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Original Citation

Temple, Nicholas (2015) Unfinished Architecture: Urban Continuity in the Age of the Complete. In: Material Imagination: Reveries on Architecture and Matter. Ashgate Studies in Architecture . Ashgate, Surrey, UK, pp. 237-252. ISBN 9781472424587

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Unfinished Architecture

Urban Continuity in the Age of the Complete

Nicholas Temple

Introduction

How can anything ever present itself truly to us since its synthesis is never completed? How could I gain the experience of the world, as I would of an individual actuating his own existence, since none of the views or perceptions I have of it can exhaust it and the horizons remain forever open?¹

Merleau-Ponty's meditation on incompleteness serves as an appropriate starting point in this investigation of the unfinished in building. His argument that it is impossible to gain a complete 'picture' of the world, on account of the inexhaustibility of our perceptions and experiences, prompts us to question the assumption of architecture's 'closure,' with respect to its creative process and its experiential presence. In asserting that our horizons of experience remain forever open, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology confronts head-on the deeply embedded instrumental precepts of contemporary culture. Among the many areas where these lay authoritative claim, the transformations of the city are perhaps the most acute and visible, with their multiple systems of management and control. These modes of urban transformation, and the broader historical background of 'city marking,' serve as the background to this study of the life of buildings and its influence on the creative imagination of architects.

¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris, 1945), pp.381. Quoted in translation in Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, Mass, 1989), p.17.

I begin however with a personal note: In my first job as a young academic, at Leeds Metropolitan University, I worked in a building that was left unfinished, a fact was not particularly remarkable except that it gave rise to a rich and fertile dialogue within the academic community about the role of architecture in 'city making' (*cosmopoiesis*). Built in the early 70s, the original scheme for the Brunswick Building, as it was called, centred on a semi-enclosed upper courtyard with elevated external walkways connecting different parts of the building complex. From this platform extended three linked wings, each cranked to form an incomplete polygonal shaped piazza at lower level, with connecting ramps and steps. The resulting external space, and its surrounding ensemble of buildings, gave the Brunswick Building a distinctive civic presence, absent elsewhere in the public spaces of central Leeds.

Insert Figure 1 here: Drawn aerial view of the Brunswick Building, Leeds, indicating the three linked wings (un-built wing shown as no.3), and location of the terminal wall to the second wing (x) (Drawing by author)

Among the numerous omissions/revisions in the final building, the most conspicuous was the decision to omit the final wing on the east side due to budget cuts. As a consequence of this missing element, the end wall of the second wing was abruptly terminated by a makeshift fire-escape stair, with exposed reinforcing rods projecting from its in-situ concrete surface. Over time, this unfinished (and hastily assembled) end wall became an icon of the Leeds School of Architecture, resolutely standing out as a modern ruin from the banal corporate architecture that surrounded it.²

The studio where I taught design was located on the top floor of the second wing, which gave access to the makeshift fire-escape stair of the terminal wall. The elevated platforms of the stair served as a vantage point from where students could survey the

² In 2009 the site of the Brunswick Building was sold by the university to a developer, and the building – by then abandoned and the school of architecture relocated to new premises - was demolished.

panorama of the city. It was in this studio that I conceived and coordinated a series of urban/architectural projects using vacant urban sites and abandoned/incomplete buildings in Leeds, many of which were visible from the vantage point of the terminal wall. These projects variously tackled the idea of architecture as an 'on-going' project, drawing upon the classical precept of *renovatio urbis*, a term Peter Carl argues constitutes an essential, albeit declining, aspect of city-making:

The grand theme of *renovatio urbis* depends for its meaning upon a conception, experience, or culture of *urbis* that is susceptible to renewal....[A]lthough *renovatio* manifests itself in the construction or restoration of buildings, streets, canals, and defense-works, and in the writing of poems or the creation or modification of laws and ceremonies...., all this activity is only a means to a more profound end. What is restored is the reciprocity between the given, historical conditions of *urbis* and their potential to be understood in the highest terms of goodness or beauty or lawfulness, etc.³

In this investigation, I will explore the role that unfinished architecture plays in this predisposition of cities to renewal (*renovatio urbis*), prompting us to re-evaluate how the physical performance of materials in building construction can furnish the architectural imagination through the ambiguous (open-ended) nature of suspended work.

