

2018

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### Recommended Citation

Delikta, Dylan (2018) "Self-Understanding Revealed through Contemporary Architecture," *Acta Cogitata: An Undergraduate Journal in Philosophy*: Vol. 5 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://commons.emich.edu/ac/vol5/iss1/4>

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# Self-Understanding Revealed through Contemporary Architecture

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## Abstract

For Hegel, architectural structures reveal cultural understandings about how we as human beings understand the self and the world around us at any given point in history. What I seek to do in this paper is to identify what sort of cultural understanding is revealed through contemporary architecture such as the skyscraper, the symbol of modern capitalism. To do this, I present Hegel's analysis on the cultural meanings that are revealed in Classical and Romantic architecture, using the Temple of Athena and the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp as examples. Next, I draw on Heidegger's (1993) discussion in "The Question Concerning Technology" of the technology as a way of "enframing" – a revealing that orders – to argue that, in the context of modern capitalism, contemporary architecture reveals the world, and ourselves, as part of a "standing reserve." In the last part before the conclusion, I delve further into how a "technological worldview" persists, using Foucault's discussion of Panopticism in his book *Discipline and Punish*. Through my discussions of Heidegger and Foucault, I use the Willis Tower in Chicago as an example to help elucidate the argument that contemporary architecture makes space for a "technological worldview." By bringing into attention the ways architecture make space for cultural understandings, we better understand the impact architecture has in revealing the self and the world, and thus grants us an opportunity to reveal the world through other ways than the technological.

### *I. Introduction*

Architectural structures – which, according to G. W. F. Hegel in *Aesthetics*, is the first particular art to come into existence – reveals to us, as human beings, cultural meanings about who we are at specific points in our history. For Hegel, the Classical temple, in context of Athenian democracy, shows a culture who focused on the "here and now." They sought harmony between one's "self-conscious subjective freedom" and the "universal aims" of the city-state (Hegel, 1975, p. 436). The gothic cathedral shows a culture who, in context of the Christian revolution, saw the external world as inadequate, believing the inner life of the individual to be what counts. This meaning is given space in the cathedral's soaring height, the way its interior determines the shape of the exterior, and its complete enclosure from the outside world (Hegel, 1975, p. 687).

In light of how Hegel described these architectural structures and how they reveal our understanding of self and the world, what does contemporary architecture, i.e. the skyscraper, reveal about how we understand ourselves and the world today? I argue that the skyscraper shows a people who, in context of our global capitalist system, have been reduced to easily replaceable parts by a technological worldview. This technological worldview permeates through our socio-economic and legal institutions and subordinates everyone to specific norms through constant surveillance and self-policing. The skyscraper reveals this to us, not only through the uniformity and impressive height of its exterior, but in the vast number and regularity of office space in its interior, which confines workers to cubicles so that they can be easily supervised and documented.

To explain this argument, I will first present Hegel's arguments on Classical and Romantic art, using the Temple of Athena and the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp to show how architecture makes space for cultural understandings of the self and the world and highlighting how the cultural understandings of Classical art and Romantic art shifted from "the here and now" to the inner life of

the individual. I will explain the shift from Romantic art's stress on the individual to the Contemporary architecture's reducing of human beings to small, replaceable parts by using Heidegger's argument about the technological worldview and "enframing" in "The Question Concerning Technology" (1975), and how a skyscraper like the Willis Tower reveals this "challenging-forth." Lastly, I will show how the Willis Tower reveals the technological worldview's dominion over us using Foucault's concept of "Panopticism" from *Discipline & Punish*.

## *II. Cultural Meanings Revealed in Classic and Romantic Architecture*

For Hegel (1975), art from Ancient Greece, specifically Athens, is described as classical art because of its unity between form and content; its form, the sculpture of the human body, is the "adequate embodiment of the Idea" or "spirit" (p. 77). "Spirit," or human subjectivity, is revealed in classical art by objectifying itself, so that inner life is seen in an external form: The ideal of classical art. As such, cultural meanings found in classical art are focused "right here," or rather, on what it means to be an Athenian citizen. This ideal shows the spiritual meaning of Greek life, that one's own excellence is tied to the excellence of the city-state. Or rather, as Hegel (1975) puts it, their "immediate real existence lived in the happy milieu of both self-conscious subjective freedom and the ethical substance [i.e. the state]" (p. 436).

