³⁹ (Augé 2006: 83).

recurring similitude can be very comforting in some situations (for instance, if one travels a lot). In other instances, it undermines the creation of meaning and attachment to an environment. If we apply these descriptions to modernistic buildings and public spaces, their lay-outs consists largely of signs, addressing and instructing all inhabitants, but relating to none of them. This characteristic touches not only on residential city expansions and housing tenements. It applies to contemporary shopping malls, supermarkets, airports and concert venues as well. The real similitude does not reside in the building details as such, but in the way that the assumptions of the design structure the actions and possibilities of users.

Imposed identities

Non-places create identities, or rather they forcibly impose them.⁴⁰ In anthropological places, relations and references from the surroundings are responsible for the emergence of a meaningful framework of interpretation and narrative orientation. The identity derived by individuals from existing symbols has clear referents in time, space, and spacetime. One may be the father of a family, the owner of an old estate, the youngest one in a long line of landowners, etc. Identity, narrative, duration, and place are inextricably intertwined.

In the non-places of supermodernity, an identity is *created from scratch* and imposed on the individual. In a comparable way, modernistic planning theory treats every person as “citizen.” One template is enough to cater for all the different needs because—after all—everyone is essentially similar. No matter what your background or capabilities, the template is forced on you.

This is an essentially existential matter. By means of this “instructive attitude” the non-place affects one’s very mode of existence, seen from the perspective of the functional demands of that location. When one is labelled a “citizen” or “traveller,” one is treated as *existing only as such*. The relations that the environment and other people create towards such a labelled person are suffused with a strange distancing. One is approached and treated as the “subject,” “consumer,” or “passer-by.” Nothing else is needed, and therefore everything else is omitted. This mode of existence is thoroughly impoverished and one-dimensional, because it rests on a reduction of everything one is constituted by as a person. Or rather—the instructive space forcibly omits and erases all factors that make up a complete person, ignoring them in the interest of a smoothly functioning environment. One is approached as an object that must be guided, controlled, managed, and directed. There are close parallels between the “machines for living” of the modernist designers, “instructive spaces” and the social-institutional and biopolitical grid that emerged in the post-World War II welfare state.

⁴⁰ (Augé 2006: 84).

By “instructive spaces”, therefore, I mean spaces that are constituted by their forcible imposition of fixed, reductive identities on individuals, aiming at directing their behaviour by placing them in a predefined and/or narrowly defined role, and reinforcing the behaviour deemed appropriate for this role by means of continuous instruction, coercion, nudging and guidance.

Following the lead of the Industrial Revolution, labour and paid employment were the two core pillars in modern society: in the 25 years after the Second World War, the prospect of a constant labour force enabled the idea of life-long careers and forms of social security, a development that reached its peak in the establishment of the 20th century welfare state.⁴¹ In addition, it consigned mostly the male part of the population to this labour force.⁴² The social institutions of modernity were as it were filled with imperatives (“shoulds”) that directed people’s lives within a fixed frame of rules and regulations.⁴³ I have discussed how these imperatives were included in the case of modernist architecture and urbanism. Social institutions and their correlative spatial settings embodied normative claims on individuals. One could participate in “collective activities”, if one behaved like an obedient citizen, passenger or consumer. The terms “passenger” or “consumer” are sets of behavioural and dispositional norms imposed on an individual. The dictatorial agency is no longer a person, but instead a set of norms that is anonymously decided and gradually imposed via a multitude of means.

These instructions are being provided to individuals through “instructive spaces,” as defined above. If modernity emphasizes a universal rational eternality, supermodernity combines its austere aesthetic with an incessant barrage of information. The tendency to treat knowledge as information was already present in modernism from the very start. The “neutral spaces” of modernity were presented as impartial, open, and non-normative. Nevertheless, these spaces simultaneously embodied clear normative conceptions of what a member of society should do and to some degree think. The fictions of the “typical user” or “average person” were used as planning templates and placeholder labels for sets of norms about behaviour or thought. It would really make no sense to plan a building, city or neighbourhood in breath-taking detail if one possesses no preconception about future behaviour or thinking of individuals. Modernism harbours a deep and divisive dualism: it promises to usher in an “open society” of liberated individuals, but at the same time, it simultaneously predetermines their lives and actions in great detail. This dualism

⁴¹ At least in Europe. In the US, the situation was quite different, although by and large both economies possessed a relatively steady labour force. See (Eichengreen 2006) for a comprehensive account of the economy of Europe in the second half of the 20th century. See also (Baily and Kirkegaard 2004).

⁴² For an elaborate exposition of this concept, see (Beck et al. 1994: 4).

⁴³ (Bauman 2007: 9).

reaches a peak in supermodernity. In its clearest manifestation, it is visible in the role and use of signifiers, whether they are conferred upon persons by visual, textual or spoken means.

In an instructive space, persons are treated as synonymous with the imposed identity and therefore, one-way communication suffices to instruct you and to give you feedback ("access granted" or "access denied"). This instructive narrative has meaning only as a "user's manual." The digital instructions on a sign, automated check-in procedures at the airport, self-scanning in supermarkets, automatic gates, reflective lines and arrows on the road, coloured lights which indicate movements or stops, traffic signs to delineate parking areas—they all instruct persons and approach them as users. Without this user's perspective, their meaning is obscure. We can clearly observe this in the case of traffic signs:

The private motorcar is the logical instrument for exercising that right [of free movement], and the effect on the public space, especially the space of the urban street, is that the space becomes meaningless and even maddening unless it can be subordinated to free movement.⁴⁴

In a space controlled by texts, signs, instructions, diagrams, symbols, and spoken messages (e.g., public announcements), users are forced to assume the identity imposed upon them by instructive spaces. In an airport, one must assume the norms that apply to the identity-label "traveller." This means that one must be there on time, and must submit to security regulations; that one's right to free movement is constrained, and that the space in which one is allowed to move around is determined, ordered, segmented and subject to norms imposed from all sides and without consulting those subjected to the consequences. To facilitate and shape this process, texts, signs, instructions, diagrams, symbols, and spoken messages determine behaviour and thought alike, varying from the security regulations about bringing liquids onto an airplane, to the repeatedly spoken message of "mind your step."

Even when not moving, users of non-places are trapped between signs that instruct them what to do next. As such, one is being kept in a state of suspension, lacking a definitive existence outside one's forcibly consigned identity role as "passenger" or "traveller." This state is the diametrical opposite of anything that resembles *belonging* or *dwelling*. Instead of encouraging a form of actually inhabiting space, non-places encourage in its users a form of continuous, purposively guided suspension. Careful and continuous instruction softly and invisibly guides, nudges and forces behaviour and mental dispositions.

⁴⁴ (Sennett 2002: 14).

And in these ways, the almost invisible omnipresence of non-places gradually changed, and increasingly changes, the mode of existence of humanity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The phrase “the generic eternal” can therefore be construed in a second, more pessimistic vein. It describes the generic, displaced condition in which much of the developed world exists. Its inhabitants are steeped in it. The generic eternal has become an integral part of the lifeworld of humanity. Even worse, it is as it were a ubiquitous architectural presence, the main spatial residue of postmodern consumer societies that did not break with the modernist tenets of their past. Koolhaas referred to this accumulating spatial residue as “junkspace,” and the thrust of his idea is quite accurate.⁴⁵ As junkfood superficially mimics the qualities of real food, so junkspace is a pretend-space, an instructive environment trying hard to be a place where people can realize meaningful attachments to either the location, others, and most importantly, themselves.