Insert Figure 2 here: View of the 'Terminal Wall' of the Brunswick Building.

Courtesy of James W Bell – Leeds.

'Open Work'

The curious history of the Brunswick Building - its short life and its irresolvable state of incompleteness - raises some intriguing questions about how buildings can, over time, respond

³ Peter Carl, 'Renovatio and the Howling Void', in Mohsen Mostafavi & Homa Fardjadi, *Delayed Space* (New York, 2001), pp.18-37, p.19.

to change and serve as temporal registers of both real and imagined settings. Both attributes of architecture however are not necessarily coincident, since adaptability in building is typically treated as exclusively a domain of spatial planning, rather than as an expression of the poetics of urban continuity through incremental alteration or adaptation. Lars Lerup ponders this relationship when he states:

Change is normally thought of as a process that inches its way bit by bit towards the future. But if there is a real concern for the present, the future – the Arcadia – loses its relevance....To expect fixity in the environment appears absurd against the facts of steady and personal changes among dwellers ... I have previously gathered this focus and concern under the slogan: building the unfinished. Many ideas rally under this. The need for a *many-sided view* is one; another is the open-endedness of the environment despite our view of it as finished. All these ideas and observations suggest that we should think of the socio-material world of the dweller as largely unfinished.⁴

The slogan, “building the unfinished”, seems at first a contradiction in terms and conveys a certain controversy about the status of creative work – its directives and ultimate purpose - in the contemporary world. It conflicts with the modern “teleological view of a building’s progressive formal development from an anointed origin toward a final goal”, and the manner in which this teleological outlook curtails the creative imagination.⁵

To probe the deeper meanings of this modern teleology I will refer to Umberto Eco’s claims of ‘open work’ in the age of modernity.⁶ Eco argues that there exists a difference between traditional and modern art forms that relate to the question of the “degree of

⁴ Lars Lerup, *Building the Unfinished: Architecture and Human Action* (Beverly Hills,1977), pp.142-43.

⁵ Marvin Trachtenberg, *Building-in-Time: From Giotto to Alberti and Modern Oblivion* (New Haven,2010), p.XXIII.

⁶ See Note1.

openness”; the capacity of artworks to adapt/respond to new circumstances.⁷ The implication of a ‘sliding scale’ of openness that Eco implies is measured on the basis of how art as an “epistemological metaphor” finds expression through historical change; from the deployment of “the canon of authorised responses,” which characterised the medieval world-view, with its hierarchy of fixed, preordained orders,”⁸ to the “fluid state”⁹ of the modern world that requires a very different creative response. As a ‘leitmotiv’ of modernity, open work feeds our insatiable quest for individual freedom of expression. In this peculiarly modern purview, greater emphasis is given to the viewer/witness to participate in the work and ultimately in its finished state: “... the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work *to be completed*.”¹⁰ Alongside this outlook is Eco’s assertion of a “flight away from the old, solid concept of necessity [characteristic of the medieval world view] and the tendency toward the ambiguous and the indeterminate...”¹¹

It is the view of this author that Eco’s promulgation of ‘open work’ puts into parenthesis the commonly held teleological perspective of modernity, with its predisposition towards ‘closure’ rather than to openness that Eco claims. At the same time, Eco’s assertion that the Baroque period reveals the first clear signs of the “indeterminacy of effect,” characteristic of open work, overlooks key aspects of earlier Renaissance artistic and intellectual accomplishments. These, as I will argue, serve as a more compelling point of reference when re-evaluating the meaning of the unfinished in modernity, particularly in regard to the concept of *renovatio urbis*.

⁷ Eco, *The Open Work*, p.xii.

⁸ Ibid.,p.13.

⁹ Ibid., p.7.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.19.

¹¹ Ibid., p.17.

