DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17939471
Original Scientific Article
Received: February 25, 2025; Accepted: April 30, 2025

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The Power of the Background: Architecture as Human Infrastructure

ABSTRACT: Whereas architecture is usually appraised in terms of its outstanding singular pieces, we have yet to find an effective way to describe larger, more unremarkable configurations of the built. In this essay, I provide a phenomenological approach that outlines how things shuttle from the perceptual foreground to the background (and vice-versa), and how architecture, for the most part, provides a baseline of normalcy, against which all of our other concerns can play out.

KEYWORDS: architecture, built environment, perception, attention, background

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1. Introduction

Thomas Heatherwick, in his recent polemic *Humanise*, decries the cold anonymity of modernism in favor of the sculptural uniqueness of architects such as Gaudí. "More than 100 years ago," he writes, "it would have been extremely hard to find a truly boring external urban environment. Today, boring environments are everywhere. We're blanketed in boringness."[1] At first blush, this appears a vast overstatement of the actual, lived influence of architectural modernism, which, notwithstanding its numerous built accomplishments around the world (e.g., buildings, neighborhoods, etc.), remains far more significant as a historical program for building than as a large-scale set of actually built and lived-in environments.

If we take Heatherwick's wholesale preference for the aesthetic individuality of buildings to the phenomenological plane, his observation simply appears wrong-headed: if architecture can at times seem "boring" or unremarkable, that is because it is a vast byproduct of the way we humans access the world, that is, through perceptual experience. "Boredom" or unremarkableness are part and parcel of that access, given especially how undesirable it would be if our built environment were constantly challenging us, perceptually or otherwise. As I will show here, the built is a largely successful reflection of our own sensory makeup, in spite of its frequent failure to meet basic human needs.

Phenomenology allows us to examine our relationship to the built in terms of a negotiation between our perceptual abilities and the kind of objectivities with which we are likely to be presented over a lifetime. A great many of those objectivities will, as Heidegger writes, be "things of the type of buildings," and increasingly so if by 2050 more than two thirds of us will be inhabiting "urban" environments.[2] It therefore seems worthwhile to explore the scope of such "things of the type of buildings," and hence also the breadth of our experience thereof. Since there is already an ample doctrine of what it means to "see" architecture—what makes it worth seeing, or worthy of criticism, etc.—here I will tread a *via negativa* by outlining what enables the built to go *un*seen.

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[1] T. Heatherwick, *Humanise: A Maker's Guide To Building Our World*, Penguin, London, 2023, p. 116.

[2] M. Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper and Row, New York, 1971, p. 154; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (Population Division), *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*, United Nations, New York, 2019, p. xix.

I will approach this phenomenological recalibration of the experience of architecture with reference principally to Husserlian phenomenology, because (indirectly) it provides the strongest, most radical account of the kind of "thing" I argue architecture is. The argument has three steps: in a first step, I will explain the significance of the foreground-background structure for human perception, and, with that, how the tendency of architecture to inhabit that background is largely inbuilt. Then, I examine what it takes for an object to sequester my attention, doing so with reference to designs that constantly aim for the very forefront of human attention. Finally, I will counterbalance the previous section with various ways in which we are able to co-determine what comes to our attention, key to which are the perceptual habits and normalcy we are able to cultivate in and among buildings.

2. The Horizon

How do things emerge from the background? "'To affect'," writes Husserl in *Experience and Judgment*, "means to stand out from the environment [*Umgebung*], which is always copresent, to attract interest to oneself, possibly interest in cognition."[3] Thus, a thing may stand in stark contrast to the things surrounding it (e.g., a Frank Gehry building), bringing it to prominence. Alternatively (or in addition to that stark contrast), I may be seeking out an object *of that type*, actively looking for it. Yet many of the objects surrounding me never do come to prominence: I watch my feet advance along the strip of sidewalk in front of me, in the knowledge that there are buildings around me, yet most often I do not pay them much attention in their particularity (e.g., the ornamental wood carvings above each window of my favorite house on Woodbine Street, Queens, New York).

This foreground-background dynamic of inclusion/exclusion is a natural feature of perceptual life, wherein the constant interaction of both is a source of competitive experiential tension. As James Dodd explains, whatever I happen to be engaged with—absorbed in maybe (or, inversely, terribly bored with)—is always connected to a wider world of potential engagement, a connection that (at least in the case of boredom)

[3] E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973, pp. 30–1.

can develop into a strong outward pull into the wider, outer-horizonal world, beyond what I physically sense.

