

André's cut

Like many artists, Carl André started – as a disciple of Brancusi - by working the object, cutting, drilling, burning, sanding, working the texture, trying to create a sculptural illusionism which converts one material into a signifier for another. But later, he renounced the search to make the object somehow “reflect” a personal vision - what Rosalind Krauss calls the “legitimising claims of a private self”¹ – “up to a certain time I was cutting into things. Then I realised that the thing I was cutting was the cut. Rather than cut into the material, I now use the material as the cut in space.”² In André's case, the work should lie flat on the floor, or parallel to the surface of the earth. “Most sculpture is priapic with the male organ in the air. In my work Priapus is down on the floor. The engaged position is to run along the earth.”³

While André's prescription is perfectly suited to solid matter, the sculptor's material starting point, architecture is predicated on the movement of people through space. What I am interested in is the effect of transversal cuts through space, that is, planes, the action of planes and planarity, in general. If architecture can be regarded as the creation of objects, then it can also be analysed in terms of its planar organisation. This includes the plane of perception of the object, how transparency, overlapping and tilting of planes can provoke perceptions of depth. So André's transversal cut is complemented in architecture by the vertical cut – in space-making, the vertical plane is “engaged” with meaning in the same way.

Walter Benjamin, in his late teens, theorized a distinction between [architectural] drawing and painting. “We should speak of two cuts through the world's substance – the longitudinal cut of painting, and the transversal cut of certain graphic productions. The longitudinal cut seems to be that of representation, of a certain way it encloses things; the transversal cut is symbolic, it encloses signs”.⁴ If we apply this to the house, we see that the front elevation is the longitudinal, pictorial representation of the house, aligned as it is with the human body. House extensions, however, have no front elevation, often no elevation at all, and are conceived primarily in plan and section, which are both transversal cuts. But it is in the latter, section, where the pictorial representation embodied in the vertical loses both its flatness and its fixed-point perspective, and becomes a dynamic, overlapping sequence of frames and surfaces.

In Le Corbusier's Maison Cook, the composition of the façade is recreated in the interior, as an internal *frons scenae* at 90 degrees. This energises the spatial plan of the house, allowing interconnecting openings and views, introducing a modern dynamic. The house extension project effects a similar transformation at the rear of the house – to create an internal theatric, which begins to aspire to the world of *la cour*, which characterises the European urban block. In the typical Georgian house, which became the model for the scaled down housing stock of the later 19th century, the floor span changes direction between the front half and the back half, leaving the rear wall free of loadbearing. This means that architectural elements co-exist in a free, mutually independent relationship, which can provoke remarkable spatial effects. But perhaps we should see those houses as intended to be extended? Although the house extension project is endowed with all of the larger import of “building-in-context”, because of its scale, it doesn't have any of the problems associated with “production”. One-off means one-off – extraordinary little models are secretly emerging in gardens. Spaces are found where no space existed before, spaces *within* the typology, whether it be 18th, 19th or early 20th century.

So how do we envisage a future where every house is transformed? Old houses are now merely the starting point for a journey through carved-out spaces, interlocking volumes and floating terraces. Nothing retains its intended form, the ideal state is never possible... there is no one single template for living which assumes the housing paradigm, but rather many and varied responses to individual requirements, on the client's side, and constraints of site, for the architect. Nonetheless, extensions now are principally concerned with the integration of house and garden, as the *tableau* afforded by the conventional window cannot satisfy modern expectations of the spatial relationships between these two.

If the goal is to make the point at which enclosure ends and landscape / garden begins a foil, almost imperceptible, as in the Japanese idea of *ongawa* – the seamless transition from inside to outside – then the work is already invested with mystery. A glass plane becomes a shifting thing, located somewhere in the middle ground. So I am interested in how the identification of planes works – how their perception is influenced, whether near or far away, and the presence of invisible planes that lie between the observer and a view. The device which calls the plane of the glass into question is the frame, or its absence, and so this becomes a recurrent theme in the work, mediating the interface between spaces, between interior and exterior, between room and site boundary.

Therefore, the ideal architectural condition is one in which every plane is either explicit or implicit – this affords an understanding of the space as “created” rather than merely “felt”. Within this three-dimensional “stage-in-the-round”, light is the actor, never neutral, moving around, causing planar confluences, denying the expected relationships between the planes of walls, ceilings and floors and in a perpetual state of dialogue with its absence, shadow. Light can also be made to work, as in Aalto’s ribbed façades, to deny the plane of the object entrapping it, to dematerialise its surfaces. In this regard the work of James Turrell is very informative – in his case light is used as a positive material, subverting a plane in space which can then become a space-making tool in its own right, or indeed an instrument with which to cut through or between opaque planes of construction. In the ultimate case, the Sky Garden in Co. Cork [which he has since disowned due to his treatment at the hands of his erstwhile patrons], the subtended plane of daylight is all that exists.

While glass and glazed envelopes have fundamentally transformed the nature of buildings, extensions also involve structure and form. Seen from the exterior, they refer to context but also require an object quality. If glass sets in train a game of planes of infinite clarity affording views of infinite depth, then opaque planes work in counterpoint to this. In their case depth is implied, they subtend the space of the world and bring it to a planar resolution. When opaque planes overlap, they also tend to deny a recognition of finite space, and imply something more complex and ultimately more satisfying. When everything “beyond” – services, wiring, plumbing – is brought to a surface, it energises it by the emergence of a single light switch or tap. When an enclosing wall contains a recess therefore, it is implying an infinite depth, beyond the confines of the room space.

What is unique to the creation of architectural objects is that they are invariably of planar composition. Therefore, at a further, microcosmic level, how an object is put together, and how the layers of construction of a building can be identified linguistically in layers of representation, becomes a process of planar lapping and cutting. There is a delight in revealing, through a sequence of layers which exploit the semantic properties of materials, the architectural intentions which lie at the very heart of the work.

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Notes

1. Rosalind Krauss, in “Passages in Modern Sculpture”, London: Thames and Hudson, 1977, p. 266
2. Carl André, from an interview with David Bourdon, *Artforum*, October, 1966
3. *Ibid.*
4. Walter Benjamin, “Peinture et Graphisme”, *La Part de l’oeil*, no.6 [1990], p. 13