AN ARCHITECTURE OF ACTION: WILLIAM MORRIS, MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY AND DOORKNOBS

ALEX T. ANDERSON
University of Pennsylvania

INTRODUCTION

William Morris hoped to discover an architecture, and a world, that could make productive human action meaningful. Maurice Merleau-Ponty showed that the world is meaningful only in action. This truth must be imbedded in contemporary architecture. I demonstrate in this essay that even apparently inconsequential architectural elements—like doorknobs—if carefully considered, demonstrate that architecture is meaningful only in the context of human action, that it must somehow reflect, arrest or propel human actions.

AN ARCHITECTURE OF ACTION

William Morris was a dreamer. In the great utopian tradition of Plato,[1] Filarete, More, Bacon, Owen and Fourier,[2] he imagined an ideal place where architecture might help to provide a harmonious balance between people and the world; however, he did not *base* his project on a physical re-structuring of the world. The basis of his dream was simply human action—the action that people employ to unite themselves with things, to make use of them rather than to stand in opposition to them. Out of action would *emerge* a new society and a new architecture. Morris believed that one's actions should be fundamentally manual; that direct contact with the products of one's labor was essential to a life lived richly in the world.[3] He declared, however, that the possibility for this kind of productive interaction with the world had been stolen by machines and the incongruous toil that they enforce.[4] His dismay with machine production did not lie in *their* production, or even in the things they produced, but in the separation that they enforced between the human hand and human products. Morris did not deny that machines are useful tools, but he did fear, with some justification, that they tend to turn *human* labor into repetitive, senseless tasks.

It has been said frequently that, in the face of the vast industrialization and inexorable progress of technology that had already taken hold of England, Morris' dream was doomed to fail. Recently, Drew Leder, drawing extensively from Albert Borgmann's study of *Technology and Contemporary Life*, has shown why this had to be the case, why technological progress obscures meaningful human action:

...direct corporeal involvement with work created a context of social and natural relations, many of which have been removed by technological 'disburdenment.' When we still needed a woodstove, not a thermostat, to secure warmth, trees had to be felled, logs split, wood hauled—it provided for the entire family a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons that was woven together of the threat of cold and the solace of warmth, the smell of wood smoke, the exertion of sawing and of carrying, the teaching of skills, and the fidelity of daily tasks. Though the central heating plant is surely convenient, it cannot provide us with a rich context for living. Again, technology presents a two-edged sword; automata can efface drudgery, but they can also vitiate our engagements with the world[5]

Morris was not really deluded; he feared, even admitted, that his dream would fail, but he hoped that it would not have to. His hopes may have been justified: I am not sure that Morris' dream has yet died completely. But before I continue, let me set down the dream in Morris' own words:

I would that the world should indeed sweep away all art for awhile...rather than the wheat should rot in the miser's granary, I would that the earth had it, that it might yet have a chance to quicken in the dark.
I have a sort of faith, though, that this clearing away of all art will not happen, that men will get wiser, as well as more learned; that many of the intricacies of life, on which we now pride ourselves more than enough, partly because they are new, partly because they have come with the gain of better things, will be cast aside as having played their part, and being useful no longer.
Then having leisure from all these things, amidst renewed simplicity of life we shall have leisure to think about our work, that faithful daily companion, which no man any longer will venture to call the Curse of labor: for surely then we shall be happy in it, each in his place, no man grudging another; no one bidden to be any man's servant, *every one scorning to be any man's* master*: men will then assuredly be happy in their work, and that happiness will assuredly bring forth decorative, noble,* popular *art.*
That art will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-sides: it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the spirits to come from the open country into a town; every man's house will be fair and decent, soothing to his mind and helpful to his work; all the works of man that we live amongst and handle will be in harmony with nature, will be reasonable and beautiful; yet all will be simple and inspiriting, not childish nor enervating; for as nothing of beauty and splendor that man's mind and hand may compass shall be wanting from our public buildings, so in no private dwelling will there be any signs of waste, pomp, or insolence, and every man will have his share of the best.
It is a dream, you may say, of what has never been and never will be; true, it has never been, and therefore, since the world is alive and moving yet, my hope is the greater that it one day will be...[6]

Well, this all reminds me a little bit of a pamphlet someone once handed me on an airplane: "Life in a Peaceful *New World*"[7]—it does seem to be an impossible, even deluded dream.