Junkspace is overripe and undernourishing at the same time, a colossal security blanket that covers the earth in a stranglehold of seduction....
Junkspace is like being condemned to a perpetual jacuzzi with millions of your best friends. A fuzzy empire of blur, it fuses high and low, public and private, straight and bent, bloated and starved to offer a seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed.⁴⁶

The emergence of this omnipresent junkspace condition, combined with the modernist “generic eternal” outlook can be traced back quite easily to the core promises of modernism and its ontological world-image. Around the late 1970s, the modernist era with its promises of universal progress became the scapegoat for postmodern thought. Yet, the modernist revolution of building practices could not be undone, and has retained its hegemony in many public spaces, from airports, hotels, and conference centres to schools, homes for the elderly, and supermarkets. Its economic efficiency and straightforward focus on functionalism became arguments for continuing modernist building practices while at the same time criticizing its doctrines and assumptions.

While postmodern thought insisted that the metaphysical and utopian underpinnings of modernism had lost credibility, it overlooked the fact that modernist building practices were still widely used and were not superseded by a specific “postmodern” way of building. Instead of introducing a clear break, postmodernism became a transformation phase for modern building as it had been known prior to that. Beck in this regard has rightly spoken of a “reflexive

⁴⁵ (Koolhaas 2002).

⁴⁶ (Koolhaas 2002: 176).

modernism” — a new kind of modernity in which the premises of modernism (universal progress, clarity, aesthetic austerity) transforms the modern agenda itself.⁴⁷ We’ve seen a manifestation of that development in Augé’s idea of “supermodernity.” This is, as it were, modernism in the highest possible gear – a development that cannot but transform modernity itself.⁴⁸

Returning now to Augé’s examples of non-places, we can observe that these are settings that superficially answer to social codes and norms. A non-place might not be the social setting that allows people to enter into deep, personal relations. However, it *is* a setting that still conforms to humane and socially acceptable behaviour. A hotel is a temporary substitute for “home,” and as such, it appears as a configuration in which people feel at ease, although in an anonymous, fleeting way. The same logic applies to airports. Although an airport is a space of transits and continuous instructions, travellers are subjected to a system of visual and spatial coding which creates an atmosphere of artificial “homey-ness” or “homeliness” (*Gemütlichkeit*, *Wohnlichkeit*) even when far away from home. It is precisely the tension between meaningful belonging and alienated suspension on which Augé’s analysis rests. The non-place is the spatial embodiment of a world of flows and processes, but also of a universal logic of static, anonymous, atomic similitude. Here, the environment we build opens up an existential question: what does it mean to exist in a world of universal alienation?

This question is profoundly important, because if we take Augé seriously, then a significant part of the built environment allows only for solitude and similitude – a mass of loose, anonymous, atomic individuals all engaged in their own soliloquies, utterly detached from each other and historical perspective. At its worst, we see such a world in post-apocalyptic novels and movies, in which the past is as it were erased and accessible in a deformed, fragmentary way. If Augé is right, then, the condition of universal alienation deeply permeates our built environment. One of the responses to this alienation is a search for *authenticity*, leading us to the second aspect of the generic eternal.

⁴⁷ Beck *et al.* 1994

⁴⁸ Something that Ulrich Beck in his last – unfinished – book also recognized, when he named it “*The Metamorphosis of the World*”. By and large, Beck’s central idea is that modernism is reflexive – i.e. that it created the conditions which change the very phenomenon from which they originated.

3. The Generic Eternal, Second Aspect: Ubiquitous Alienation and the Ghost of Social Authenticity

Because Junkspace cannot be grasped, it cannot be remembered. It is flamboyant yet unmemorable, like a screen saver. Its refusal to freeze ensures instant amnesia.⁴⁹

In the first two sections, I discussed how modernism based the built environment of the recent and contemporary world on the ideals of unity, exactitude, and clarity. This pure, sober aesthetic is explicitly intended to awaken our appreciation through its display of utterly instrumental rationality—an order that spatially echoed the timeless order of the universe, yet is also designed to be a “machine for living.” The acceleration of the modern project led to the proliferation of places devoted to flows and passing through. Such places possess an instrumentalized rationality combined with the austere modernist aesthetic, under the auspices of today’s political order. In particular, they impose a new mode of existence on individuals, pressing them into certain predefined moulds by instructing them on their behaviour. Such places thus resist durable social relationships and lasting communal ties. The convergence of the modernist aesthetic ideals and the accelerating development of modernity in non-places led to a kind of ubiquitous alienation.

By “ubiquitous alienation”, I mean a tacit, pre-reflective, essentially embodied, subjectively experienced attitude of alienation that permeates instructive spaces due to their instrumental, reductive and objectifying attitudes towards individuals.

Ubiquitous alienation, in turn, leads to a counter-revolution in building. It is as if the spectre of solitude has to be warded off in order to be able to cope with the too-austere, too machine-like reality that supermodernity represents. What means do we have for banishing the spectre? The answer is re-introducing *social authenticity*, even though modernism’s core tenets of efficiency and unity still reign supreme. The type of social authenticity that is hankered after is itself an essentially *ghostly* or *phantom* image of social authenticity, however. More precisely, it is a kind of imagined, seemingly remembered community, in which social relations were close-knit, everyone could leave the door unlocked, and there was a clear, perceptible link to history and one’s roots. Moreover, in this imagined, seemingly remembered Eden, there was an overall coherence in individual and social affect (feeling, desire, and emotion) belief, and action—in short, a self-consciously unified society of like-minded individuals.

⁴⁹ (Koolhaas 2002: 177).

Anyone who visits a contemporary hotel, airport, supermarket, shopping mall, hospital, parking garage, data storage centre, or even some new city quarters, can witness the curious insertion of ghostly social-authentic locations or elements into spaces where they stand out in the most curious way possible.

The functionalist, modernist building aesthetic creates a tension between genericity and specificity: for modernism, one source of beauty is instrumental rationality, at the expense of historicity or that which already exists. The tension between these two forces gives rise to a kind of hybrid style that is organizationally modernist, but in terms of atmosphere and detailing superficially attempts to mimic authenticity. This mix is deeply unsuccessful in its ambitions, because it succeeds in affording a kind of shallow emotional well-being, but only at the price of architectural blandness, discord, and boredom. One need only take a close look at a contemporary airport or hotel lobby to see this “softening of the austere” in full swing. The building layout may present itself as modern and industrial, yet inside a cosy bar or classical interior, it directly contradicts the aesthetic ideal represented outside. Again, and in particular, an airport may present itself as modern and industrial, with its LED-lights, escalators, computer screens, luggage belts and utterly functional layout. Yet, the terminal’s Italian restaurant has fake baked clay tiles as flooring and may even feature red-and-white blocked tablecloths. The Irish pub features an interior that is supposed to represent a cosy place one could find in an idealized Irish village. The aesthetic effect of these two worlds — eerily reminiscent of “The Village” in the 1960s TV cult-classic *The Prisoner* — is shocking, because this softening of the austere aesthetic ideal highlights the contrasts and makes it painfully clear that both worlds coincide, yet never co-exist on an equal basis. In Koolhaas’s words: they are permanently disjointed, and this continuous dissonance is presented bare-faced. It is the essence of junkspace that it is constituted in such a way. It wears its disharmony proudly, while in reality it is not a self-conscious design-choice, but a direct consequence of our way of building.