> Specific concerns, defining specific activities and experiences, represent a set of foreground immersions that rest against a background of embeddedness in the horizon of the world. As an active being turned towards things of concern, my engagements in turn reflect a fundamental tension between a background horizon of the world in which I find myself and the foreground immersion in the scope defined by a given concern.[4]

For example, as I stand in front of a particular house in my neighborhood, now examining its façade in great detail, there is also an attentional pull from the wider neighborhood beyond it (e.g., from other buildings, friends, bars, etc.), the presence of which, though out of sight, is palpable. Dodd puts this as follows: "Every cogito—every activity, say eating or reading my novel—is caught in that tension between the nascent visibility of an unfolding accomplishment (I am on page forty in my book; dinner is half over; my painting is finished and I can step back and decide whether it was successful), and something 'else' that remains just there on the edge ofwhatever I see in the circuit of its visibility [...]"[5] The potential of such an "edge" to yield a further aspect of the world is not a mere source of distraction—much more importantly, it is testament to our basic openness to being affected by the world. To say that the world has its "edges" means that it always already stands in a lively tension with whatever currently is closest to the forefront of my attention. A helpful example, courtesy of Anne Montavont, is the focused engagement in an activity such as writing, in which I actively "screen out" any environing objects:

> For example: the piece of paper there, before me, is the object of the perceptual act I have carried out; it is my object; the table on which the piece of paper is lying is pre-given to me, even if I do not turn to it at all (or any longer). The table is present to my consciousness; it is there for me, but for which ego (*moi*)? Not to the wakeful ego, the active (*en acte*) ego that is elsewhere engaged (with the piece of

[4] J. Dodd, *Phenomenology, Architecture and the Built World*, Brill, Leiden, 2017, p. 81.
[5] *Ibid*., p. 83.

paper), but to another ego, the dormant ego. Indeed, attention does not traverse the flux of consciousness end to end. It sheds light on singular acts only.[6]

The writing table, while a material support for my piece of paper, is of no interest at this moment, as it amounts only to "inactual or potential lived experience."[7] And yet the table is "there," maybe faintly visible or even palpable. Though its presence may literally be fundamental to my engagement with the piece of paper, I take for granted its material support (until it fails me, e.g., turns out to be wobbly). My inattention to the table, however, is no shortcoming, but a result of our perceptual and cognitive makeup.[8] And so, when the table eventually does come to the fore, showing itself in a particular way (e.g., baring a round coffee stain to its wood top), it always protrudes "from a background of other possibilities" (e.g., the yellow Post-it note on the wall, a walk to the grocery store, etc.), as one edge among other potential edges.

Although our attention can beckon objects into the foreground (like that Gehry building, now from a mirador in Bilbao), as its focus wanes it gradually releases these objects into the perceptual and horizonal backgrounds whence they came. Husserl reminds us that our "being-with" a thing (*Dabeisein*), whether or not it is willed, is always a question of "gradations," of varying levels of intensity.[9] Being with and among objects ought to be understood in terms of degrees "of primary and secondary [and tertiary, etc.] being-there," whereby the object of concern stands in the foreground, with any ancillary objects inhabiting those various gradations of background.[10]

The degree to which we are involved with objects is ultimately a matter of "proximity," though not necessarily in physical terms, for it is possible to be "with" an object even if it is not intuitively present (i.e., horizonal background) or physically close to us (i.e., perceptual background).

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[6] A. Montavont, *De la passivité dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1999, p. 67.

[7] *Ibid*., p. 68.

[8] *Ibid*., p. 72. "Intentional life comprises acts whose true agent is not the ego, which has not actively produced them." Cf. Holenstein, *Die Phänomenologie der Assoziation*, Nijhoff, The Hague, 1972, p. 133.

[9] E. Husserl, *Die Lebenswelt*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2008, p. 359.

[10] *Ibid*. "Die attentionalen Modi sind nicht bloß Modi der doxischen, auf Sein und Sosein gerichteten Akte, sondern aller Akte, auch der wollend-handelnden usw." See also Montavont, *De la passivité dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, pp. 179–180.

The various intensities of being-with things yield, in Husserl's words, "a notion of backgrounds"—plural—in lived experience.[11] There is always fluid two-way traffic between background and foreground, with objects constantly shuttling back and forth. The object at the center of my attention is a case in point, as it is always also seen in relation to the objects around it—"the pencil is *beside* the inkwell, it is *longer* than the penholder, and so on"—and so it partakes in the tension between foreground to background.[12]

No earthly object—no matter how protrusive or edgy—is so singular or remarkable as to explode the foreground-background structure and to operate independently of it.[13] In a continuation of Montavont's earlier example of a desktop, Husserl (himself a forerunner of examples to do with desks) outlines the relation between what lies at the center of attention and what is peripheral to it:

> [S]eizing-upon is a singling out and seizing; anything perceived has an experiential background. Around the sheet of paper lie books, pencils, an inkstand, etc., also "perceived" in a certain manner, perceptively there, in the "field of intuition;" but, during the advertence to thesheet of paper, they were without even a secondary advertence and seizing-upon. They were apparent and yet were not seized upon and picked out, not posited singly for themselves.[14]

The protruding object is always and necessarily accompanied by its background or object field, which, though opaque and indistinct, is as changeable as the object itself. For instance, an object I know lies on the way to Manhattan—say, a particular piece of street art—but no longer appears to be there (having maybe fallen prey to anti-vandalist forces). When I come to notice the piece for its absence, I understand the object not in complete isolation from its environs but as part of a larger whole, the vast bulk of which lies outside my perceptual field. I wonder whether I might be mistaken, whether the piece lies further "along the way to

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[11] If we were talking about the perceptual background, this might equally be termed "a notion of foregrounds." E. Husserl, *Die Lebenswelt*, p. 359.