This harmony between inner and outer life and the focus on the "here and now" is given space in classical architecture like the Temple of Athena in a few major ways (See Appendix A). For one, it is important to note that classical architecture does not hold spirit, but is independent from it. The temple, being proportionate as shown by its "simple lines and big surfaces," is meant to serve a role of housing the spirit (p. 660). The Temple also does not rise to soaring heights; rather, it "stretches out in breadth and width" (p. 674). This closeness to the ground shifts attention to what is going on "right here" rather than looking out to a "there" that is found with tall structures. The Temple of Athena is also an "open-enclosure," meaning that the temple's walls and colonnades do not strictly separate the inside from the outside. Whether one is inside the temple's walls giving reverence to the spirit or outside mingling with the community gathered around the temple, they are reminded of the harmony one must have to be an excellent citizen in Athenian culture.

In Romantic art, our understanding of the world and self turns inward; that is, rather than revealing a harmony between inner life and outer existence, Romantic art reveals that it is the inner life of the individual that has greatest spiritual meaning. Hegel (1975) argues, this shift from harmony between inner and outer to absolute inwardness comes about in three ways. First, the gods which classical art portrays are anthropomorphic, in that their constant involvement in finite affairs brings them down "into the field of caprice and contingency" and are subject fate which holds higher power over them (p. 503). Second, the Athenian individual is held in a conflict with the state, as she is both subordinate to state, and yet because of her development as a subject, starts to recognize herself as a free individual (p. 510). Third, Athens only recognized men as citizens, creating a tension between the excellences of the individual with exclusion. This reaches the point where Romantic art is given its context: the Christian Revolution, which regarded the external as inadequate for the needs of the spirit, furthering the ideal of equality among different genders. What matters here is the spirit of the individual, or in other words, the free infinite spirit. The spirit is elevated above the finite through its own dissatisfaction with its external appearance, gaining a "deeper reconciliation with its own element of inwardness" (p. 518). Although dissatisfied with its finite external appearance, the infinite spirit must "bring itself into representation," and so appears through the "willing and self-knowing subject" (p. 518). It is therefore "the actual individual person in [her] inner life who acquires infinite worth" (pp. 518-520). What counts is no longer the individual as a citizen of the city-state, but rather the individual understood as equal to other individuals regardless of contingent factors as where one is born.

Romantic architecture gives space to this cultural meaning quite nicely. When looking at a gothic cathedral such as the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp, Belgium, one can notice just how

commanding and beautiful of a structure this is (see Appendix B). Just by standing outside of it, she sees that this structure stands on its own account and yet, as her eyes scale upward toward the peak of its towers, the cathedral seems to be lifted by its sublimity to the infinite. While the church serves its function as place of worship, all its “purely utilitarian” functions get lost in “the greatness of the whole” (p. 685). By simply looking at the exterior of the cathedral, the space reveals the cultural meaning of spiritual elevation; or rather, how the infinite appears through the finite. However, the exterior is not what is important about the cathedral; in fact, the exterior is shaped by the interior, whose walls and pillars “rise upwards freely and independently,” appearing to rise like trees in a forest, and extend outward giving the church its shape (pp. 686-688). This again shows people the importance of the inner life over the finitude of the external world due to how the interior shapes the exterior. When stepping inside the cathedral, its patrons become completely enclosed by its high rising walls that allow only glimmers of light to peer through due to its windows being made of stained glass. This gives more space to the importance of inner life, as this separation from the outside gives us a tranquil place to meditate and worship. As Hegel (1975) points out, “What people need here is not provided by the world of nature... they need a world made by and for man alone, for his worship and the preoccupations of his inner life” (p. 686). The cathedral, however, is more than just individual worship; it houses an entire community which not only comes to worship, but practice the sacraments of baptism and marriage, and celebrates the death of loved ones in a funeral. With these constant comings and goings, people realize how finite their time is in this world. The only thing that remains constant is the church within which these events are unfolding. By being inside the interior of the cathedral, we are reminded about how finite we are as bodies, but on the other hand, we are reminded of the free infinity of our spirit. The cathedral then brings the infinite “there” to “here,” yet this “here” is not “there,” and so calls on us to take up the spirit by focusing on our inwardness so that when our externality ends, we can remain alive in our infinite spirit.

