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GRAHAM HARMAN, *ARCHITECTURE AND OBJECTS: ART AFTER NATURE*, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, MINNEAPOLIS, 2022.

I first read *Architecture and Objects* in the summer of 2021, in advance of its publication.<sup>1</sup> At the time, I was completing the manuscript of my first book *Ecologies of Inception: Design Potentials on a Warming Planet*, which challenged—towards non-extractive and caring forms of architectural practice—the Western grounding of potentiality in notions of blankness, formlessness, and plasticity.<sup>2</sup> Guided by a relational, feminist, and emancipatory interpretation and analysis of “withdrawal,” the book also considered how Graham Harman’s philosophy—what has come to be known as object-oriented ontology (OOO)—could help develop architectural design as a form of stewardship, and separate the value of buildings, materials, and components from their original functions and the associated projects—also recognising it in their embodiment of violence, harm, labour, carbon, and energy.<sup>3</sup> In my reading, the opacity of objects, much like Édouard Glissant’s “right to opacity,” could establish a metaphysical ground for the coexistence of many worlds—freedom as

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<sup>1</sup> I begin this review by framing the context of my engagement with Harman’s work, as a reminder that reading is a situated and creative act (as Ursula K. Le Guin suggests, the story is a collection of “black marks on wood pulp” until the “reader, reading it, makes it live”). U. K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, Grove / Atlantic, Incorporated, New York, 1997, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> See S. Ferracina, *Ecologies of Inception: Design Potentials on a Warming Planet*, Routledge, Abingdon / New York, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> I should note that the book stemmed from my PhD project at the European Graduate School (Division of Philosophy, Art and Critical Thought). The thesis, *Ecologies of Inception: Designing Hyperobjects*, was developed with Graham Harman as supervisor, and completed in 2020 with Harman, Timothy Morton, and Christopher Fynsk as thesis defence committee members.

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the constitutional impossibility of being fully known, paraphrased, used up, named, dominated, or reproduced.<sup>4</sup>

Back in 2012, Harman still shied away from defining the “possible significance or insignificance” of OOO for architecture in any detail, preferring to “leave it to real architects to decide that question” and merely suggesting that his philosophy might contribute to “better integrating the unknown and the counterfactual into our picture of reality.”<sup>5</sup> Instead, a decade—and several books and articles—later, *Architecture and Objects* demarcated an authorised landing zone for the encounter between OOO and architecture, one that significantly strayed from my own interpretative aspirations. The tension between these opposite uses of object-oriented philosophy—towards architectural autonomy on one side, and architectural stewardship on the other—coloured and colours my reading of *Architecture and Objects*, and situates the present review. But let’s start from the book’s central arguments.

The book interrogates architecture’s relation with philosophy and art respectively. The former concerns primarily—and defends the status of—the architectural translation of philosophical insights, linking it to the priority of aesthetic experience in accessing, partially and indirectly as this may be, the reality of objects (I will clarify this below). The latter inspires a formalist approach to architectural aesthetics that adopts a Kantian model of autonomy but loosens its parameters, trading a wholesale rejection of ulterior interactions—the disqualifying usefulness of buildings—with the selection of a limited few. In both discussions, Harman argues for the separability of relational concerns and circumstances (for example, environmental or socio-political effects) from the autonomous and aesthetic building-objects outlasting them—a separation I will contest. Three threads run across the chapters and often combine: an exposition of the key tenets of object-oriented philosophy; the object-oriented re-tracing of recent encounters between Western avant-garde architects

<sup>4</sup> É. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2009, p. 189. See also S. Ferracina, “Reclaiming Opacity: Towards Errant, Exaptive, and Monstrous Architectural Ecologies,” <https://pensarecomeunamontagna.gamec.it/en/reclaiming-opacity-towards-errant-exaptive-and-monstrous-architectural-ecologies/>, (accessed 9 April 2025).

<sup>5</sup> G. Harman, “Non-Relationality for Philosophers and Architects,” *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism*, Zero Books, Winchester / Washington, 2012, pp. 208, 217. A key intermediate step in the encounter between OOO and architecture is represented by J. Bedford (ed.), *Is there an Object-Oriented Architecture? Engaging Graham Harman*, Bloomsbury Academic, London / New York, 2020.

and philosophers; and the definition of a triple-O brand of architectural formalism in opposition to literalist, rationalist, or functionalist approaches.