[12] E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, pp. 105–6.

[13] B. Waldenfels, *Sinnesschwellen*, *Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1999, p. 155.

[14] E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1982, p. 70.

Manhattan" (a proximate larger whole that itself is part of an even larger one, i.e., the world).[15]

While there is always some degree of contrast between objects, there is equally continuity between them, which in part we humans bring to them: Objects can gradually grow together, as any contrast between them progressively decreases (*Ent-fernung*), as does a double gate when it shuts automatically. Objects may share exact features, and connect on the basis of these (e.g., the travertine façades of the Lincoln Center), or they may appear to be a "mixture of very similar elements [...] that allows a new similar element to ensue" (e.g., the many brick garages of southern Queens, bound by their wooden doors or metal shutters, and pre-war ornamentation).[16] That there can be such a degree of continuity between the objects I encounter, and that so many humans can move about the world as "carefreely" as they do, is first the result of our apperceptive capacities, and only secondly an accomplishment of the built world.

3. Interest Receivable (The Power of Objects)

The appearance of objects is, in the end, not entirely a matter of the will. Our actual grasp of things—whatever their nature (e.g. actual, imagined, recollected, etc.)—is changeable, and only ever *more or less* stable.[17] Moreover, our grasp of things does not exclusively or even predominantly depend on our taking an active interest in them, or on knowing them through repeated exposure. Attention can also be "directed," that is, attracted and ushered along by objects I do not specifically seek out or intend to encounter (e.g., by an inflatable flailing tube man outside a liquor store). In a text from 1931, Husserl formulates this in terms of the "movement" or stirring of an object in the background, leading to its protrusion.[18]

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[15] This is what Montavont refers to when she speaks of "the impossibility of a lived experience to be isolated" (A. Montavont, *De la passivité dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, p. 18). Any lived experience is hence open to a multiplicity of other potential engagements with the world, "impl[ying] other lived experiences in the form of a perceptual horizon" (*ibid*.). See S. Geniusas, *The Origins of the Horizon in Husserl's Phenomenology*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2012, p. 184.

[16] E. Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 2001, p. 514.

[17] See, for instance, Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 2, Routledge, Abingdon, 2001, p. 119.

[18] Husserl, *Die Lebenswelt*, p. 469.

How can an object be said to "move" within an undefined or at best only faintly visible field of objects? The object might, for instance, emit a form of signal, e.g. where, at night and seen among a larger group of buildings, a second-floor window lights up, causing it (and, with it, the whole house) to protrude from the background, or to emerge from the row of houses. Of course, where there is a strong contrast between foreground and background, the degree of salience of an object is much less dependent on my predisposition to pay attention to that class of thing. There are, in such a case, fewer objects and thus fewer levels of salience between which to discriminate.

Visually, however, only gradual differences separate a voluntary turning-towards something from an involuntary capture of attention.[19] I notice my neighbor's garish new metallic gate and fence combination without expressly intending to do so, yet notice it I do. Waldenfels analyzes such situations in terms of an eventual fusion of what is alien and what is proper to the individual: "What strikes us [*auffällt*] always comes too early; our attending to it too late."[20] We are radically exposed to the world: The shiny gate emerges suddenly from a background of other objects—it has struck me—and only then do I contend with whatever preconceived notions I harbor with regard to domestic fencing (this fence strikes me *as* something in particular, as rather ugly). The attraction and direction of attention is thus not a unidirectional matter of the human will, but subject also to the level of attraction displayed by objects, often human-made ones, whose "relief of salience, relief of noticeability, [...] can capture my attention."[21]

While protrusion in the realm of the sensuous is often due to such "qualitative discontinuities of considerable degree (*großen Abstandes*)," its analogon in the supra-sensuous realm might be a thought that lingers intensely, constantly disrupting my attempts to concentrate on other things.[22] Husserl formulates this in terms of a "confrontation" that leads to the ego "yielding" its attention to the now foregrounded object.[23] Affection is thus a matter of the protrusive "force" of objects, of their varying degrees of salience from surrounding objects.[24]

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[19] A. Schütz and T. Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World*, vol. 1, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973, pp. 253–254.

[20] B. Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 2004, p. 72.

[21] E. Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, p. 215.

[22] E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, p. 76.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 77.

[24] E. Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, p. 197.