### *III. Technological Worldview and Contemporary Architecture*

In today’s global capitalist world, contemporary architecture reveals to us a different cultural meaning about the self and the world. While Romantic architecture gives space to the individual’s “free infinite spirit,” contemporary architecture gives space to two opposed, yet related, understandings of the self. On the one hand, the individual is given a sense of accomplishment, as most structures of today could not be built without human ingenuity, giving her the sense of human’s mastery over nature. On the other hand, these structures reveal an individual who is reduced to small, replaceable parts and is measured by how well she fits into the institutions which mold the world around her. This is a result of a world governed by technology that has not only enabled people to save lives and spread information at fast paces to others, but also efficiently take lives away through the manufacturing of doomsday weapons and creation of methods and institutions of oppression. While we tend to view technology in its powerful instrumentality (as some mean to carrying out some human end) as derived from modern physics, Heidegger (1993) in “The Question Concerning Technology” argues that technology in its essence is a way of revealing, and therefore, a worldview which we inhabit. Like art or nature, the essence of technology is a revealing of the world by way of “bringing-forth,” e.g. it reveals a cabin in the woods which was not there through the “gathering together in advance” the “four modes of occasioning,” or rather, causality . However, in the case of modern technology, the essence of technology reveals the world to us by way of “challenging.” This “challenging” reveals nature as a supplier of energy to be extracted and stored, and “sets upon nature” in a way that orders it into some sort of industry, such as agriculture yielding food which becomes a resource used the food industry (Heidegger, 1993, p. 320). Nature then becomes a “standing-reserve”; it is seen only as a supplier of resources for human ends and “no longer stands over against us as object,” and thus, it appears that we have become masters over nature (p. 322). Indeed, rather than modern technology being derived from modern physics, Heidegger argues that modern physics, which orders and calculates with things broken

down to their smallest parts, only develops within the context of this larger technological “worldview.”

The technological worldview is therefore “a revealing that orders” because it demands that nature be revealed as a standing-reserve (Heidegger, 1993, p. 322). Modern technology is not like a wooden bridge which lets the river be as it allows us to cross from bank to bank; it is rather the dam that reveals the river as power source that provides electricity to a city. However, this worldview does not only challenge nature; this challenging of nature only makes it appear as if we as human beings have mastery over nature. It turns out that it has in large part made us part of the standing-reserve as well. On the one hand, the technological worldview orders us to act as standing-reserve by calling on us to extract resources from nature to be stored for later, e.g. – a forester who is “subordinate to the orderability of cellulose” through the foresting industry he works for (p. 323). On the other, humans take part in the “bringing-forth” of technology in its “ordering as a way of revealing” and as such are never reduced to mere standing-reserve (p. 324). What we find here then is that the “challenging-forth” of modern technology, though requiring us to reveal it, is not the mere work of humans. Rather, it is a response to the “call of unconcealment” which the essence of technology unconceals as the quantification of nature and humans to store or extract energy, sending us on our way to further reveal standing-reserve (p. 324). What we find here is that the essence of technology, by way of “challenging-forth,” veils other ways that we bring-forth new understandings through what Heidegger calls Ge-stell, or “enframing.”