We are reminded in this duality of 'open work' the grey stone metropolis of Fedora in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, whose centre is occupied by a metal building containing crystal globes in each room:

Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora. These are the forms the city could have taken if, for one reason or another, it had not become what we see today. In every age someone, looking at Fedora as it was, imagined a way of making it the ideal city, but while he was constructing his miniature model, Fedora was already no longer the same as before, and what had been until yesterday a possible future became only a toy in a glass globe.¹²

The perpetual state of disjunction, elucidated in Fedora, between on the one hand the reality of urbanity's relentless change (that resists momentary suspension), and on the other, speculations of future possibilities to redeem the past (the basis of ideal models), reveals how 'open work' both nourishes and obstructs our imagined vision of the city. But what bearing does this dichotomy have on the role of unfinished work in perpetuating urban (cultural) renewal?

***Renovatio Urbis* as 'Work-in-Progress'**

These two modes of thinking about the city emerged as dialectically related forms of creative thought during the Renaissance, at once drawing upon an older tradition and consciously departing from it. Michel Jeanneret describes this in the following terms:

The humanists.....sought to distinguish themselves from their predecessors, and consolidate the historical rupture that would guarantee their modernity. To this end they constructed an image.....of medieval thought enslaved to rigid dogmas and immutable essences in a rigidified culture that conceived the universe as an invariable, rational, closed system.....it served as a foil that allowed the sixteenth century to reject a reputedly static world vision and emancipate the mind from an

¹² Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York, 1974), p.32.

order deemed reductive and inhibiting. Renaissance thinkers not only rejected this world view, they gave a positive value to change and celebrated the alteration of things and the flux of contingencies as a promise of renewal.....¹³

By standing in opposition to the medieval scholastic world-view, Renaissance humanists consciously cultivated an outlook that both drew upon the legacy of classical antiquity and sought to establish a new paradigm of knowledge based on a theoretical standpoint. Jeanneret's summary of this humanist initiative highlights a crucial feature of Renaissance culture that has a bearing on Eco's concept of open work modern and by implication on modern urban transformations, namely the new emphasis on "...the flux of contingencies as a promise of renewal."

Such a mode of creativity gave impetus to the imaginative possibilities generated by *renovatio urbis*, in which the city becomes a setting where the promise of renewal is made tangible through the appropriation of existing building fabric and in the construction of new buildings and monuments. A conspicuous feature of this enterprise, as we see for example in the transformations of Rome in the early 16th century, was the prevalence of unfinished projects in which renewal is manifested in urban fabric as an on-going project.

This state of the unfinished, moreover, was motivated by a "determination to perpetuate the dynamics of the miraculous creative genius," thereby making creation itself "indissociable from the creating subject."¹⁴ Such a mark of authorship in the creative process served as a metaphor for 'God's cosmic creation,' providing the framework for communicating the humanist project of *renovatio urbis* in architecture and the visual arts. Not surprisingly the most fertile philosophical influence on this enterprise can be found in Plato's *Timaeus*, which saw a resurgence of interest in early 16th century humanism.¹⁵ Plato's

¹³ Michel Jeanneret, *Perpetual Motion: Transforming Shapes in the Renaissance from da Vinci to Montaigne* (Baltimore, 2001), p.3.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp.2-3.

¹⁵ James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden,1991), pp.161-263.

cosmology distinguishes between “two orders of existence, the intelligible and unchanging model and the changing and visible copy”...¹⁶ We can see how philosophical notions of flux and alteration, that underpinned Plato’s cosmology, would have informed the broader cultural milieu of change and its urban/architectural and artistic manifestations:

Plato’s position on creation is nearer to that of Heraclitus, who alone had rejected the notion of substance underlying change and had taught the complete transformation of every form of body into every other. We are now to think of qualities which are not also ‘things’ or substances, but transient appearances in the Receptacle.¹⁷

The impact of Heraclitus’ philosophy of *panta rhei* (via Plato’s Receptacle) on humanist thought extended it seems to artistic practices and temperaments.¹⁸ The choice of Michelangelo to ‘stand in,’ so to speak, for Heraclitus in Raphael’s *School of Athens* (c.1509) has prompted numerous speculations.¹⁹ We can see why Raphael may have arrived at this match between the ancient philosopher, who is said to have wept incessantly (perhaps on account of his belief in the transience and impermanence of things), and the Renaissance artist noted for his restlessness and pessimism.²⁰ Alongside Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo

¹⁶ Francis M. Cornford, *Plato’s Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato* (Indianapolis,1997), p.177.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.178.

