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The Inner Life of Objects: A Critical Review of *Architecture and Objects*

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Architecture and Objects

Graham Harman

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xvi+220 pp.

To be is to be an object. Objects are not to be identified with any particular entity, such as material things, spiritual things, abstractions, qualities, qualia, essences. Nor can objects be completely defined by a finite set of disjunctive statements. Strangely, objects can be objects of objects, meta-objects as platonic entities that recursively contain themselves, but cannot contain nor refer to the totality of all other objects, because there is no totality. The preceding series of statements is what I have understood from a critical reflection upon reading Harman's philosophical explanation of post-modernism in architecture. Those series of statements I understood to be what Graham takes as his philosophical system or philosophical methodology.

Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology

Graham calls his philosophy "Speculative Realism" and OOO ("Object-Oriented Ontology"). OOO/Speculative Realism is a philosophical methodology that Harman's book on the philosophy of architecture, applies to the philosophical issues surrounding architecture. Harman sees two major philosophical problems, or perhaps three, that architecture and its aesthetics raises: "...this book is guided by the double question of architecture's relation to philosophy on the one hand and to art on the other" (xiv). However, the other question popping up intermittently throughout the book, goes deep into the heart of ontology, especially, OOO: how can two independent objects (each composed of a complexity of infinite properties) relate to each other? Shades of Leibniz: "...he [Leibniz] recognizes that the autonomy of individual substances raises the important question of how two autonomous things could possibly interact" (111).

Though OOO according to Harman derives from a critique of such notable post-modernists as Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze, as well as certain peripheral figures such as the recently deceased Bruno Latour, post-modernism in architecture does not merely share the label of philosophical post-modernism, but its philosophical principles as well. How?

First, Harman quotes direct references to some post-modernists philosophers that he found in the writings of the more intellectually oriented post-modernist architects. Such references could, possibly, only reveal a cocktail party trendiness rather than any deep connection between the two *objects*, philosophy as an object and architecture as an object, where each object contains its own autonomous universe of a complexity of objects.

Second, Harman observes that post-modernist architecture uses a variety of shapes with an apparently *deconstructionist* purpose: to expose the underlying skeletal or supporting structures used in the construction of the building. Post-modernist buildings have strange curvatures, or odd angles that at best metaphorically resemble the "deconstructionist" aspect of post-modernist philosophy in disassembling structures/ideas into the parts they play in holding

the building/philosophical system together as a function of the power structures/places of/in societies.

On a personal note, I have bumped into post-modernist architecture in my home town of Toronto, such as some famous public edifices designed by Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind. My superficial observation of such architecture makes me wonder whether Harman stretches the philosophical import of post-modernism in architecture so that it will fit into his OOO world-picture. Furthermore, if one takes seriously Harman's OOO where each object is an isolated universe of self-enclosed and self-sufficient entities, how can a book as an object, relate to anything outside of itself? How not only can Harman's book be about anything other than itself, but even if about architecture as an object, how can Harman's book argue that architecture is an object that relates to philosophy, which is itself another isolated object unto itself? I will come back to those questions after a slight digression into the role of the critical book reviewer who disagrees with the underlying philosophical outlook of the author of the book under review, such as I do.

A Critic's Options

Jonathan Swift's satirical remark about critics highlights a serious problem for critical book reviewers as well as critics and criticism in general. Is the critic left with three options, as follows? 1. "spy out the filth...or to praise and acquit ... to read only for an occasion of censure and reproof..." 2. Tell how the book is derivative, and merely puts old wine in a new bottle, restoring "ancient learning from the worms, and graves, and dust of manuscripts." 3. Demonstrate how the book under critical review repeats the insights of the book reviewer's own books: "appears to be nothing else but an abstract of the criticisms themselves have made."¹ In other words, is a reviewer ever able to find something new in a book from which the reviewer can learn? Does the reviewer inevitably fall into the trap of only finding errors, repetition of old ideas, or, at best, a mirror of the reviewer's own brilliant ideas? Here then is my own specific dilemma: if the book has something new to say, must the very newness of the book escape the reviewer where the reviewer only appreciates either the old stuff of others or mirrors the reviewer's own pet theories? This digression about the limits of criticism aside, I now return to Harman's philosophy of architecture.