Figure 6: Shopping street in Nijmegen (NL). It makes an explicit attempt to refer to history, but is at the same time ordered around logos, advertisements, and commercial brands — a visual disharmony desperately trying to be socially authentic (author’s phosograph).

The idealized past is represented as a type of environment that is an exception to the rule. It is represented as a fragment of another, distant world—rumoured to have existed in the not-too-distant past. There is a strange dialectic going on between the all-too-austere spaces of supermodernity and its fragmentary and confused representations of authenticity. One pole of the dialectic is the ubiquitous alienation—so Derrida is bang-on target when he says that

[u]nreserved alienation is thus unreserved representation. It wrenches presence absolutely from itself and absolutely re-presents it to itself.⁵⁰

Here, environments of alienation and discord struggle with a certain lack that is also well-analysed by Augé and Koolhaas. These environments cannot provide lasting social relations, nor can they point to more than their rational efficiency, their superficial cosiness, or their austere aesthetic ideals—and in some cases, liberal doses of all three. In this impoverished and disjointed atmosphere, an extra element is needed, namely the presence of the ghost of social authenticity. However, in instructive spaces, there is little to go on. Consequently, such spaces must literally “wrench” a kind of authentic presence from the impoverished elements of which they are made up. Here, the second pole of the dialectic enters: these authentic moments must be represented to itself. What this means in practice is that these exceptions (let’s say the Irish pub in an airport) must be integrated in a way that seems natural and seamless.

Architecturally, this is an impossible task. The tension between the functional, austere demands of the instructive space and its orchestrated faux-social-authenticity cannot but stand out in the very tension it represents. The key to accurately describing this tension is the word “unreserved.” The representation of architectural exceptions is unreserved in the sense of being without style, without a broader aesthetic framework in which they can be placed—and even without ambition to do so. Thus, visitors are confronted with a strange spectacle: in a single instructive space, the *ersatz* representations of multiple worlds do not co-exist, but instead they collide. The Chinese (or broadly Oriental) restaurant coincides with the American fast-food chain and the Italian restaurant, next to the minimalist fashion store. These fragments never come together—even worse, they clash violently, creating an absurd visual clamour, as if every member of a marching band plays their music at their own tempo. These fragments of space try desperately to be worlds or substitutes for a authentic social experience, but they cannot do it. Notwithstanding their unreserved presence, they do not form a coherent part of the world, but remain architectural fragments, a kind of spatial residue aimed at countering the lingering feeling of alienation.

⁵⁰ (Derrida 1997: 296).

The term “unreserved” can also be read in a second way: the spatial disjointedness of instructive spaces represents a kind of *shamelessness*. The appalling lack of aesthetic sensibility, alongside the openly-displayed instrumentality, creates a spectacle that is inherently abhorrent: a factory where the slaves are required to behave as if they are not locked up. They have to be *proud* that they are denizens of the factory, and must act as if this state of affairs is *perfectly justified*: happy little campers, all of them in a row.



Figure 7: Applied on a large scale, junkspace itself provides a whole new experience. Its visual clamour and disharmony are elevated to such levels here in Atlantic City (USA) that it is quite incomparable with any other architectural style (author's photograph).

The tension inherent in the junkspace condition is at its most visible in all efforts to re-historicize contemporary buildings. The new colleges at Yale University, for example, are built in an or *ersatz* or faux Neo-Gothic style that was much in vogue in the late 19th century.⁵¹ With modern materials, however, one is overwhelmed by the impression that this style is a mere anachronism in a modern world. The idiosyncrasies of that style (its emphasis on elaborate brickwork, its stone ornaments, the size and segmentation of the buildings, etc.) are copied without considering that these were consequences of a certain way of building, dictated by technical and economic considerations embedded in a given historical context. In a scathing critique, architectural critic Christopher Hawthorne concedes:

⁵¹ See Betsky 2018 for a critical discussion

Expensive dormitories, in particular, have begun to exhibit an incurious (and in its worst form an infantilizing) nostalgia, with Yale and USC, among other schools, leaning hard on the kind of Gothic Revival excess that first became popular a full century ago. Unlike the architecturally ambitious and defiantly un-cozy complex I lived in as a Yale undergraduate in the early 1990s.... the new campus architecture is meant to be familiar and comforting above all.⁵²

In a response to an uncertain world, the host of social authenticity is offered up as an antidote or soft pillow. Hawthorne is absolutely correct when he traces a connection between the agenda of providing comfort and infantilization. At some point, one must grow up—and this means necessarily experiencing *some* discomfort. Yale's official rationale for choosing this architectural style was that the buildings reflected the university's values. One wonders what these values are. Here is Hawthorne again:

[I]f a university speaks through the names of its buildings, the architecture it chooses for those buildings speaks more plainly still. So what does the taste for Hogwarts-style dormitories say about the Yale or the USC of 2017? It says that the primary job of residential architecture on campus is to provide a sense of consistency and familiarity for donors and incoming students alike—to soften the edges of the college experience.⁵³

The critical point here is that architecture can be experienced like an impressive artwork or an especially taxing piano-playing class. It confronts one with limits and boundaries, but it heightens and trains one's critical judgment. Taking the sharp edge off, anaesthetizes the exercise of that critical faculty. Worse still, the instructive tendency is just as present in fake authentic buildings—only this time the packaging is different.

Likewise, the insistence on including “traditional” architecture in the old city centre of Frankfurt points in the same direction. Traditional buildings are valued for a world they visually and architecturally represent, even if this means resorting to an architectural style that only outwardly looks as if it had been there forever. Whether this is the intention of the designers or not, some see it as a reference to a world that has gone and that should not be resurrected.⁵⁴

⁵² (LAT 2017).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See, for the controversy, (FAZ 2018). In a critical essay, architectural theorist Stephan Trüby accused the designers of the new inner city of Frankfurt of being complicit with rekindling a revisionist version of Germany's fraught modern history by focusing on historical building styles. Trüby explicitly connects the design choices to the rise of right-wing politics in contemporary Germany, an accusation that seems far-fetched and ill-founded to me. However, his position illustrates the controversies that can arise in working with historical styles or an “idealized past.”

A third example is the new English garden towns commissioned by Prince Charles.⁵⁵ Hankering after a simpler and more idyllic, 19th-century England in which life was uncomplicated and the common folk were safely tucked away from ever being viewed by the aristocracy, Charles proposed an unprecedented step in the direction of archaic neo-traditionalism. The new towns had to be built in a historicizing style, emphasizing bent streets, ornate buildings, and refined brickwork—thereby architecturally pretending that the 20th century either did not take place or was somehow irrelevant.

These instances are not just a matter of antiquarian taste or outdated personal preference. They do not only seek to revive a historical building style or city layout. They intend to revive the whole world that belongs to that historical epoch—or at least a highly idealized and selective version of such a world. These building projects are attempts to come to terms with modernity by removing it from sight, as it were, retreating into a highly reactionary world that is through-and-through fake, inauthentic, and “twee”—a distorted appearance if there ever was one. Again, this compulsively historicizing response is a direct mirror image of the ahistorical clean slate of CIAM-inspired modernism. Whereas this type of modernism tried to conceive a new world by erasing history altogether, the silent presence of history surfaced again as a new, imagined ideal, archaically mimicking traditional building styles in a world that has irrevocably changed.