¹⁸ Jeanneret, *Perpetual Motion*, p.29. For an examination of Heraclitus’ philosophy of flux see Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge,1979), pp.147-53. As is the case elsewhere, the Renaissance was especially partial to demonstrating dialectical relationships between ideas – through allegory or symbolic programmes – as we see for example in Bramante’s relief of Heraclitus and Democritus; Dawson Kiang, ‘Bramante’s “Heraclitus and Democritus”: The Frieze’, *Zeitschrift Kunstgeschichte*, 51, Bd., H.2 (1988): pp.262-68.

¹⁹ Ingrid Rowland, ‘The Intellectual Background of the *School of Athens*’, in Marcia Hall (ed.), *Raphael’s School of Athens* (Cambridge,1997), pp.131-70, pp. 57-8.

²⁰ On Heraclitus as the weeping philosopher see Cora E. Lutz, ‘Democritus and Heraclitus’, *The Classical Journal*, Vol.49, No.7 (April, 1954):pp.309-14.

is the most noted Renaissance artist for leaving many of his works unfinished. One explanation, largely perpetuated by Vasari, is that his “*non finito* reflects the sublimity of his ideas, which again and again lay beyond the reach of his hand.”²¹ Vasari’s argument, which perpetuates the idea of the unfinished as a sign of the fertile creative imagination, is based on the Neo-platonic notion that the artist’s “idea was always more important than its realisation”²² This resulted in Michelangelo’s willingness to “change his design, even when it was in the course of execution.”²³ We can see this for example in his design of Julius II’s Tomb, in which Michelangelo abandoned the original architectural framework and statues of slaves in the course of their realization.²⁴

Insert Figure 3 here: Detail from the fresco, the *School of Athens* (c.1509) by Raphael, showing the figure of Michelangelo ‘standing in’ for the philosopher Heraclitus.

Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura. © 2014. Photo Scala, Florence.

It seems that Michelangelo’s resistance to following an idea to its synthesis actually underpinned his creative process, and in so doing could be construed in vaguely ‘Heraclitan’ terms as an emulation of the divine forces of nature’s perennial flux. Given these characteristics of Michelangelo’s work, his appearance in the *School of Athens* as Heraclitus may not just be a conceit on the part of Raphael; the pessimistic streak in Michelangelo’s character may have been interpreted by Raphael as signalling a state of mind convergent with the moral uncertainties that the early 16th century Roman Catholic Church would have construed from Heraclitus’ philosophy of flux; that perpetual change carries with it a burden

²¹ Quoted in Juergen Schulz, ‘Michelangelo’s Unfinished Works’, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol.57, No.3 (Sept.1975):pp.366-373, p.366.

²² *Ibid.*, p.366.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.373.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.368.

of pessimism and doubt about what will come. Indeed, pessimism served as the flip-side to Renaissance optimism for an imminent Golden Age; that the promise of Rome as *altera Jerusalem* was always counterbalanced by its portrayal as Babylon reborn.²⁵

It seems to me that this Renaissance sensibility shares some of the traits of Eco's open-work, with its anticipation of modernity's multiplicity and plurality; only in the case of the art and architecture of humanism, receptiveness to change operated at the level of a dialectical relationship. This oscillated between a deeply embedded classical tradition and a newly discovered reverie towards the dynamics ('inner workings') of nature, or *natura naturans*, revealed through the combined effects of direct observation and the human creative process.²⁶

In many respects unfinished, or altered, buildings in 16th century Rome provided the most fertile expression of this relationship; on the one hand architecture at this time adhered to the 'timeless' Platonic-Pythagorean order of harmonic proportions (exemplified in Bramante's famous parchment plan for the new St. Peter's basilica). On the other hand, we see tangible evidence of building projects being subjected to (traceable) temporal change, through their abruptly suspended or appropriated states (observe for example the rusticated base of Bramante's abandoned Palazzo dei Tribunali along via Giulia, that was later incorporated into other buildings). In such examples the burden of material delay and decay is made clear, anticipating in the process the full consequences of Mannerist fragmentation.²⁷

²⁵ This twofold model is largely drawn from St Augustine. Nicholas Temple, *renovatio urbis: Architecture, Urbanism and Ceremony in the Rome of Julius II* (London, 2011), pp. 243-49.