Enframing is the “gathering together which belongs that setting-upon which challenges man and puts him in position to reveal the actual, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 329). This means that the technological worldview calls on us to reveal the world around us—and even ourselves as human beings— as quantifiable units of energy to be stored. Nature as such loses its object-ness as our enframing orders us to break nature down to its smallest, exact parts by means of modern physics, and in turn, use this exact science to order ourselves. Enframing blocks other ways of revealing the world to the point that it “banishes [us] into the kind of revealing that is ordering,” with which we forget that enframing is itself a worldview that both reveals and conceals meaning about ourselves and the world around us (p. 332). As such, we are “destined” to be taken as a “standing-reserve” to technology so long as we fail to see technology as a worldview that challenges us to reveal the actual in the mode of ordering (p. 330).

When we gaze upon contemporary architecture, we see how this technological worldview is given space within its structure. Take the Willis Tower, the second tallest building in the United States, for instance (See Appendix C). At first glance, it fully commands our attention like the gothic cathedral in Romantic architecture. Unlike the exterior of the cathedral, which is given shape by its interior, revealing the importance of inner life, the exterior of Willis Tower figuratively screams for attention, showing off how this skyscraper dominates the cityscape and is an achievement of modern physics and exact science. Looking closer at the exterior of Willis Tower, however, we can see further how this skyscraper makes space for “the revealing that is ordering” (Heidegger, 1993, p. 332). The Tower’s windows are uniform and exactly measured, dividing offices and rooms inside the Tower also through exact measurement so that the rooms fit the shape of the window. This uniformity shows how people today subordinate ourselves to specific measurements, trying to conform to specific standards that global capitalism, built around the technological worldview, creates. This conformity does not just exist in the Willis Tower. Other skyscrapers, hospitals, hotels, university residence halls, and many other contemporary structures share this conformity due to this ordering the technological worldview reveals. Once entering the Willis Tower, the patrons find themselves among offices that are divided by a cubicle of some form, lit up by both the outside light and indoor LED lights, where workers do jobs in which they can be easily replaced. This skyscraper, appearing to show mastery over nature, actually shows how enframing has “banished us to revealing that is ordering”(p. 332). It also further makes space for the technological worldview by revealing, in the mode of ordering, how humanity under global capitalism has become a standing-

reserve to corporations, as workers are made subordinate to finance, ordered to produce investment capital with which investors and stock-brokers can make more money.

#### *IV. Contemporary Architecture and Panopticism*

The enframing of the technological worldview is also perpetuated and given space in contemporary architecture through the concept of “panopticism” which Michel Foucault (1997) presents to us in *Discipline & Punish*. The concept is derived from the architectural figure devised by Jeremy Bentham called the Panopticon. Essentially, it is an annular building with a tower in the center. The building is divided into cells with two windows, one on the inside which allowed one to see the windows of the tower, and one on the outside which allowed light to shine into the room. From the tower, a supervisor can see into all of the cells to easily observe captives because they are made “perfectly individualized and constantly visible” by the structure of the building (Foucault, 1997, p. 200). Captives looking toward the tower, however, cannot see who or if anyone is supervising them. Yet, because of the constant view of the tower, the prisoner is never certain if she is being watched, which creates the effect of “permanent visibility that assures automatic functioning of power” (p. 201). The captives, kept from being able to merge together, are in a constant state of visibility due to having the tower in sight, but because they do not know who is watching, they are incentivized to conform to whatever the Panopticon is trying to instill. The supervisor could be anybody, as people may “come and exercise in the central tower the functions of surveillance,” assuring that this “disciplinary mechanism will be democratically controlled” (p. 207).

In a Heideggerian sense, panopticism is a “revealing that orders”; it is a practice that challenges-forth humanity to be a standing-reserve for the institutions of global capitalism. Contemporary architecture reveals this discipline to us in a few ways. The windows which surround offices like those found on the Willis Tower are made to serve the purpose of the outer window of the Panopticon, letting light in so that the workers can be easily seen. For other contemporary structures, the use of LED lights performs this function, as the white light omitted by them get rid of shadows which may obscure vision. The cubicles in these offices are structured so that one cannot see the workers next to her, quite like the cells in the Panopticon, but are both short enough and allow a big enough opening so that others can observe the worker in that cell. The boss, manager, or supervisor usually sits in a room that is separate from the workers. This room, in some sense, acts like the center tower of the Panopticon. Workers are often unsure if the boss is in her office, making them more likely to stay in check with the office’s rules and guidelines. In this way, the workers are quite like the captives of the Panopticon; they are always potentially seen but can never see who is (or is not) seeing them. While these workers can interact with others, the cubicles act as a way to easily individualize the worker and make it easy for supervisors to document how well they are fulfilling their role and make sure the worker still fits a part in the whole operation. The Willis Tower itself, being not only an office but a tourist destination, even allows people to come in and visit, essentially mimicking how the Panopticon allows anyone to engage in the role of a supervisor.