In airports, hotels, shopping malls, and even residential areas, these aesthetic tensions often coincide in one building or area, rendering them painfully visible. On the scale of whole towns or districts, one could in principle pretend to live in the 19th century, while still visiting modern shopping malls or taking the bus. This split between a ghostly social authenticity and the residue of modern building (in the form of non-places) has been called the “disneyfication” of the world—as if social reality were a consumer theme park in which each style and preference can be made, realized and juxtaposed in one (global) space. The socially authentic “anthropological place” has receded into the background; and in the search for handholds and roots, disneyfied places are artificially created and offered as commodities. Faux social authenticity is marketed as a product, leading seamlessly into the commodification of lived reality itself.⁵⁶ In such *ersatz* historical

⁵⁵ See (Morris and Booth 2009) for a critical discussion of the model village of Poundbury.

⁵⁶ The trap to be avoided here has been perpetuated by some deconstructionist thinkers and the likes of Žižek. It consists in claiming either (i) that the socially “authentic” is an ideological construction, based on unfounded presuppositions, or (ii) that the socially “authentic” is a phantasy, a kind of phantasmatic element in order to come to terms with harsh reality. Both options make good points about the notion of “authenticity” as such, but deny its real-world existence. I disagree with this line of thought, and, correspondingly, think that socially authentic experiences not only can but also *do* exist—

environments, lived reality is consciously manipulated to create the atmosphere of a world that is rumoured to have existed, and thereby serves as an antidote for the generic eternality of our environments.

In what then, is genuine, “real,” social authenticity sought? Simply put, it is sought in the production of a quasi-historical content, in the creation of a “mythical space.” The notion of “anthropological place” evokes founding myths, symbols, and palpable traces of the past, integrating them in a meaningful unity that can be read and interpreted again and again. The street names, monuments and signs mentioned by De Certeau detach themselves and become myths, worlds in themselves. Merleau-Ponty makes this point very perceptively:

The myth itself, however diffuse, has an identifiable significance for primitive man, simply because it does form a world, that is, a whole in which each element has meaningful relations with the rest.⁵⁷

The myth not only has value for “primitive man,” but just as much for the city-dweller in the 21st century. The whole of meaningful relations within the myth is the substrate of the anthropological place. The generic, eternal non-place constitutes precisely the opposite state of affairs: it is an instructive space of which we can make very little sense because it is not a world at all. The great ambition of modernity—to conceive of an austere, eternal, neutral and above all *unified* world without the burden of history—here runs up against its inherent limits.

The austerity of modernism allowed only for the bare bones of a space to be manifestly present. Mies van der Rohe once characteristically described his architecture as “bones and skin,” referring to his use of glass curtain façades and steel beams. Bones and skin—nothing more. The ghost of social authenticity vainly attempts to put some flesh on the bones, picked from a narrative that can be easily marketed as a commodity. History or tradition are great products, as the condition of ubiquitous alienation stimulates the search for roots and perspective in time. The “here” and “there” have to be reconstructed from imaginary fragments—the faux socially authentic must provide a temporal perspective to counter the ubiquitous alienation brought about by ahistorical, instructive spaces.

In this particular case, the loss of temporal perspective leads to the strange experience that the environment seems to have fallen from the sky fully formed and without any reference to history. Time seems to be erased from the factors that co-

no matter which theoretical model one uses to analyze such experiences or debunk them as epiphenomena.

⁵⁷ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 341).

exist and make up our experience. On this point, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of the nature of co-existence is again very accurate:

But co-existence, which in fact defines space, is not alien to time, but is the fact of two phenomena belonging to the same temporal wave. As for the relationship of the perceived object to my perception, it does not unite them in space and outside time: they are contemporary.⁵⁸

Space and time are not alien to each other; more than that, by their very nature they are constituted to be integrated with each other. Spaces beget meaning through their visible presence in time. Indeed, this is what classical architecture shows. Space's persistence through time adds historical layers and references that anchor it in lived experience—but this is not possible without the experience of time in the form of history. Physical presence makes space and time co-exist in an object, suffusing it with meaning. Pure presence, or what is *manifest*, in the simplest sense of those terms, is a necessary condition for the creation of such meaning—or to put it differently: for a place to have content, it has to have a certain presentation or manifestation. Mere existence is not enough. Yet again, Merleau-Ponty cogently spells out why this must be so:

[The] “order of co-existents” is inseparable from the “order of sequences,” or rather time is not only the consciousness of a sequence. Perception provides me with a “field of presence” in the broad sense, extending in two dimensions: the here-there dimension and the past-present-future dimension. The second elucidates the first.⁵⁹

Merleau-Ponty's formulations cross paths with the concept of “anthropological place,” as I have discussed it above. The anthropological place is comprised of identity (*presence*) relations (*here-there*) and history (*past, but also future*). When perceiving a given space, the anthropological place is the field of presence in space and time that enables us to relate to the larger spatial-historical context. Modern architecture, however, erases time from the equation altogether, preferring to deal with space in functionalist, atemporal terms. At the same time, it unwittingly re-introduces time into architecture, contradicting its very foundations. The first reintroduction of time in the products of modernism is its generic eternal ideal: the city of the future would do away with all need for re-conception, since the “order of the universe” is reflected in it. History has come to an end, and the only thing that needs to be done is to realize paradise, since its conception in thought has already taken place. The very ideal of generic eternity might have been an expression of an “end of history” ideology, but it is not possible to think about eternity without

⁵⁸ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 309).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

thinking simultaneously about its constituent concept: time. One notion is necessary to think the other. This leads to a dialectical reversal: by omitting temporality and expressing the ideal of eternity, that which is absent becomes present *in its very absence*. In the same way, a recently deceased family member is saliently absent at the first reunion of the whole family. The void that someone left behind makes him all the more present—without him physically being there. In the same way, the absence of temporality makes it all the more conspicuous in modernist architecture. Not coincidentally, the supermodernist response is to re-introduce the ghost of social authenticity as an expression of temporality. By bringing historical building traditions back into architectural practice, the modern and the socially authentic would meld into a new hybrid form that unites the best of both worlds.⁶⁰ This response takes a view of perception that is naïve and syncretic. It hopes to combine architectural fragments and clues into a “new-&-improved” style that will represent the new synthesis of the traditional and the new, as if history is a kind of cabinet from which one can pick fragments at will.

Nevertheless, the act of perception is not just adding new experiences to a virtual library in one’s mind:

In the natural attitude, I do not have perceptions, I do not posit this object as beside that one, along with their objective relationships, I have a flow of experiences which imply and explain each other both simultaneously and successively.⁶¹

The experience of place consists not only of processing input from the senses. It is also the process of actually making sense of the environment by arranging input into a sensuous model that can be comprehended. This model comes into being by means of affects that the space affords. This process is not merely *intellectual* and *theoretical*, aka “discursive,” aka “cognitive,” it is also irreducibly *essentially embodied* and *aesthetic*, aka “sensible,” aka “affective.” The processing of experiential fragments and assembling them in constellations that are meaningful to us is at once discursive *and* sensible, at once cognitive *and* affective.