²⁶ J. Bialostocki, 'The Renaissance concept of nature and antiquity', in *The Renaissance and Mannerism: Studies in Western Art. Acts of the 20th International Congress of the History of Art* (1963), pp. 19-30.

²⁷ For an account of the key characteristics of Mannerism see my entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art & Architecture*, edited by Peter and Linda Murray and Tom Devonshire Jones (Oxford, 2013), pp. 344-47.

Insert Figure 4 here: View of the rusticated base of the uncompleted Palazzo dei Tribunali (c.1510), incorporated into later palaces along via Giulia in Rome (photo by author)

Jeanneret even implies that the 16th century was in many ways the century of the incomplete, nurtured by a “transformist sensibility.”²⁸ We can see how this sensibility may have been influenced in part by a new sense of urgency at the beginning of the 16th century, a time which many believed to be auspicious. Claims, for example, of Julius II’s chief spokesman, the Augustinian friar Giles of Viterbo, that this period signalled the coming of a ‘golden age,’ that could rival past golden ages in biblical history, gave impetus to the ambitious projects being undertaken by Julius II.²⁹ The saga of the construction of the new St. Peter’s Basilica, the largest and arguably most important building project in 16th century Europe, serves as a powerful expression of this self-conscious age of renewal. In this project, the old and new fabric co-existed in various stages for almost a century; as the old basilica was being gradually demolished the new was taking its place. For Federica Goffi, this co-existence created a new way of thinking about the conservation of built form as a dynamic (temporal) process that enlivened invention and the imagination.³⁰

It is tempting to consider the resulting mismatch between high ambitions, and the reality of unresolved and partially completed projects, as simply indicative of a creative impulse over-extending itself, in a way similar to Vasari’s account of Michelangelo’s “non-

²⁸ Jeanneret, *Perpetual Motion*, pp.1-7.

²⁹ Egidio da Viterbo, ‘Fulfillment of the Christian Golden Age under Pope Julius II: A Text of a Discourse of Giles of Viterbo 1507’, edited and commentary by John W. O’Malley, *Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought and Religion*, XXV (1969):pp.265-338.

³⁰ Federica Goffi, *Time Matter(s): Invention and Re-Imagination in Built Conservation: The Unfinished Drawing St. Peter’s, The Vatican* (Farnham, Surrey, 2013).

finito” referred to earlier. But this implication of failure, on the part of both artist and patron, only overlooks the broader cultural context of these extraordinary initiatives; in essence the unfinished was somehow ‘built into’ the cultural fabric of the society, as a necessary condition of human endeavour and imagination, and ultimately of collective human salvation.

Insert Figure 5 here: Digital restoration of Tiberio Alfarano’s 1571 hybrid drawing of old and new St. Peter’s Basilica. © F. Goffi. Original drawing before digital alteration courtesy of the Archivio della Fabbrica di San Pietro, Roma.

Seen from the broader perspective of Rome, it is apparent that Renaissance initiatives for self-renewal, through the act of building, embraced the larger topography of the city, in which ancient ruins were being quarried for building materials, and *spolia* recycled as architectural components. It is as if Rome, with its combination of ancient ruins, building sites and large areas of semi-demolished buildings, was undergoing a continual process of transformation, in which old and new were effectively conflated. From this permanent state of transience emerged multiple ‘versions’ of Rome in the creative imagination of architects and antiquarians, each susceptible to re-invention through the fertile narratives of the city’s mytho-historic past.³¹

Visible evidence of distinct stages of development in this process of transformation, as one would expect in the urban/architectural accomplishments of individual pontiffs, were rarely commemorated by the completion of buildings. Only inscriptions, dedicated to the

³¹ These ‘versions’ of Rome are most palpably expressed in the proliferation of prints of the city’s topography in the 16th century. See Rebecca Zorach, *The Virtual Tourist in Renaissance Rome: Printing and Collecting the Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae* (Chicago, 2008)

residing or recently deceased popes, could serve as visual and epigraphic registers of these initiatives at any one period.³²

I would argue that this historical model of architectural and artistic endeavour, whilst exceptional during the Renaissance (in terms of its scope and collective ambition), reflects deeper meanings of *renovatio urbis* that still have a bearing on the contemporary city. As Carl states: “*renovatio* appears to confront so much of the modernist project because it speaks not only to temporal renewal, but even more to the content of the temporality that is renewed.”³³ It provides a ‘barometer’ of how renewal is understood not merely as the basis of cyclical change, facilitated through commercial/corporate activity, but more fundamentally as part of the historical and cultural continuity of the city.