The Panopticon in-itself is a form of contemporary architecture with which the technological worldview is revealed. Given its focus on exactness via individualization of captives who are always seen but cannot see, we can see that the Panopticon was created so that we could exactly measure and discipline those who might cause a ruckus to the way our institutions are structured. Skyscrapers such as the Willis Tower, though seemingly showing how humans have mastered nature through technology, creates the space that shows just how we are disciplined and ordered through panopticism to be subordinate to the technological worldview.

## *V. Conclusion*

Using the way Hegel describes classical and romantic architecture and how they revealed cultural meanings about self and the world, it is clear that contemporary architecture reveals a people, in the context of global capitalism, reduced to a “standing-reserve” by a technological worldview. This enframing has been the source of discipline of people by socio-economic and political institutions, and is given space to be revealed through contemporary architecture. This argument also, in some sense, reveals just how boring contemporary architecture has become, as it has been standardized, regulated, and basically uniform in its appearance. It may be efficient both structurally and how it functions as a standing-reserve for food, energy, capital, etc., causing people to marvel at the ability of engineers, but its rigidness and uniformity presents us with lackluster thoughts of routine and discipline, giving people the appearance that we as workers within modern capitalism are only cogs in the machine which can be replaced if not maintaining its function properly.

Our architecture, and the way we as human beings reveal ourselves and the world through it, does not have to remain this way. As Heidegger (1993) says, “Only what is granted endures. What endures primarily out of the earliest beginning is what grants” (p. 336). We have a share in developing cultural meaning. We are co-creators of the world, and as such, we have the ability to bring-forth new cultural meanings other than the technological worldview, so long as we become aware that it is a way of revealing rather than the way of revealing. When we become aware of the role we play in enframing this technological worldview, we become able to broaden our horizons and reveal the world in ways that do not stifle our creative power, and perhaps allow our architecture to give space to new understandings about the self and the world.

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## Appendix A: Temple of Athena



Retrieved from <http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth200/politics/parthenon.html>



## Appendix B: The Church of Our Lady in Antwerp

-Interior



Retrieved from <http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth200/politics/parthenon.html>

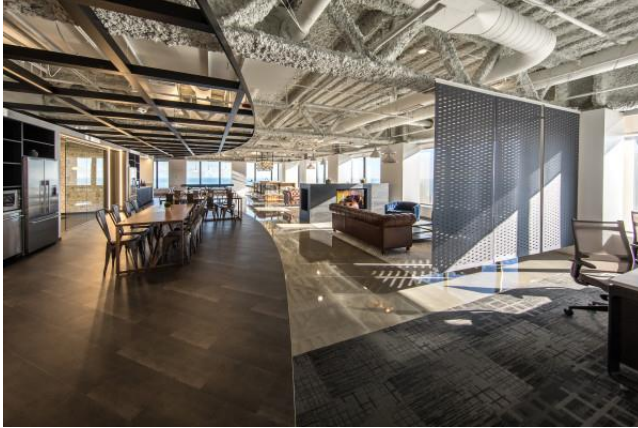
-Exterior



Neefs, P. (Artist). Interior of Antwerp Cathedral, Belgium. [Image of painting]. Leeds, United Kingdom; Leeds Museum

## Appendix C: Willis Tower

- Interior



Retrieved from <http://www.telosgroupllc.com/willis-tower/>

-Exterior



Retrieved from <http://www3.jjc.edu/ftp/wcdc13/rturza/TheWillis.htmlTower>