As a critical reviewer, dare I ask and seriously consider the question: what is new about Harman's philosophy of architecture? Here is what I think is new in Harman's book about the philosophy of architecture: It is not only, if at all, that post-modernism in architecture reflects post-modernism in philosophy. Rather, what is new in Harman's book is that architecture as an *aesthetic object* occupies a space in aesthetics unlike the other arts, other aesthetic objects, such as the visual arts and the literary arts. Architecture is an autonomous discipline governed by a real-world requirement. The real-world requirement is not merely that form follows function, but that the buildings, and the designs guiding the buildings, must stand on their own feet. A building that collapses, as does happen, is a failed architectural object. "Architects may learn from philosophers, but they can also push back, as when Eisenman retorts to Derrida that his perpetual hedging...are of little use to the architect, who is asked to make something that will not collapse and kill its occupants" (34).

¹ Swift, Jonathan. 1704. *A Tale of a Tub and The History of Martin* edited by Henry Morley (1889). London: Routledge. Page 113. Online: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4737/pg4737-images.html#page113>.

This feature of the reality-requirement for architecture creates a special aesthetic for architecture.

In a strange way, this real-world aspect for the aesthetics of architecture, that buildings do not collapse and kill people, is missed by philosophers, according to Harman: “Architecture requires much technical and design know-how utterly foreign to philosophy. Yet it is also an implicit statement about the nature of reality, and for this reason the architecture-philosophy dialogue is unlikely to disappear. With luck, philosophy will soon change to the point where it can learn more in return than has previously been the case. This would require...a shift away from the modern obsession with the onto-taxonomy of thought and world” (175).

Leaving the Garden

How then do we bring philosophy out of its oasis in an intellectual garden into the world with its pits and rapids? The OOO/Speculative Realism stance, on one side, seems to underscore the two parallel universes—the intellectual oasis of speculative thought, and the rough and ready world of trial and error. The fault-line of OOO/Speculative Realism is that it may still be caught within the traditional academic philosophical approach where philosophy and the humanities are thought to have their own objects different from the objects of other disciplines, such as the natural sciences and the social sciences. According to Harman, it is Heidegger, the arch anti-scientist, who unintentionally, as I understand Harman’s understanding of Heidegger, shows how to disrupt the isolationism of disciplines: “As Heidegger famously shows, function entails a unified total effect, one that is generally disrupted only when something goes wrong ...” (158). We disrupt isolation when pushing beyond the supposed functions or purposes of a discipline. We disrupt the isolation of disciplines, including and especially philosophy as a supposedly autonomous object, when we transgress borders and boundaries: “this might entail a slight decomposition of purpose, pushing as close to failure as possible” (158). We, philosophers and intellectuals, have to think in ways similar to how post-modernist architects think: how do we push form to go beyond purpose, beyond function, so that we tread close to failure, but not so close as to result in leaks in the roof or worse?

To return to the question: does OOO/Speculative Realism teach us anything about architecture that we didn’t already know? It is an unfair question for a reviewer to ask, because as a critical reviewer, critics inevitably tend to fall into the trap outlined by Jonathan Swift: the book under review, if not full of errors, is either old stuff dusted off, or new stuff reflective of the reviewer’s own work. I have attempted to avoid that trap, and conclude that the new stuff in Harman’s book is the thesis: architecture has an aesthetic that includes reality-checks for structural stability and safety. It is common sense. Unfortunately, common sense swiftly goes into hiding from us when we confine our thinking to the inner life of own schools of thought as fetish objects.