The American philosopher's basic insight is that neither experience (the partial ways in which we encounter them) nor knowledge (the information we can gather about them) can exhaust or fully capture the reality of objects, which eludes forms of paraphrase and reduction, remaining in part withdrawn.<sup>6</sup> While subordinating objects to underlying structures presumed to be deeper or more fundamental (e.g., atoms, primordial soups, being) fails to account for emergence—their being more than the sum of their parts—, reducing them to their qualities or effects cannot account for how they change.<sup>7</sup> For Harman, the term “object” denotes precisely entities that resist forms of reduction in these two directions (what he calls undermining and overmining). Anything can be an object: buildings, bricks, poems, zoning laws, strawberry jam recipes, human beings, foxes, historical events, and fictional characters—and even the relations between them.<sup>8</sup>

Harmanian objects comprise a phenomenal and a noumenal pole, existing dynamically either in relation to a perceiver (sensual object and sensual qualities) or withdrawn from that relation (real object and real qualities).<sup>9</sup> Here, causation can only be vicarious—two real objects only come into contact indirectly, through the intercession of a sensual one, and within a larger object that acts as either medium (a neutral background) or mediator (a portal towards new situations).<sup>10</sup> When I perceive a tree, for example, I am not encountering the real tree, but a sensual translation (the “tree for me”) that combines a unified object and its many partial profiles or qualities. In this interaction (what Harman calls “sincerity”) a sensual object is, as helpfully articulated by Jon Cogburn and Niki Young, “the glue between two real objects, one emanating and one intending.”<sup>11</sup> As sincerity forms a new compound object (the real

<sup>6</sup> G. Harman, *Architecture and Objects*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> G. Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, Zero Books, Winchester / Washington, 2011, pp. 8–13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7–19. My treatment of OOO in *Ecologies of Inception* attempts to displace the focus on the architectural object precisely by attributing the starring role of “object” not to buildings, but to Land, nonhumans, inhabitants, and building components respectively. See S. Ferracina, *Ecologies of Inception*, pp. 201–234.

<sup>9</sup> G. Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> G. Harman, *Architecture and Objects*, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> J. Cogburn, N. Young, “Revisiting the Notion of Vicarious Cause: Allure, Metaphor, and Realism in Object-Oriented Ontology,” *Open Philosophy*, VII, 1, 2024, p. 4.

me + the sensual tree), a “subject can always be found on the interior of some wider object to which it belongs, and is not some unique point of transcendence or negativity that rises above everything else.”<sup>12</sup>

But objects and their qualities are not always fused together, and can be pulled apart from one another, resulting in what Harman calls “tensions.” With the exception of the causal link between a real object and its real qualities, tensions are central to OOO’s understanding of aesthetic (that is, non-literal and non-conceptual) experience: the vertical one between the withdrawn reality of an object and its sensual qualities as they appear to another real object; the horizontal one between a stable sensual object and its shifting sensual qualities; and the eidetic one between an intelligible sensual object and the real qualities ascribed to it by a beholder.<sup>13</sup>

Aiming to resolve the impasse between “ontological evaluation” and “design proposition” lamented by Bryan E. Norwood,<sup>14</sup> Harman offers cautious examples of architectural precedents, strategies, and “aesthetic techniques” (e.g., “ambiguous legibility”; “targeted overornamentation”; “emphatic transparency”; the use of plinths that separate a building’s mass from the ground) that may address and amplify these tensions.<sup>15</sup> However, the appeal to repeatable recipes, rules, and protocols, even if tentative and unstable, remains fraught with difficulties, and runs the risk of mistaking the conceptual underpinnings or critical success of a building for its aesthetic content, or of ascribing aesthetic value to architectural solutions that, removed from disciplinary discourses and art-historical baselines, have none. Doesn’t OOO, after all, foreground precisely how reality exceeds our articulations and representations of it? And is it not possible that slippages between objects and their qualities be found in all manner of spaces and configurations, spanning different scales, and even piercing the outlines of buildings and the language used to describe them?

In any case, Harman challenges a literalist approach to architecture (one according to which “we can adequately describe” a building “by enumerating an appropriate set of qualities” or functional orientations), proposing one that, by alluding to the withdrawn objects below the relational surface of things, is capable of unlocking their “not-yet-discovered

<sup>12</sup> G. Harman, *Architecture and Objects*, p. 106.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82–86.