The Temporality of Architecture

To establish a clearer understanding of the status and meaning of *renovatio urbis* in architecture today we have to go to an unlikely source - the building site. It is a significant, but largely overlooked, fact that the building-site is the last remaining vestige of the processes of making and fabricating in the public realm. In place of the visible signs of crafting and producing goods and artefacts, that once dominated urban life before the modern age, cities today have become little more than locations for the display and promotion of prefabricated and virtual products in shops, offices and public spaces.

With the compressed timescale of modern building construction, on account of the increasing costs of labour and materials, and the demands for more effective health and safety regulations in the building industry, these sites of transformation in the city have become effectively closed off from public gaze. Against the overarching impression of

³² Charles Burroughs argues that this prevalence of commemorative inscriptions in 15th century Rome gave urban topography a certain “para-textual efficacy.” Charles Burroughs, *From Signs to Design: Environmental Process and Reform in Early Renaissance Rome* (Cambridge, MA., 1990), p.10.

³³ Carl, ‘Renovatio and the Howling Void’, p21.

homogeneity and completeness, which the contemporary corporate city presents to the general public, the 'messy' processes of construction (through the exposure of building carcasses) seem strangely incongruous.

The problematic status of the building-site today contrasts with its enduring and legitimate public presence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, where the act of building was in every sense an acknowledgment of architecture's perennial unfinished or adaptive state. We can see this most vividly in the building sites of cathedrals, whose duration of construction (over many centuries and through successive episcopates), was characterised by expanses of semi-permanent scaffolding and assembled piles of cut stone and formwork. These sites were almost certainly a more familiar feature of medieval urban life than finished places of worship, an issue that is often ignored by architectural historians. An indication of the consequences of this accumulated history of building sites is highlighted in the following statement:

In modernity building sites do not last for long, but in the pre-modern period the typical monumental "building" was in reality a building site for so long that sometimes this condition remained as a palimpsest – for example, in naming, as in the streets around the north, east and south sides of Florence Cathedral, whose substructures were so long in the making that the area came to be called the *Via dei Fondamenti*.³⁴

A key factor in these hugely ambitious projects was the capacity of building work to be conceived and represented through different modalities of time. Marvin Trachtenberg examines this aspect of building:

The opposition of architecture and time is generally so strong in modernity... that it tends to be difficult to see concretely beyond it to a world of non-chronicidal architectural temporality. Yet my analysis raises the possibility that the architecture-time relationship might be alternatively construed, not as merely "neutral" but in

³⁴ Trachtenberg, *Building-in-Time*, p.XII.

altogether positive terms. This would require that time be seen other than as a malignant force practically or intellectually.³⁵

Trachtenberg's argument of a "chronicidal" form of temporality in modernity derives from his argument of a historical shift from 'building-in-time' to building-outside-time. This transformation took place as a result of changes in the relationship between two modes of temporality within architecture itself; the duration of a building's construction and its use/inhabitation [or "lifeworld"]. Trachtenberg highlights the complex overlaps between both, in which the slowness of construction in pre-modern times meant that the lifeworld was much more intrusive in the building process. This is demonstrated for example in the on-going alterations to the new St Peter's Basilica during its construction. In the case of modern architecture however, "... the velocities of both architectural making and of the lifeworld not only are in relative conformity but also the speed of construction is also so great that lifeworld conditions usually do not have time to change enough to affect the project much during the execution of the final design."³⁶ The absence of visible evidence of changes in a building's design, in the process of its construction, is what Trachtenberg describes as "building-outside-time, a closed teleological approach that has its origins in Albertian theory of architecture."³⁷ Stephen Parcell provides a useful spatial [Janus-faced] model when considering the question of the role of architecture in acknowledging a past and anticipating a future:

We normally presume that a work emerges from a world that has preceded it.