To summarize this phase of the discussion, the deeply entrenched assumptions inherent in the modernist project have created the conditions for

⁶⁰ No wonder then, that someone as acute as architectural historian and critic Kenneth Frampton proposes what he called a “critical regionalism”, blending the local context, modern tools of thought and local materials into a new kind of architectural style. Frampton’s otherwise fascinating and promising response demonstrates exactly what I am about to argue later: namely, that such hybrids still operate under the core modernist assumptions. Consequently, they necessarily re-iterate a new cycle of modernity that does not overcome the past but reinforces its tenets under a new form, all the while claiming to have overcome it.

⁶¹ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 327).

environments of universal alienation. The presence of these environments is thoroughly instrumentalized, austere, and geared towards efficiency. Their efficiency is ensured by continuous instruction and guidance, leading to the phenomenon of instructive spaces. As antidote to this situation, a new type of generic eternal, the ghost of social authenticity, suffuses the rationalized instructive spaces, providing a fake temporal perspective in an environment of real alienation.

In supermodernity, identities are present as someone's imposed role, enforced through instructive spaces through one-way messages and feedback. Time and history have been erased, to be replaced either by fake historical narratives or by an austere world of technological progress, in which the past is nothing more than an annoying spectre haunting the present.

4. The Generic Eternal: Two Dialectical Reversals

Die Menschen bezahlen die Vermehrung ihrer Macht mit der Entfremdung von dem, worüber sie die Macht ausüben.⁶²

Thus, not only is modern society a cage, but all the people in it are shaped by its bars; we are beings without spirit, without sexual or personal identity ... we might almost say without being.⁶³

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said — "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."⁶⁴

⁶² (Adorno and Horkheimer 2013: 15). Translation: people pay for the power they exert over others by alienation from those over whom their power is exercised (author's translation).

⁶³ (Berman 2010: 27).

⁶⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*, first published in 1818.

If anything, the aesthetic condition I've been calling "the generic eternal" is a complex of paradoxes. Modernism promises the ultimate liberation of mankind, but it succeeds in creating some of the most "bog standard" and oppressive building prototypes imaginable. It begins with an almost monastic emphasis on purity and austerity, yet unwittingly gives rise to an uncontrolled proliferation of historicizing narratives and building styles. It attempts to erase history and start over, yet it creates the precondition for reactionary historicizing styles and architectural escapism.

Normative Images of Efficiency and Aesthetics

Modernism succeeds in solving a variety of specific practical problems, ranging from providing excellent infrastructures, to healthy housing and efficient working places. My claim is that the ubiquitous alienation it produced stems not just from its practical efficacy: it stems from the underlying world-picture of domination of nature and its related natural mechanism. In an imaginary yet eerily real world-picture in which individuals are cogs in an omnipresent, globally interconnected mega-machine called "the built environment," deviations must be minimized to guarantee the functioning of the machine as a whole. Disruptive behaviour must be regulated, and norms must be prescribed to delineate acceptable behaviours. In short, the imaginary yet eerily real world-picture of modernity is effective for solving a range of specific practical problems, but is tragically unable to offer a normative image of a better future world. In order to function as intended, modernity has to "see like a state" and operate with the "cold sneer of command."

If efficiency and output (a Marxian production process if there ever was one) replace "living" in its fullest sense, the relations between humanity and its artefacts are reversed. No longer do artefacts serve humanity, instead humanity must serve what it has produced in order for the artificial world to function as intended.⁶⁵ The power of humanity to manipulate the environment has increased, but only at the price of ubiquitous alienation. The world-picture of modernity has become all-too-real, irrevocably changing its authors. When looking on our own works, we are the ones that must despair. The boundless desert that stretches towards the horizon in Shelley's poem has in the contemporary world been replaced by a vast plane of a different, yet equally unforgiving character: the generic eternal with its tragic ambition to be an all-encompassing, neutral, and regulated world.

The chilling irony of reading Shelley's poem in this way is that the inscription reads: "look on my Works, ye Mighty..." However, precisely those who are called "Mighty" because they conceived the world as it is today, have been relegated to a subservient position by the very artefacts they produced. The accomplishments

⁶⁵ (Berman 2010: 27).

which gave them a claim to be called “Mighty” is the very cause of their servitude. Ozymandias’s instruction should maybe not be read as triumphant boasting, but as a dire warning. The despair we should feel has nothing to do with the power of Ozymandias the individual, and everything to do with the power that his “works” exert over our lives.

The reversal of positions between humanity and their artificial world can be traced back to the level on which the notion of “utility” is defined. In instructive spaces, everyone has to partially relinquish one’s autonomy so that the structure as a whole continues to function as intended. The norm for “utility” is no longer defined at the level of the individual, but instead at the level of the infrastructure they use. The imperatives imposed on individuals are not for their own good—rather, they are in place to assure the proper functioning of the instructive space itself. The normative image that results is therefore increasingly regulatory and oppressive, as unpredictability and deviation must be reduced to a minimum. The existence of the user, inhabitant, or passer-by must be tailored to the needs of the environment. Max Horkheimer clearly identified this tendency in 1947, when he wrote:

Just as all life today tends increasingly to be subjected to rationalization and planning, so the life of each individual, including his most hidden impulses, which formerly constituted his private domain, must now take the demands of rationalization and planning into account: the individual’s self-preservation presupposes his adjustment to the requirements for the preservation of the system.⁶⁶

Horkheimer convincingly connects two notions: the demands of instrumental rationality on one hand, and the corresponding diminution of one’s individuality at the other. Self-preservation is defined at the level of the social institution or social system, and utility is consequently defined in terms that have little to do with autonomous, individual well-being.

The idealized image underlying this relation between individual and social institution or system is that of a technologically optimized world of generically eternal beauty and efficiency. This elevated, generic eternal world of modernism would be an overwhelmingly inhospitable place if it were fully realized—and increasingly the built environment is becoming such a place. It would look like a sterile fusion between a monastery and a high-tech “campus.” This fusion is not as strange as it seems: when the British minimalist architect John Pawson was commissioned to build a monastery in Slovakia, one of the monks recalled that the aesthetic that inspired him to propose Pawson as architect was that of Apple. During a visit to the Apple store in New York, the monk was so overcome by the strict,

⁶⁶ (Horkheimer 2013: 67).

minimalist austerity of the store layout that it inspired him to commission Pawson as designer in the hope that he could replicate those minimalist qualities.⁶⁷

Minimalism and austerity, as images, serve well as artistic principles of the generic eternal. To constitute the whole inhabited and subjectively-experienced world, however, those images fall terribly short. Such a world would simply be too austere, too bland, and too abstract to be a *world* at all. Living in it would be nightmarish existence, stripped of one's capacity to make individual choices, and condemned to a continuous encounter with the machine-aesthetic of technological austerity.

The idea of *austerity* as the highest of aesthetic ideals, and the idea of *efficiency* as the highest of the functional ideals, jointly create a world devoid of arbitrariness, deviation, inefficiency, redundancy, randomness, and empty, indeterministic freedom. It is generic in the sense that its norms for aesthetic experience and efficiency are everywhere the same, realizing the universal aspirations of modernism in all domains of life. It realizes a world in which the notion of "place" lose its meaning altogether. If the world is aesthetically and functionally similar at every point of the globe, being here or somewhere else loses its relevance. The idea of a "neutral public space" on which the emergent collective develops would be globalized.