> Extremes of contrast are so strong, make such a forcefully efficacious prominence that they drown out, so to speak, all competing contrasts. Thus, there is something like a possible competition and a kind of concealment of active tendencies by especially strong ones. For example, particular colored figures becoming quite prominent affect us; affecting us at the same time are noises like the sound of a passing car, the notes of a song, prominent odors, etc. All of this takes place at the same time, and insofar as we turn to it alone, listening to it, the song wins out. But the rest still exercises an allure. But when a violent blast breaks in, like the blast of an explosion, it drowns out not only the affective particularities of the acoustic field, but also the particularities of all other fields. What otherwise spoke to us, no matter how little we paid attention to it, can no longer make it through to us.[25]

In cases where the contrast is extremely stark, even an active pursuit can be smothered by the salient object (say, a loud bang), its affective force simply overwhelming the former. Yet, even when this does occur, I do not therefore necessarily lose all interest in the object initially pursued. Though I may be irritated by the intrusion of an overwhelming sensuous force, e.g. the sound of that jackhammer, I can still remain determined to return to my work once the noise has passed. Indeed, Husserl makes room for the possibility that affection could in some manner be "inhibited" by so-called "weakening counter-potencies," which is to say that our predisposition to be affected by objects can somehow be dulled.[26] My original intention—to return to work—thus remains "on hold" as a counter-potency to the jackhammer, ever ready to reemerge.[27]This insight as to our receptivity for stark contrast underlies the sort of spaces Rem Koolhaas describes as "Junkspace," with their capacity to attract users through glaring visual stimuli such as LED lights and screens. It is because of our deep familiarity with such cheap, exchangeable environments that the intensity of their light displays requires continuous ratcheting up by the makers and operators of such environments. After all,

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[25] *Ibid*.

[26] *Ibid*., p. 201.

[27] Depending, of course, on the environment we habitually inhabit, we are not always or, with any luck, usually affected to such a great extent. Even in environments in which inhabitants are subjected to such objectively strong stimuli, e.g., a house at the end of a busy runway, the strength of such affections can be tempered through habituation (along with its physical and emotional toll), and the various potential affections lurking in the background gradually regain some of their strength.

the more dazzling the display, the more readily the structure will appear to the percipient or user:

> Superstrings of graphics, transplanted emblems of franchise and sparkling infrastructures of light, LEDs, and video describe an authorless world beyond anyone's claim, always unique, utterly unpredictable, yet intensely familiar. Junkspace is hot (or suddenly arctic); fluorescent walls, folded like melting stained glass, generate additional heat to raise the temperature of Junkspace to levels at which you could cultivate orchids.[28]

Koolhaas identifies and connects two shifts in the history of architecture in order to explain the use of materials in Junkspace. The first of these shifts—a shift from the long-standing penchant for repetition and regularity (which long predates architectural modernism) to the postmodernist emphasis on "complexity and contradiction"—goes in tandem with the second one:[29] Heavy, solid-seeming building materials (modular or not) are replaced with lightweight modules, which can be contorted into unlikely shapes that clad the lightweight frame beneath. This individualizes the user-facing environment through a form of distortion that no longer appears to obey a more traditional, modular style of assembly (even if "under the hood" or structurally it likely still does so). The composition of Junkspace hence *appears* arbitrary, "a domain of feigned, simulated order."[30] This complicates users' understanding of such buildings, which is arguably more used to classical notions of material symmetry (e.g., O-O-X-O-O). It is due to the opacity of Junkspace, due to its refusal to let us see roughly how it hangs together, that those environments attempt—largely successfully—to capture our attention.

> Patterns imply repetition or ultimately decipherable rules; Junkspace is beyond measure, beyond code [...] Because it cannot be grasped, Junkspace cannot be remembered. It is flamboyant yet unmemorable, like a screen saver; its refusal to freeze ensures instant amnesia. Junkspace does not pretend to create perfection, only interest.[31]

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[28] *Ibid*., p. 177.

[29] See R. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1977.

[30] R. Koolhaas, "Junkspace," *October*, 100, 2002, p. 177.

[31] *Ibid*.

These commercial spaces, writes Koolhaas, are strongly suggestive of dynamism and vitality, yet in the end all that distinguishes one Junkspace from the next is the affective force it can muster. The initial strength of such a display is not memorable per se, and so the designers of such environments conflate the short-term gain of our attention with a longer-term memory or knowledge of the place.[32] These are environments that, through their own movement (e.g., flashes, flickers) suggest that we move towards them, and along, within them (e.g., mandatory passage through an airport duty free shop).[33] Given the manifest lack of opportunity to scrutinize such spaces—to stand still, to attempt to understand their underlying structure—it takes an architect or designer of built space such as Koolhaas to reveal the brittle bones beneath the metal and LED skin, and thereby to shed light on the very crude conception of human perception at the root of Junkspace. While the latter must eventually yield to the things that ultimately move us (e.g., work, sleep, love, etc.), it does not yield to more conventional built environments, those that can accommodate a multiplicity of human pursuits (in addition to conspicuous consumption). These are altogether less absorbing built experiences than Junkspace, and so lend themselves to understanding not in isolation, but within a continuum of other places.