<sup>14</sup> B. E. Norwood, “Metaphors for Nothing,” *Log*, 33, 2015, p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> G. Harman, *Architecture and Objects*, pp. 82, 83, 172.

qualities.”<sup>16</sup> For example, unlike descriptions of oxygen’s measurable atomic properties or environmental behaviour, a poem might refer to the element as being “fed by all plant life on the earth, including trees.”<sup>17</sup> This, Harman tells us, causes the oxygen to “come to life.”<sup>18</sup>

Oxygen is *fed*, suggesting a ravenous appetite on the part of this inanimate chemical. It is fed in part not just by trees, but by *all* trees, hinting at a vast arboreal conspiracy. Moreover, it is not just all trees, but all trees *from the earth*, which also brings soil and bedrock into the cartel. Even if we insist that this is merely improper personification of an inanimate chemical, the poem still does genuine cognitive work. By ascribing so much unfamiliar drama to the life of oxygen, the line in question splits oxygen as an inscrutable *object* from oxygen as a *bundle of qualities*: whether those that science measures in mathematizable form or those that practical life uses as it will. In OOO terms, the poem produces an object/quality rift, which is precisely what theoretical knowledge and practical know-how equally avoid.<sup>19</sup>

But as the real oxygen remains inaccessible and cannot bear “fed” qualities, it turns out that the real object performing the oxygen’s quality of being fed is the poem’s reader.<sup>20</sup> In this reverse form of mimesis, “it is not that the artist manufactures imitations of objects,” writes Harman, “but that the beholder of art *enacts* a nonliteral imitation of what is beheld.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, not unlike the combination of hydrogen and oxygen in a molecule of water, the metaphorical union between the beholder and the qualities of the absent oxygen produces a new compound object that is itself autonomous, and that, by remaining precarious and improbable, de-literalises the relation between its components.<sup>22</sup> This overcomes and neutralises, according to Harman, Kant’s rejection of the relation between art object and human beholder (and Peter Eisenman’s rejection of the relation between architecture and inhabitant).<sup>23</sup> Therefore, OOO’s formalism no longer identifies an interior reality cut

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 114.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115–116.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152–153.

off from everything else, but one that only engages with specific slices of reality (those invited into the compound object, or “cell”).

Harman’s formalism aims to de-relationalise or “zero” two terms, form and function, that usually refer to how buildings are perceived and used respectively.<sup>24</sup> Harman drains them of relational content to maximise architecture’s autonomy “despite its built-in handicap of usefulness.”<sup>25</sup> Two examples stand out: Louis Sullivan’s functionalist maxim “form ever follows function” being read as a quasi-formalist limiting of impurities (“an important variation on Kantian aesthetics”),<sup>26</sup> and the foreshadowing, in Aldo Rossi’s enduring types, of Harman’s understanding of form as denoting “the reality of a thing apart from [...] relations.”<sup>27</sup> The tension between form and function, taken to represent the “gap between an entity’s intrinsic structure and its relations with the world,” informs three formalist design protocols: the zeroing of form, the zeroing of time, and the zeroing of function.<sup>28</sup> The zeroing of form is achieved through the production of new contexts and compound objects, and is analogous to the selective assembly of individual building components (a stack of bricks) into architectural structures (an arch or a wall).<sup>29</sup> The zeroing of time refers to the merging of the experiences and memories associated with a building (“the house seen from everywhere”) and appeals to the development of “temporal complexity” in built form.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the zeroing or “monumentalising” of function doesn’t suppress programmatic concerns, but loosens and detaches its constituent terms.<sup>31</sup>

It should be noted that, for Harman, “a monumental imperative” animates, in every discipline, a desire to deliver outputs that are “more than the product of [their] time and place.”<sup>32</sup> However, it is difficult to imagine how the establishment of any canon could be independent of the contingent socio-political history that informs it. Aren’t monuments, after all, also symbols and consolidations of power? Yet, the tension between form and function described by Harman could also articulate and

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

renegotiate an object's continued identity, outline, composition, and persistence as it moves across users, uses, scales, programmes, and times. Indeed, Harman's language ("zeroing") is suggestive of a dial that could be turned up and down to describe, with some degree of precision, different levels of programmatic and functional attachment and co-dependence.

*Architecture and Objects* is fascinating and at times exhilarating, yet this reader is left wondering whether OOO's radical views on aesthetics and causality, and its rejection of onto-taxonomy (the postulation of a fundamental gap between humans and nonhumans), could deliver more than a conservative account of architectural value as centred around the significance of individual avant-garde buildings and their phenomenological or critical appreciation. Beyond the metaphorical world of poems and art objects, couldn't architecture be defined by more active forms of engagement that, like making or misusing, are able to also produce object/quality rifts? Doesn't playing a chair like a bongo drum, or turning a tree into a table, bring forth the "not-yet-discovered qualities" of the respective objects? And, insofar as the tree-turned-table has a reality that is independent of language and perception, should we not understand them (the tree and the table) to be the same object?