Indeed, the development of the world as described above can be observed in the utilitarian and infrastructural spaces of the 20th and 21st centuries. Airports, supermarkets, hotels, parking garages, highways, shopping malls, and residential areas all exhibit clear traces of the double normativity of modernity: a *normative logic of instrumental rationality* and a *normative aesthetic of austerity*. The first set of norms is enforced through instructive spaces; the second through adhering to an aesthetic ideal derived ultimately from the ontological world-picture of modernity itself.

The generic eternal qualities of instructive spaces have been implemented across the globe, and its universalizing logic has proved remarkably flexible and tenacious; although its aesthetic ideal often has resulted in hyper-bland buildings and spaces, nevertheless where austerity is not just an aesthetic ideal but an economic given, it seemingly thrives. What melts into air in these hyper-bland spaces is the very idea of place itself. If the properties of spaces become so exchangeable that they function everywhere and look disconcertingly similar, the notion of a local identity dissipates into an eternal world of sameness, austerity and perpetual efficiency.

⁶⁷ Aureli 2013: 43

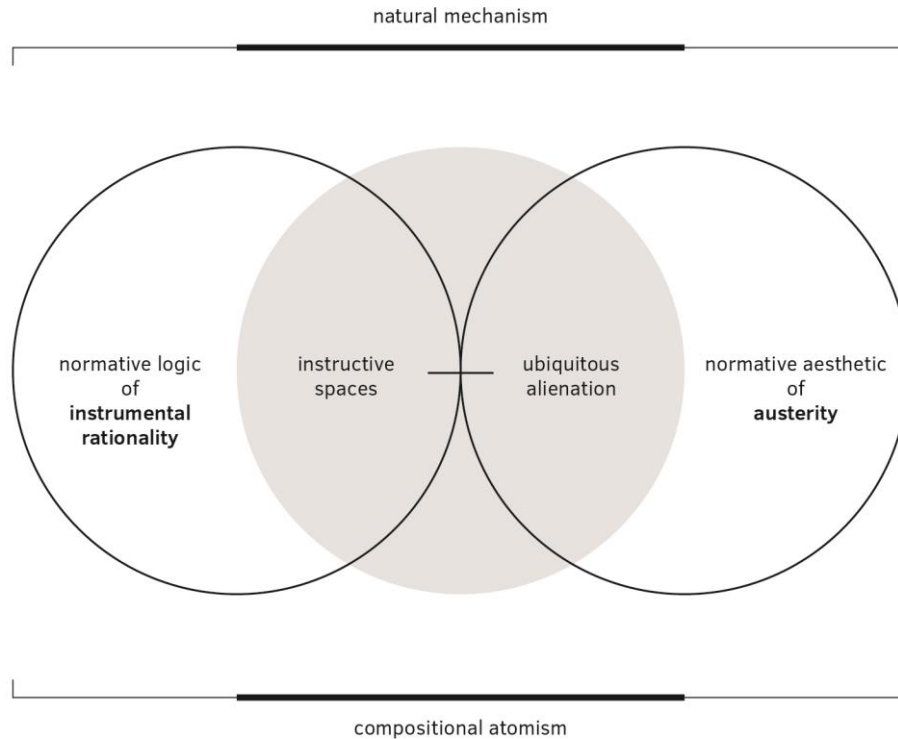


Figure 8: Relations between the two core assumptions of modernity, the dual rational images of supermodernity, and the resulting dual phenomena of instructive space and ubiquitous alienation (author's diagram).

However, in the face of the generic eternal, the need for contradictions, imperfections, and unpredictability remains. Today, this desire for contingency is termed the "local," the "untarnished," the "original," or the "authentic." As I have discussed, the counterpart of the technological presence and prestige must be some sort of fake local, pure, and above all unspoiled Eden. The idea of an "Arcadian world" is projected into this imaginary place. The idea of alienation acquires its dramatic sting only against the theatrical device of a despoiled Eden, an innocent condition of which humanity is torn, and the return to which is upheld as an attainable ideal.

This idyllic representation is a fictional image, a fleeting mirage to cover up for the tragic, traumatic loss of anthropological places. It is an attempt to come to grips with a world in which the search for "enchantment" and "roots" continues in the oppressive desert landscape of instructive spaces.⁶⁸ In these spaces, alienation is manifested spatially and procedurally. In order to escape its grip, another type of place is needed in which the continuous injunctions of modernity are not felt.

This leads to a second step in the dialectic, whereby the very notion of "social authenticity" becomes an integral part of the normative logic of modernity itself, in the mode of *a ghost*. Ghostly social authenticity becomes a mode of "lived

⁶⁸ This line of thought is extensively worked out in (Adorno and Horkheimer 2017).

experience” that is seamlessly integrated into the modernist logic of efficiency. Within instructive spaces, certain predefined places like “the friendly Irish pub” or “the cosy Italian restaurant” provide predefined possibilities of escapism. Even escapism is regulated: thus even unpredictability and ghostly social authenticity are framed, ordered, and stamped with a certain aesthetic that is an indistinguishable part of the broader, efficient framework of instructions in which it is embedded. Again, dialectic reversals are at work here. In these orchestrated forms of escapism, the characteristics of ghostly socially authentic places are relentlessly copied and multiplied, making them utterly generic and eternal in turn. If “cosy Italian restaurants” from Canada to China and back again serve all the same pizzas and pastas, and are decorated in similar ways, then the very idea of the ghost of social authenticity is used as an exchangeable commodity that can be inserted in every context on the globe.

The ghost of social authenticity is, as it were, integrated into the logic of efficiency like regular furloughs for combat soldiers: it provides a wholly predictable and preformatted escapism that nevertheless does not interfere with the overall goals and aims of overall functionality as such. Lived reality or “subjective experience” itself is commodified and marketed as a product. Temporal escapist experiences are offered as antidote to universal alienation, but are also an integral part of its structuring logic. When fully developed, the modernist aesthetic ideal would be uninhabitable—and so it integrates “contradictions” in its form that seem very different, but in fact are merely epiphenomenally different sub-mechanisms of the same mega-machine, created solely in order to buffer or temporarily cure the negative effects of its own preconditions.

In instructive spaces, procedures determine behaviour. This is clearly visible in all highly-regulated settings, ranging from airports to operating rooms in hospitals and prisons. Such places impose a regimen of actions and sequences upon individuals. Spoken messages not to leave one’s baggage unattended, repeated injunctions to “mind your step,” and pictograms to illustrate the appropriate actions at passport control are used to segment one’s time and determine one’s actions.

The regimen of signs in instructive spaces is imposed on *us*: it is an order of injunctions that determines both our physical actions and mental states. It deeply determines our mode of existence on all levels. The instructions are not imposed on mere travellers, passers-by, or customers, but on us – essentially embodied human beings. Labels to categorize and reduce human beings are just abstractions made on instrumental-rationalist grounds. This makes the generic eternal an *aesthetic existential human condition*: since human beings are essentially embodied, any regulative regimen that seeks to control and direct behaviour necessarily requires stimulation of our bodily sensorium. This encompasses not just the five senses, but also one’s mental states, one’s imagination, one’s self-image and how one

experiences our own body and its active potentials. Horkheimer noted that even the “private space” of the individual is subjected to the demands of instructive spaces. This private space extends well beyond one’s innermost desires. It fully includes the factors mentioned above. By imposing an identity on someone, and by continually reinforcing one’s role through instructions, the lived body is used and manipulated as a mere means to an end—or even worse—the core constituents that make up a human being are instrumentalized and manipulated to death in service of efficiency, like the workers crucified on and sacrificed to their machines in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*.