Thus, when I walk past my favorite house on Woodbine Street, and as it recedes into memory, it takes on "the sense of a background, a real space (*Dingraum*), that could be filled with objects or objective forms (*Objektgestalten*)."[34] In slipping back into invisibility, the house is still "there" in my overall conception of the neighborhood, but in far more fluid a relation to the other objects inhabiting the background, such as the deli at the next corner or the station wagon opposite. Casey speaks of this in

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[32] From a business standpoint, it does not matter whether I remember the interior of a duty-free shop, as long as I actually enter it and then, after some time spent looking for it, eventually find the desired article. In many environments, entry into certain commercial spaces has become non-negotiable: While museums force us to exit through the gift shop, airports are increasingly requiring us to enter through the duty-free shop, which is often designed as a meandering passage from the airside-end of the security screening to the departure gates.

[33] They thereby allow little opportunity for detailed scrutiny, and yet, even if they did, the bodily posture of phenomenological scrutiny would likely clash so greatly with the patterns of movement of those functionally engaged with the environment, those travelling and/or shopping, as to seem utterly outlandish. A spatial design that might allow the user to extract themselves from usership could break the spell of Junkspace, making those within and outside it feel as if under observation, and, by extension, making Junkspace itself seem suspect (or, worse still, dysfunctional).

[34] E. Husserl, *Die Lebenswelt*, p. 469.

terms of the "place-world," a notion that ties "by-places" (i.e., the place where I currently stand or into which I walk) to "middle-range distinct places (for example, houses, parks, whole cities)—and sometimes also more remote places that have been drawn in to my perceptual or actional orbit from the far sphere."[35] Although in practical terms the place-world is the basis for our orientation within an environment, conceptually and specifically it is maybe best described in Husserl's words as a "unitary entanglement" (*Verworren-in-eins*), a coherent but variably well-ordered collection of objects, some of which are visible, while most are not.[36]

Any routinely-acquired environmental or hodological knowledge is rooted within such a complex precipitate of lived experience. Because of its variable and expansive dimensions, an objectivity such as a built environment requires extended and repeated exposure in order even to cohere qua objectivity; in order then for it to be open to recall. For example, to cycle a route from memory, without needing to consult a sequence of directions and street signs, it is necessary to have cycled the route repeatedly. Precisely due to the kind of (large) objectivities they are, environments tend essentially towards the background—they are a form of intuitional background, from which smaller objectivities can emerge—and, as such, rarely come to the fore as a whole. That is, even when I am unfamiliar with an environment, and must follow a set of directions in order to navigate it successfully, I am not therefore more likely to apprehend my environs as such, but only particular elements thereof, such as street signs or landmarks.

Husserl provides a fruitful metaphor for the interaction between the "precipitate" of lived experience and environmental conceptions: we enter a familiar room in the dark—it has therefore, in a sense, become unfamiliar—and attempt to locate the furniture, which is all but invisible. Yet, because of my familiarity with the room, I have a rudimentary notion of its spatial dimensions, and of the arrangement of the objects in that room, which stand in for the dark area before me, almost abstractly so. Add to this only a flicker of light, and the room appears nearly as vividly as when it is fully lit.

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[35] E. Casey, *The World at a Glance*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2007, pp. 93, 102.

[36] E. Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1969, p. 57.

> [The object is] not given, but rather, presented in an empty manner. Or like when, having familiar objects in my surroundings before me in the dark, I reach for them, go toward them, but only in exceptional circumstances do I have presentifying intuitions [...] It actually stands there, just that I do not see it, or I only see a little bit of it, only a vague glimmer, like when I have a glimmer in the dark, and what I can make out of the completely appearing thing that is barely discernible in this vagueness here is the wholly determinate and quite familiar desk.[37]

Setting aside the initial disorientation caused by the pitch black, this is not unlike the manner in which familiar environments are encountered and navigated, that is, with a peripheral blindness that is flooded from memory with sedimented detail the moment we direct our attention to its various scales (e.g., to a parade of shops). In the example, the activation of the empty perception is more helpful than the actual intuition of the dark room, and therefore predominates in the interaction between full and empty presentations. This is not necessarily the case when navigating an environment in the course of everyday life, even if its empty perception—a vague built periphery—allows, e.g., for a stronger focus on the path to a destination.

As we have already established, this manner of glossing over an environment is only possible after protracted engagement, only after it has become thoroughly familiar (e.g., after I have furnished and decorated the room; after I have figured out the way to the subway). Only a few points of orientation, a few markers, suffice to let the larger built whole awaken, in part only schematically, but in other parts also in great detail (e.g., I look at the entire harmonica-shaped block on the avenue in renewed wonder).

