

Time-plots:
Temporally Unfolding and Spatially Unifying
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Introduction

In October 2024 I had the pleasure to present, alongside David Leatherbarrow and Paul Emmons, in the *Quickness* conference, organized by Pari Riahi, Laure Katsaros and Michael Davis at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Dedicated to Calvino's second value in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, the conference asked participants to reflect on quickness in architecture. My talk focused on the tensions Calvino introduces between the speed of mental perception and the slow time of visual observation. I explored this theme by looking at the synchronic logic of architectural design and the constituencies of embodied vision by a sentient viewer. In this presentation I will evoke Calvino again, not merely because he is concerned with the presence of the reader in his fiction, and my paper, like the previous one, is to a great extent devoted to the presence of the embodied subject in architecture, but also for the reason that he used architectural models in his literature, giving narrative form to ideas of space and time. My focal point is the notion of time-*plots*. I borrow from Peter Brooks' *Reading from the Plot*, where he draws four senses of this word from the American Heritage Dictionary, highlighting its polysemous nature:

- a. A small piece of ground, generally used for a specific purpose; *a garden plot*, or a measured area of land; a lot.
- b. A ground plan, as for a building, a diagram.
- c. The pattern or sequence of interrelated events in a work of fiction, as a novel or film.
- d. A secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose; a scheme.

The first definition is a matter of space. The second one concerns a spatial representation revealing the spatial order of a plan or a chart in diagrammatic form. These two characterizations involve some sort of measure, drawing and calculations, implying a set of instructions about how a building is to be built or a specific phenomenon can be abstracted, thus embedding the notion of time related to their construction, even if we do not see it in a plan, chart or diagram. The third definition concerns temporal order in narrative, bringing along the notion of aesthetic cohesion, the purpose underlying a narrative plot. A broad interpretation of the final one refers to power relationships, calling forth the idea of socio-political control.

Intertwining spatial order, temporal order and the exercise of power, the concept of the plot underlines both the spatial and narrative disciplines. It is about a strategy, a project, an individual or collective endeavour in which something must be produced or brought out. Informed by these four descriptions I ask: first, how architecture and narrative plot time as an ordering force of those meanings we try to wrest from human and social temporality. Second, how spatio-temporal forms exert social and political power. The aim is to construct a framework within which time in architecture and aesthetic forms can be studied in relation to each other and in comparison with non-artistic realms of lived experience.

The talk develops through three interwoven lines of investigation:

The first one uncovers the histories and morphologies of three contexts: the city of Venice, the Palace of Westminster and the Parthenon and Erechtheion in ancient Athens, highlighting different notions of time: as *process* in the evolutionary urban fabric of Venice; as *power* in the transformation of the political system of Venice from island communities to a state and a republic; as power, *performance* and *affordance* in the Westminster House of Commons; and as *memory* in the Parthenon and the Erechtheion in Athens. Tracing consistencies and transformations in the evolution of social and political functions in the three architectural environments, this part situates time and architecture in historical sequence.

The second part attempts to construct a comparative framework in which the perception of time can be investigated in different spatial arrangements and within possible worlds of form. It proposes a quadri-partite typology of spatio-temporal sequences in theoretical layouts alongside paradigmatic cases that illustrate each of these typologies. In contrast to the first part which follows the histories of three real settings, the second

part teases space-time relationships in theoretical settings, complementing and extending the previous investigation.

As some of the buildings examined here thematise time through their content, such as museums and galleries, or through the metonymic articulation of architectural elements, the third line of investigation concerns the ways in which architecture expresses time (instead of embodying time). By staging and memorializing the past as complete worlds out of fragments, these buildings evoke the themes of history and memory in the viewer's mind.

The final part of the paper examines a selection of buildings, each representing one of the four typologies introduced previously. It draws from the idea of the literary plot as a form of "travel" through textual space and time, focusing on the notions of prolepsis and analepsis. In particular, it delves into the penultimate dialogue in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, where Marco Polo and Kublai Khan examine the Khan's atlas. By establishing analogies between these narrative techniques and embodied vision in architecture, the paper emphasizes the importance of temporal unfolding in how we experience architecture. Yet, as the subtitle suggests, it also addresses an opposing concept: the spatial unification of perceptions over time through visual relationships among spaces outside the sequence in which they are encountered.

The three interrelated layers of investigation lead to some key observations: that architecture, aesthetic and non-artistic forms of lived experience are about the materialization of processes concerning how a building or a city was made over and over again, how it was inhabited, how it shifted in terms of use, meaning and power; how it fell into disuse, was dismantled or scattered; that buildings and cities are a matter of performances where people engage in ordered, semi-ordered or random interactions, transcending a single author and evolving over time; and that architectural and urban spaces embed certain relations of power related to space-time while foreclosing others.

The second observation the study makes concerns the space-time interaction in architecture and narrative, suggesting that the principles of space-time order lived experience giving a project cohesion. The argument posits that embodied vision is not solely tied to time. While a work is experienced step-by-step, the sense of the whole emerges from the spatial connections, traces and reversals the viewer experiences and the work leaves in memory. The third contribution of this work is in offering alternative notions of temporality contrary to the modernist idea of linear time that privileged forward movement. I argue that architecture registers multiple overlapping temporalities: quick and slow, condensed and dilated, linear, cyclical, dendritic or network-like.

In the final discussion the three lines of investigation which meet at many points come to converge in a more general discussion about the analytical perspective and method followed. The purpose of these inquiries is to establish frameworks for identifying the impacts of space-time within potential architectural forms—a study in understanding architectural configuration. Within these forms, it seeks to trace how certain real settings have evolved in terms of physical form, social definition and meaning over time in response to socio-political, economic and technological shifts—forming a study in architectural history.