This attitude is a total inversion of Kant’s injunction to treat human beings not merely as a means but also always at the same time as an end. In instructive spaces, human beings are not only utilized as mere means to ensure the efficiency of the infrastructure they use. On top of being coerced into a given role, one is required to stop thinking of oneself as an end-in-itself. This is the most radical form of self-renunciation that is thinkable. It amounts to an existence in which subjects are required not to view themselves as subjects any longer, but merely as cogwheels in the larger scheme of things, a larger scheme for “human improvement”—a larger scheme moreover, that has been created in huge, open-spaced offices at the top of skyscrapers, overlooking vast cities—think again of *Metropolis* and Joh Fredersen’s office, or of *Blade Runner* and Eldon Tyrell’s office—and without consulting them. The justification for this demand is presented as a practical and unavoidable necessity.

This very form of presentation might be one of the subtlest forms of coercion, as the instructions are presented as either practically unavoidable and/or as offers to provide one with a good, easy or even pleasurable experience. Either way, the situation is tacitly made clear: the instructions cannot be ignored, and it is a gesture of good will of those providing them that they take care to phrase them in terms that appear polite or that appeal to practical necessity.

Such instructions demand—from those at whom they are directed—compliance and obedience to their pre-assigned role. Indeed, they need to *identify with* the role imposed on them. One is not merely treated as a passenger, patient, customer, or prisoner—one is expected to actively internalize this role and assume it as an integral part of one’s identity. Identities that are imposed on individuals in instructive spaces are not only templates for behaviour, but simultaneously blueprints to rethink one’s own subjectivity. We can cast this demand in terms of Peter Strawson’s helpful distinction between objective (instrumental) and reactive (considerate/participatory) attitudes. Here’s Strawson’s description of the objective or instrumental attitude:

To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided, though this gerundive is not peculiar to cases of objectivity of attitude. The objective attitude may be emotionally toned in many ways, but not in all ways: it may include repulsion or fear, it may include pity or even love, though not all kinds of love.⁶⁹

By contrast, reactive attitudes are of a wholly different order—they belong to a domain that extends well beyond the realm of instrumental reason. Inherently non-instrumental emotional attitudes like platonic love, anger, resentment, forgiveness, hospitality, gratitude, and disappointment, belong in this category.⁷⁰ Systems and instructions are not angered or disappointed by transgressive behaviour. They merely signal and manage the transgression. In doing so, they display the objective attitude towards the transgressor. In interpersonal relationships, the presence of reactive attitudes proves that the relation is manifestly non-instrumental. A friend who surprises me in a positive way sparks a feeling of delight that cannot be simply categorized as a “payoff,” “reward,” “consequence,” or “bonus.” The emotion itself is irreducibly valuable—and its value cannot be captured in merely instrumental terms. The reactive attitude is participatory or involved, as opposed to distanced and directive.

Although Strawson acknowledges that objective and reactive attitudes sometimes overlap and are not always mutually exclusive, he nevertheless succeeds in identifying a key characteristic unique to objective attitudes: it takes the agency of a given subject as something that must be manipulated for further ends. This manipulation can be a form of training, treatment, or managing. At any rate, the shortcomings of a given subject manifest themselves in how his or her agency is used. Therefore, someone in power—a boss or overseer—has to cure, manage, nudge, or overtly manipulate the subject in order to avoid the dangerous and disruptive potential of the autonomous exercise of agency.

Strawson notes that we cannot keep this going forever: in everyday human behaviour, one cannot continually or endlessly adopt an objective attitude towards others—for it would amount to a complete negation of normal intersubjectivity.⁷¹ What individual human beings cannot do, however, systems and regulations can. They persist over long periods of time and do not have to cope with the limitations of the human attention span. The only prerequisite for its functioning is that the

⁶⁹ (Strawson 1993: 52).

⁷⁰ Ibid: 51.

⁷¹ Ibid: 53.

system as a whole adopts a singularly impoverished view of what a human being is. In the case of the objective attitude, it is a subject whose autonomy must be bent, curbed, formed, and sculpted. And indeed, the imposition of a new identity on individuals in instructive spaces does just that. A new role and associated behaviours are imprinted on individuals – and non-participation is not only not encouraged, it is actively punished.

In this case, the instructive spaces of supermodernity elevate an exceptional situation (temporarily viewing someone as an object of training, treatment or managing) to a permanent state of being, a *modus operandi*.

This feature of instructive spaces extends further than instructing people to wait in line, to check-in at the counter or to identify themselves at various control points. Strawson rightly points out that objective attitudes may be emotionally toned. Some of the instructions provided in instructive spaces take the form of explicit orders or commands; others are guidelines that one is expected to obey; still others are only present as nudges or suggestions. The emotions expressed by these types of instructions differ somewhat. Orders are given from an almost disinterested, authoritarian point of view – again, the “cold sneer of command.” Nudges and tacitly enforced expectations possess a different emotional hue: they work on a different level of the psyche, silently encroaching on one’s self-image and self-narration. This does not mean, however, that they are compassionate or friendly: underneath the velvet glove of social conformism hides the same iron fist of instrumental logic. We can cast their insidious potential in Strawson’s terms: nudges are objective attitudes that pretend to be reactive attitudes. They are as it were regulations presented as personal duties. “For everyone’s safety, please do not leave your luggage unattended” is the key vocalization of the nudge. In one message, a cold and instrumental command is transformed into a personal duty for which everyone is held individually responsible. It suggests that those who do not obey the command are saboteurs, lacking in responsibility and refusing to be social beings.

In instructive spaces, such nudges and subliminal suggestions as well as direct, explicit orders accompanied with implicit or explicit threats of punishment require individuals to adopt objective attitudes towards themselves. They are tacitly compelled to abstain from regarding themselves as beings who deserve to be approached through reactive attitudes and treated as ends-in-themselves. The objective attitude in instructive spaces casts a free person as a disruption, as an agent who is maladjusted and malformed by his very capacity for autonomous action.

Not only Strawson but also Horkheimer alludes to this feature of modern communication, diagnosing its underlying goal:

Domination of nature involves domination of man. Each subject not only has to take part in the subjugation of external nature, human and nonhuman, but in order to do so must subjugate nature within himself. Domination becomes “internalized” for domination’s sake. What is usually indicated as a goal—the happiness of the individual, health and wealth—gains its significance exclusively from its functional potentiality.⁷²

The internalization of domination can be equated with a certain belief: that adopting an objective attitude towards oneself is necessary *for one’s own good*. The imposition of rules and nudges must not be felt as the pressure of an external force but must be experienced as natural, necessary and therefore justified. In believing so, personal autonomy becomes a risk factor, an unpredictable enemy to be chained, controlled, and managed, rather than the most fundamental expression of one’s subjectivity. Once something becomes a risk factor in a given instructive space, it automatically falls under the jurisdiction of instrumental reason. The normative logic of instrumental reason demands subjugation and devotion—even to the point where self-renunciation is required.