4. Attention Paid (The Power of Humans)

For Bernhard Waldenfels, the glance (*Blick*) across the desk, the room, and beyond is a fundamentally important way of seeing: it is a way of understanding both the "organization" and "transgression" of fields of vision, whereby certain objectivities tend toward the background, with others in the fore.[38] Which way of seeing one adopts depends, for instance, on the activity we are involved in (writing, walking, teaching,

[37] E. Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, pp. 425–426.
[38] B. Waldenfels, *Sinnesschwellen*, p. 125.

etc.), the manner in which we perform that activity (routinely, intensely, elegantly, badly, etc.), and on the role played by objects in the visible and as yet invisible environs (the extent to which they are instrumental or coincidental to the activity). The glance, with its scattershot speed and momentary pauses, scans the surrounding surfaces for points of interest (which are paid degrees of attention, or not). As Casey explains, the glance is an environmental trailblazer, the beginning of a "way in" to what surrounds us:

> In the perception of the world around us, the glance often leads the way, charting out the pathways of attention. These pathways are not independent tracks or trails to be followed *later* by attentional acts; instead, they blaze the trail of attending itself, being its forward fringe: at once the harbinger of the action and part of the action itself. The very insubstantiality of the glance, its mereness and playfulness, aids it immensely in this trailblazing behavior. The glance beckons us to attend; it summons us to pay attention; but it is also integral to attending itself.[39]

The glance is a visual manifestation of our openness to the world, and, moreover, of our willingness to be distracted and to observe our surroundings dispassionately until we find a new resting point for our attention. Once that is found, the glance might scan the objects surrounding that new center of attention, as these may enhance my contextual understanding of it.[40]

Whether we then stay with that object depends on the level of interest we take therein, in the attention we pay it.[41] Upon arrival in a place unknown to me, I am, as Casey puts it, particularly "open to surprise," and thus I cast an "open glance" at my new environs, a glance "that takes in as much as possible."[42] For example, I have just driven into the center of Arezzo, Italy, a place so visually and physically different to my usual stomping ground that I just want to drink it all up. At some point, I stop

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[39] E. Casey, *The World at a Glance*, p. 326.

[40] E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, pp. 105–106.

[41] See, for example, E. Husserl, *Ideas I*, p. 197; or E. Husserl, *Philosophy of Arithmetic*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2003, p. 219.

[42] E. Casey, *The World at a Glance*, p. 56. The opposite might be just as true, of course: when on the eve of an important work presentation we arrive late at night in a town hitherto unknown to us, our focus may rest squarely on the task at hand, i.e., on reaching the hotel bed pronto.

and look up in amazement at the dozens of highly distinct columns that together compose the tall main facade of Santa Maria della Pieve.

"Any protrusion," Husserl writes, "is an end (*Ende*), and also a transition for the realization (*Verwirklichung*) of the new."[43] The novelty of an experience depends in part on the various ways in which we direct our attention, e.g., with intentional openness, as with Casey's "open glance," through detail-oriented scrutiny of an object, etc. Certain deliberate forms of attentiveness are capable of heightening the likelihood of the new, as Bernhard Waldenfels points out. Attention, in such cases, functions as a reorganizer of experience, as a disruptor of dominant or otherwise obtrusive parameters of lived experience.

> Attention ensures that in the formation of a "relief of noticeability" certain things *protrude*, and others *recede*, as in a relief [...] For the person attending, this corresponds to a preference, a bringing forward (*Vorziehen*), and to a pushing back (*Zurückstellen*).[44]

For architecture buffs, that may mean paying a great deal of attention to their built environs, thereafter letting these slip back into the perceptual background. While it is true, as Husserl writes, that objects always come accompanied by a mode of presentation (e.g., my favorite house on Woodbine Street, as it emerges from the November fog), we are able to make modal interventions by, for example, questioning or tweaking the form in which objects appear (e.g., vaguely, but now more distinctly).[45] The manner of objects' shifting from background to foreground also depends on the way in which we direct our attention (onto them, away, etc.), which in turn is also a function of their faceted appearance (whereby my favorite house is always showing itself in renewed ways).

Indeed, when we are aware of a thing's presence, we are of course not *comprehensively* aware of it, i.e., we cannot have examined the thing for all of its particularities. Experience in its entirety can only ever be understood in terms of its varying degrees of clarity or opacity. Husserl illustrates this in an example from *Thing and Space*, which he begins with a clear focus on a printed word on a page in a book, then moving on to the various peripheries surrounding that word.

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[43] E. Husserl, *Die Lebenswelt*, p. 18.
[44] B. Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit*, p. 102.
[45] E. Husserl, *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins*, Max Niemeyer, Halle, 1928, p. 485.