The appeal to nonrelationality, metaphors, and allure expounded in *Architecture and Objects* can inspire compelling new ways to think about architectural composition and design. Harman's case for a formalist architecture, however, remains unconvincing insofar as aesthetic experience is understood to be more important than, or even inversely proportional to, other design considerations (e.g., social, political, environmental, constructional). "*Sociopolitical critiques of formalism in architecture,*" he pre-emptively tells us, "*bear only on its preconditions [...]* Formalism is not politically suspect, any more than poems are suspect for not attempting to save the world."<sup>33</sup> Yet buildings are not poems, and what differentiates our present moment from those animating the Deleuzian or Derridean architectural explorations of the nineties or two-thousands is precisely a broad and detailed disciplinary understanding of how, in the ongoing environmental and social crises, buildings embody and perform violence. Aside from the most glaring instances of exploitation and human rights abuse associated, for example, with on-going Saudi developments (to which architects explicitly inspired by Harman's brand of formalism happen to be attached), architectural configurations and

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

solutions are directly responsible for environmental harm and injustice.<sup>34</sup> Specifying ultra-clear glass in a building, for instance, doesn't only promote a form of "emphatic transparency," but also commits to a "radical increase in the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides," to the extent that the material can be understood, in Andrés Jaque's words, as "a socio-territorial apparatus intended to segregate humans and nonhumans in zones of diverse levels of pollution exposure."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the extraction and production of materials like aluminium, steel and concrete have been shown to cause irreparable damage to livelihoods and ecosystems, often along the well-trodden paths of environmental inequality and racism.<sup>36</sup> The list could go on; the point being that, as I wrote elsewhere, "[d]esign decisions are never just decisions about a design."<sup>37</sup> Or, to put it differently, aesthetic decisions are never just decisions about aesthetics.

Now, these considerations are not attempts to "undermine" the architectural object or to confuse it with its history, insofar as there is a difference, glossed over in Harman's book, between the object of aesthetic experience (the completed building) and the design decisions informing its configuration and construction. That is: not only are aesthetic decisions—of the formalist as well as of any other persuasion—inextricably and causally linked to the effects of their implementation, of which the building is one; they also are, alongside all manner of other concerns (e.g., functional, tectonic, energetic, ethical) just another "precondition

<sup>34</sup> See for example: M. Thomas, L. El Gibaly, "Neom: Saudi Forces 'Told to Kill' to Clear Land for Eco-City," <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68945445>, (accessed 9 April 2025); D. J. Roche, "New Documentary Reveals that 21,000 Laborers Have Died Working on Saudi Vision 2030, which includes NEOM, Since Construction Began," <https://www.archpaper.com/2024/10/documentary-reveals-21000-workers-killed-saudi-vision-2030-neom/>, (accessed 9 April 2025).

<sup>35</sup> A. Jaque, "Architecture as Ultra-clear Rendered Society," in V. Grossman and C. Miguel (eds.), *Everyday Matters: Contemporary Approaches to Architecture*, Ruby Press, Berlin, 2021, pp. 165–167.

<sup>36</sup> See for example: C. A. Zimring, *Aluminum Upcycled: Sustainable Design in Historical Perspective*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2017; V. Beiser, "Sand Mining: The Global Environmental Crisis You've Probably Never Heard of," <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/feb/27/sand-mining-global-environmental-crisis-never-heard>, (accessed 9 April 2025); A.N. Rojeo, J-P. Birat, A. Dutta, "A Review of the Current Environmental Challenges of the Steel Industry and Its Value Chain," *Journal of Environmental Management* 259 (1 April 2020): 109782.

<sup>37</sup> S. Ferracina, "The Ethics of Use: Repurposing Debenhams," <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/after-comfort/563085/the-ethics-of-use-repurposing-debenhams/>, (accessed 9 April 2025).

for architecture.”<sup>38</sup> Beauty can never be truly separated from the complex matrix of decisions, pressures, biases, and constraints directly or indirectly involved in its pursuit, nor can formalist architects be exonerated from professional duties, or from the need to extend the scope of their responsibility and attention in the face of mounting social, political, and environmental crises.

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<sup>38</sup> G. Harman, *Architecture and Objects*, p. 172.