Like the town planning official cited earlier, instructive spaces “discourage non-participation.” Adopting an autonomous position is discouraged if not outright forbidden, as non-participation is not an option. Behaviour that does not comply with the projected expectations of a given instructive space must be regulated and minimized, and for this reason, procedures and orchestrated forms of escapism are offered side-by-side. The ultimate goal of all instructions is to keep infrastructures running smoothly, a goal that again requires self-renunciation:

[Therefore] self-renunciation of the individual in industrial society has no goal transcending industrial society.⁷³

Horkheimer repeats with these words the Kantian point introduced earlier: industrial society (and this notion can be extended to the instructive spaces of supermodernity) knows no other goal than sustaining itself. Utility is defined at the level of the infrastructural system in which individuals move and live. As such, the moral bookkeeping is carried out over the heads of individuals, at the top of the skyscraper. The treatment of individuals in instructive spaces is carried out with a utilitarian goal in mind—a goal for which individuals are mere means, social atoms to be directed. The idea of individual value and personal humanity is overlooked in the instructive spaces of this kind.

⁷² (Horkheimer 2013: 66).

⁷³ Ibid.

Self-renunciation can take many different forms: it ranges from the taxing daily routines of a monk, to the sacrifice a soldier makes for a greater cause; or facing great adversity in providing income for one's family. Often, such cases involve a voluntary decision, and it is on these grounds that such self-renunciation is praised and valued. Witnessing the ordeals of others often creates sympathy for those undergoing them. There is an element of self-inflicted pain or suffering in such forms of self-renunciation, but it is a type of pain that is frequently endured with determination and even satisfaction, since its goal is kept in view. For the monk, the goal might be spiritual development; for the single mother the goal is providing income for the survival of her children.

The self-renunciation demanded in the instructive spaces of supermodernity, however, is of a categorically different kind: it is not based on a voluntary decision, nor does it have anything to do with personal goals or circumstances. It exists as a tacit and continuous demand, a formative force that shapes the existence of those it touches, but that does not justify its own presence, let alone its claims on the experience and behaviour of individuals. Self-renunciation in this sense is a necessary outcome of the logic of instrumental rationality. It demands selflessness from those participating in it, in exchange for an "optimal" or "pleasant" experience. As I mentioned above, not-participating is not an option in instructive spaces. Everyone who uses them must partake in its procedures. This feature of instructive spaces is coercive in the sense that it leaves no other options open for those who pass through them. It is not merely coercive in the sense that it demands obedience to its rules—although this is certainly one of its dimensions. Worse, this type of coercion directly impacts the very substratum of what it means to be a person. It demands a change in the way persons view themselves—a massive manipulation of self-images in the interest of the normative logic of instrumental reason.

Where, in all this, is the normative aesthetic of austerity located? As I have said, the "aesthetic" is the domain of the subjective experiences of essentially embodied human beings. Embodiment unites the input of the senses and mental dispositions. The "aesthetic" in the sense of the built environment is its materialization, shape, and organization—and the instructions it imposes by way of its physical shape. Given the preceding discussion, it is clear that the influence of the built environment on our (collective) subjective experience is far-reaching. The built environment is the physical set of tools that represents the core assumptions of modernism (natural mechanism and atomism) at its most salient, all the while presenting it as "efficient," "neutral," "service-oriented," and "necessary." The idea that a rationally-designed building would clearly and distinctly represent the sublime is transformed into a regulative ideal: rationality is phrased in functional terms, promising a pleasurable experience as long as the rules imposed by the environment are followed. The very organization of instructive spaces embodies and enforces this ideal.

In fact, the physical, machine-like shape of modernism is a direct representation of its metaphysical underpinning: it presents itself as neutral or efficient and poses demands justified by its efficacy. The purported neutrality in both its physical form and organization is “more metaphysical than metaphysics itself.”⁷⁴ It is an expressive ideal of a metaphysical idea. Most importantly, it is a tool for internalizing the very features of a non-place itself. The idea that there is no *there* there is exactly what Berman alludes to when he states that in modernity “we are almost without being.” This situation can be directly traced back to the metaphysical underpinning of modernism, its overly simplistic world-picture, and consequently its alienating potential.

5. Concluding Summary: A Question and a Reply

I have argued in the preceding sections that the “generic eternal” is an aesthetic existential condition: it is experienced through the bodily sensorium and through the manipulation of our mental dispositions. The normative logic of instrumental reason and the normative aesthetic of austerity are tools to control and guide both individual subjectivity and intersubjective exchanges. Even putatively “authentic” moments are integrated into the normative images of supermodernity—even escapism is regulated. This situation is a logical consequence of the two ontological notions on which modernism is based. First, there is the notion of natural mechanism; second, there is the idea of atomism. Adherence to these two notions leads naturally to the elevation of instrumental reason as the ultimate justification for creating the built environment. On the aesthetic side, the two ontological notions lead naturally to the ideals of austerity and exactitude that are elevated as the closest expression of rationality within the built environment.

The acceleration of modernity, aka “supermodernity,” witnesses the perfection of this idea in the development of instructive spaces—namely, spaces constituted by their forcible imposition of fixed, reductive identities on individuals, aiming at directing their behaviour by placing them in a predefined or narrowly defined role. These spaces are designed to reinforce behaviour deemed appropriate by means of continuous instruction, coercion, nudging, and guidance. The widespread application of instructive spaces, in turn, naturally leads to ubiquitous alienation, due to their objectifying attitudes towards individuals. This feeling of alienation evokes a counter-reaction, namely escapism and a deeply existential search for the ghost of social authenticity. However, even escapism is closely regulated as part of the instrumental rationality in instructive spaces. They form mythical spaces, reminiscent of an imagined past in which modernity has not taken place at all.

⁷⁴ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2013: 29).

These instructive spaces, although more varied due the infusions of faux authenticity operate still according to the two core notions of modernism. This is best explained by identifying two normative images that structure these spaces: the first is the normative logic of instrumental rationality; and the second is the normative aesthetic of austerity. Superimposed on each other, these normative images result in spaces that demand self-renunciation of each individual. Such radical self-renunciation is demanded because individual agency is seen as a potential disruption or risk for a smoothly functioning built environment.

At this point, one might ask whether there is anything good to be found in modernity at all? It may seem from a superficial reading of this essay that modernity is nothing but an elaborate ploy or scheme to subjugate humanity. To read it this way would be missing the main point, and in order to prevent this some further clarification is required. First, and on functional grounds, modernism has realized a great many of its initial promises. The 19th century city and its disadvantages were, often with breath-taking success, addressed and reconceived. Second, in this process, a totalizing feature of modernity comes to the fore. This is why Berman in his excellent study on the experience of modernity draws a distinction between the 19th century modernism that is regarded as a complex of paradoxes and tensions, and its 20th century counterpart that rests on “flat totalizations.”⁷⁵ The difference is that 19th century modernism embraces the idea of open-ended futures, while the 20th century variation (under the auspices of instrumental reason and a limitless trust in technology) veers towards closed visions—a single-lane highway towards paradise. The 20th century variation deserves serious criticism, because its core tenets are very much alive in the 21st century. There is one difference, however: in the 21st century, the technological means to enforce the closed future envisioned by modernism can be implemented much more radically, efficiently, and existentially than in the previous century. All the criticism does not detract from the advantages and accomplishments of modern developments. Instead, it serves to view the advantages against the background of the alienating potential of modernity—a potential that has accompanied its most glorious moments and accomplishments since its beginning.

⁷⁵ (Berman 2010: 24).

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