> In every adumbration is found a small, undelimited part of the clarity in which the corresponding thingly moment presents itself with relative completeness. This part passes over, without limitation, to ever further spheres of increasing unclarity. I focus, e.g., on a word from a printed page lying before me. It appears relatively clear, and further, within it, a letter appears most clearly, and at the normal visual distance it is completely clear, while the neighboring letters and the more distant ones are already diminishing in clarity. And so it continues: what is by far the most is a vague *je ne sais quoi*, continuously diminishing in clarity as one proceeds out toward the margin of the field of view, where the paper is apprehended in undeterminate generality as printed writing, but is not graspable in its definite individuality.[46]

Things go partially unnoticed, not necessarily due to a lack of attention—or an act of omission—but because intentional rays are directed elsewhere or otherwise. The world is always encountered with variable levels of attention (or inattention), the distribution of which determines the amount of contrast required for an object to come to prominence. Casey speaks of this dynamic of inclusion/exclusion in terms of the "braided quality" of experience, which "at once alleviates and complicates our experience in the life-world."[47]

Moreover, whether or not we become aware of a thing is not merely the result of objective attributes, e.g., of certain shapes, textures, arrangements, or sizes, but also of each individual's predisposition to attend to such attributes, due precisely to the individuality of their life experience. Thus, a person endowed with a knowledge of the history, theory, and practice of architecture is not only more inclined to pay attention to their built environment, but is equally more likely to be struck from the background by a feature thereof. In such cases, "[s]eeing is set into motion through a desire to see (*Sehbegehren*), a *libido vivendi* . . . ," which is to say that things strike us visually, attract our attention, because they rouse our desire to see (and to see such things in particular, e.g., buildings).[48] This aspect of our relation to the world (and to particular regions thereof) can, of course, also be extended to the other senses. Husserl, for instance, points to the example of music, namely to a particularly

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[46] E. Husserl, *Thing and Space*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1997, p. 92.
[47] E. Casey, *The World at a Glance*, p. 315.
[48] B. Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit*, p. 121.

beautiful motif, in order to illustrate the role of pleasure in our basic openness to the world:

> A melody sounds without exercising any considerable affective force, or if this should even be possible, without exercising any affective allure on us at all. We are occupied with something else, and the melody does not affect us for instance as a "disturbance." Now comes an especially mellifluous sound, a phrase that especially arouses sensible pleasure or even displeasure [...] The particularity of the sound has made me attentive. And through this I became attentive to the entire melody, and, understandably, the particularities thus became alive to me.[49]

Affection, in such cases, is not the jagged objective profile resulting, for example, from the sudden racket of a jackhammer tearing open some pavement. Instead, it is more like my favorite house, which although it stands out—to me at least—from the other houses on Woodbine Street, is objectively not overwhelmingly different (i.e., it is not wildly colorful, unusually large or small, etc.). Indeed, if not for my predilection for the building and its particularities, e.g., its century-old wooden veranda, it would be easy to miss.

Much like a faint or dormant memory relies on the force of lived experience for its revival, the quality of a full, sensuous presentation also depends on a concurrent empty presentation. That is, we tend to encounter objects with and against a precipitate or accumulation of memories of that type (of object).[50] The object stands before me in this manner (e.g., as my favorite house on Woodbine Street) because the empty horizon of past experience has co-shaped its actual presentation, the way in which it now stands before me.[51] Thus, even an encounter with an object or larger

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[49] E. Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, p. 203: "This particularity does not merely become affective for itself in a living manner; rather, the entire melody is accentuated in one stroke to the extent that it is still living within the field of the present; thus, the affection radiates back into the retentional phases; it is initially at work by accentuating [the retentional phases] in a unitary manner, and at the same time it has an effect on the special matters that are prominent, on the particular sounds, fostering special affections."

[50] *Ibid*., p. 446. This is what Husserl means when he refers to the fullness of intuition as the "actualization of the potentiality of constitution" inherent in the empty presentation.

[51] Yet the actual thing never "contains" its empty counterpart in any form, and instead "replaces" it, stands in for it (*ibid*., p. 427). In this, there is a "transition" between the two forms of presentation, "a synthesis through coinciding of the empty presentation and intuition," but never a total overlap (one should not confuse the emptiness of something concealed with the emptiness of something apprehended) (*ibid*., p. 378).

objectivity that is rooted in habituality (e.g., the Queens block on which I live) is anything but a static affair. The "habitus," in fact, resides in the frequent transformation of the memory: "The object perceived retrieves (or, less literally, "repeats" [*wiederholen*]) the memory, "reactivating" and transforming it in the process, thereby contributing to the formation of a "*habitus*."[52] This is no such thing as an isolated memory, and instead an accumulation of previous encounters not necessarily with the same, singular object, but with a wider fabric of similar objects or situations.