Conceived as the off-spring of a specific author in a specific time and place, it would seem to be the end product of intentions and historical forces. ... However, even after

³⁵ Ibid., p.14.

³⁶ Ibid., p.XIV.

³⁷ Ibid., pp.70-101. Trachtenberg emphasises the exceptional nature of Alberti's a-temporal theory of architecture in relation to the prevailing practice of architecture in 15th century Italy, suggesting its prophetic nature in anticipating things to come.

an intricate historical background has been established, the work itself retains a degree of independence.³⁸

Parcell argues that the resulting “gap between things and ideas enables a work to be disengaged from the world behind (its history). Protected by a conceptual moat, it is free to engage in other discourses opening up in front (its fictions), introduced and witnessed by the architectural performer.”³⁹ In other words, the work is situated at an interface between, on the one hand, a pre-existing context and, on the other, future possibilities. Parcell’s thesis may well have drawn a literary analogy from Paul Ricoeur’s concept of ‘Distanciation’, as it pertains to the tension between the “condition” of understanding a written text (by virtue of its autonomy and remoteness) and the need to “conquer” it by hermeneutical means.⁴⁰ In this ‘bifrons’ model of the temporality of architecture the face looking backwards is masked, by virtue of the “conceptual moat” that Parcell describes. This situation is perpetuated by the standpoint that “... contemporary historiography [and we could say of contemporary culture in general] gives precedence to one of the illusions of consciousness, that the perspective of our own historical moment must be autonomous.”⁴¹ The resulting asymmetry in the temporal understanding of architecture is, I believe, one of the most critical challenges facing architects today, since it ignores the fundamental role of memory in the creative imagination.⁴² Parcell warns of the potential dangers of such disengagement of the

³⁸ Stephen Parcell, ‘The World in Front of the Work’, *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol.46, No.4 (May, 1993);pp.249-59, p.250.

³⁹ Ibid.,p.250.

⁴⁰ Paul Ricoeur, ‘The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation’, *Philosophy Today* 17.2 (1973);pp.129-41, p.130.

⁴¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (London,1981), p.27 (from the Introduction by Lewis S. Mudge)

⁴² Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester, West Sussex, 2005), pp.67-70.

work from its historical background, in the way it can lead to “a sterile object floating in a universal kit of parts.”⁴³

It seems however incontestable that much architecture today ‘reveals’ in this autonomy and detachment, by asserting its capacity to operate freely as a monologue with itself, rather than acting in dialogue with the past through acknowledgment [and appropriation] of a prevailing set of cultural practices [what we broadly call tradition]. It is in the context of Parcell’s particular interpretation of the temporal dimensions of architecture, that we can begin to understand more clearly the status of Eco’s model of ‘open work’ in the contemporary city. In the continuing and relentless search for new innovations, that characterise our technologically driven society, open work has become a largely opaque process concealed behind the visual and bureaucratic layers of systems and organisations. The role of architecture, however, in this strategy of concealment remains problematic, as we have seen in the context of the archaic presence of the building site. In spite of Trachtenberg’s assertion of the impact of the speed of construction today on the disappearance of visible signs of “lifeworld” changes/adaptions in building [when compared to pre-modern times], the place-specific nature of building construction, and its enduring spatial and temporal presence in the city, serve as persistent reminders of architecture’s role as an embodiment of urban (and cultural) continuity.

In this investigation I have argued the importance of unfinished work in the collective memory of the city, and how this memory of previous or unresolved undertakings provides an essential ground for projecting future possibilities of architecture, through the material imagination. The example of the Brunswick Building, examined at the beginning of this chapter, demonstrates how unintended suspension of building work, and its architectural consequences, can act as a catalyst for creative reflection. Adapting a literary reference

⁴³ Parcell, ‘The World in Front of the Work’, p.250.

taken from Ricoeur, “everyday reality is metamorphized by means of what we could call the imaginative variations that [unfinished building] works on the real.”⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ Ricoeur, ‘The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation’, p.141.

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