For instance, my decade-long exposure to the built environment of southern Queens conditions the choice of my favorite house on Woodbine Street, that is, of what for me constitutes normalcy and exceptionality. In *Experience and Judgment*, Husserl describes how the accumulated experience of individual instances of an object type can yield the non-intuitive notion of a "normal" object:

> For example, a tall man can be present as being tall without, in general, there needing to be people who are short in our field of vision. The man *contrasts* with "normal" men, examples of whom may be vaguely "called up" without an explicit comparison being made. [...] All of these determinations are drawn with reference to a *normality of experience* which can vary from environing world to environing world.[53]

The "normal" object is not physically in the background but informs an "absolute impression" (rather than a "relational determination," where two objects are considered side by side).[54] In other words, it forms a distinct impression that shapes my judgment of similar situations, and so when I ride a cable car up a steep San Francisco street, as a New Yorker I am struck by the sometimes improbable lengths to which central Californian builders went in order somehow to level the buildings that line California Street. A seasoned San Franciscan, however, may in the course of their everyday comings and goings not find their home cityscape all that noteworthy or striking.

We do not for the most part—in everyday life—move through built environments with the curiosity of a tourist. As Frédéric Gros reminds us

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[52] E. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, p. 123.
[53] *Ibid*., p. 194.
[54] *Ibid*.

in his *Philosophy of Walking*, everyday practical-minded interactions with the built environment actually rely on a form of selective inattention:

> Usually people walk the streets in a thoroughly practical manner, to go for bread, to the shops, to the bus or subway, to drop in on a friend. Then, streets are just corridors. People walk with their heads down, recognizing only what they need to. They look at nothing, they navigate, perceiving only the functional minimum: turn right at the green pharmacy sign, that big brown gateway means the bakery is on the next corner. Thus the street becomes *a mere tissue of feeble, twinkling signs*, with its spectacle largely extinguished.[55]

This form of inattention is a specific form of access to the world, one whereby pedestrians pay minimal attention to their immediate environment while instead concentrating on events elsewhere, e.g., on whatever appointments they may have on that day, or on the words just uttered by a friend on the street. In phenomenological terms, this relies on the ability to inhabit situations beyond those we are physically inhabiting at any given moment, spreading our attention, with varying degrees of intensity, over several experiential horizons.

The dual force of habit and routine hence can result in a dulling of environmental quality and specificity. This commonly occurs in deeply familiar environments, which after a period of attentive settling in, of acclimatization, soon lend themselves to increasingly edgeless navigation (without the need for the initial levels of attentiveness with which one first navigated). Yet, notwithstanding this partial dulling, habit and routine are also fundamental to the upkeep of knowledge as to the quality and specificity of an environment, even if the latter is no longer encountered with the attention to detail paid to it initially. That is, although I may not actively be familiarizing myself with the buildings and objects that line my walk to the subway, I do still engage with them (e.g., through a form of cursory check) particularly insofar as they are "infrastructural" to that daily walk of mine. In that role, the built world is a successful provider of basic orientation in a spatial, visual, and bodily sense, one that through its historical catalogue of forms lends itself more readily than most other environments to the normalization Husserl speaks of.

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[55] F. Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, Verso, London, 2014, pp. 166–167 (emphasis mine).

5. Conclusion

As I argued here, a broad understanding of architecture—in terms of its pieces and wholes, its products and products' products—is to consider it an infrastructural component of the lifeworld. As such, it is part and parcel of the modern attempt to construct the world in a way that more readily suits human needs and abilities. Over the past two centuries or so, architecture has largely been a wild success story—a story of productive order and regularity—and also a cautionary tale (e.g., in terms of sustainability, social and environmental). And while it also has a long-standing history of seeking aesthetic protrusion, by means of its particularly outstanding pieces, its function as a sympathetic, mostly easygoing frame for human life lay front and center in this essay.[56]

I showed, first, how the horizonal foreground-background structure sets up an experiential tension between a singular focus and the world of things beyond it. The built is exemplary insofar as it is just as much about a particular place as it is about places further afield, all of which are more or less directly tied together by human-made infrastructure. Next, we considered how a background, specifically one filled with "objects of the type of buildings," can suddenly hijack our focus. Architecture, when it confronts us with the dazzling environments described in Koolhaas's "Junkspace," is a hijacker of attention. Finally, and with no small amount of help from Husserl, I laid out how humans co-determine what comes to their attention, creating, based on their everyday comings and goings, their very own conditions for the emergence of singular built things from among a larger whole of built things.

In a strict sense, *which* object exactly (or object type) inhabits our perceptual foreground is a moot point for phenomenology. (Hence all those examples involving desks and coffee mugs.) This has philosophically sound reasons, and yet I felt obliged to force the matter a little here: given a world in which the phenomenon of the "urban" has reached every nook and cranny of the planet,[57] phenomenology is also our best chance to account for expressions and/or experiences of the built that range from the most subtle to the bombastic, from a semi-suburban fence *cum* gate combo to a Frank Gehry masterpiece. That said, we lack examples of

[56] See, for instance, G. W. F. Hegel's understanding of the function of architecture in conjunction with Greek sculpture (*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p. 702).

[57] See N. Brenner, "Introduction: Urban Theory Without an Outside," in *Implosions / Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*, Jovis, Berlin, 2014.

what it is like to inhabit the built world across all forms of human expression (e.g., fiction, art, cinema, etc.)—among other things, this essay is a call to reverse that trend.

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