But what I want to emphasize is that Morris' dream, and the movement that he hoped to start, was not based on things or even on ideology, but on human *action.* It is in this context that we may still derive benefit from studying it. To benefit from Morris' dream, however, we must briefly examine the significance of human action.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant said that:

...everything which the understanding draws from itself, without borrowing from experience, it nevertheless possesses only for the behoof and use of experience. The principles of pure understanding, whether constitutive à priori *(as the mathematical principles), or merely regulative (as the dynamical), contain nothing but the pure schema, as it were, of* possible experience. [8]

This is a radical departure from the stance that an architect of the French academy might have espoused only 30 years earlier. Take, for example, Charles-Etienne Briseux, a contemporary of the Abbé Laugier: in his *Traité du Beau Essentiel* (1752) he hoped to refute Perrault's assertion that personal tastes are necessary in establishing architectural beauty, by proving the existence of fundamentally beautiful proportions in nature. In his treatise "nature is described" according to Alberto Pérez-Goméz, "as a projection of the human body, the ultimate model of just proportions.[9] In such a formulation, the understanding of nature is quite distant from any potential action one might exert on it. For Briseux and many of his contemporaries, the world was a given condition, even if it reflected human proportions. Accordingly, the architect's duty was to discover the essential beauty of the world and mirror it in built form. Briseux believed that *experience* was one means by which such natural "truths" might be discovered, but it could not alter those truths.

Kant's notion of *potential experience* demonstrates an understanding of the world that implies—and is thus conditioned by—one's experience of it. If Kant was correct, the architect's task had to be other than Briseux defined it. Instead of searching for given conditions that establish the beautiful, one would have to first understand what a potential *experience* of those conditions might be; only then could one form an adequate judgment of beauty. The architect would have to understand subjective human experience in order to understand the nature of the world.

At the beginning of this century Henri Bergson made this notion of *potential experience* more explicit and more palpable: "The objects which surround my body," he said, "reflect its possible action upon them."[10] According to Bergson, an understanding of the world could never develop from a purely visual examination, one that is divorced from the body's capabilities, because those very capabilities are embodied in the objects that surround it. It is impossible for me to look at something without seeing what effect I might have on it. I cannot divorce my physical capabilities from my vision of the world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty further elaborated this concept. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* he said: "Our body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle continuously alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system."[11] Later he extended this statement to include the whole realm of human action: "But this delimitation of the senses is crude..." he said in *The Visible and the Invisible,* "Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world."[12] In a later chapter of the same work, a chapter entitled "The Intertwining, the Chiasm," Merleau-Ponty explains that the world and our bodies are woven into each other in a common *flesh,* which exists midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh, he says, "is in a sense and 'element' of being."[13] This notion of the flesh develops a central theme (perhaps *the* central theme) in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. It attempts to make a unity of our body and the world via lived experience. It demonstrates that we understand the world not solely through contemplative vision, but through active engagement with the world, through *action.*

This notion of action returns us to William Morris. I think that we can now begin to understand Morris through Merleau-Ponty, because Merleau-Ponty's philosophy explicitly restates Morris' implicit understanding of the world. Productive action lay the center of Morris' vision of the world. He believed that if people could sustain meaningful and productive activity, they could sustain and improve the world. Morris hoped to make toil useful and leisure enjoyable; once these were accomplished, production and products could be joined in a meaningful system. But he knew that such production is virtually impossible in an industrialized milieu, where machines divorce human toil from the objects produced. In machine production, one's actions and one's products do not meet intelligibly. A wedge works its way into being, and, using Merleau-Ponty's terminology, its flesh is destroyed, leaving only the idea of productive action. A final consequence of this disjunction of labor and product places the world on one hand and the self on the other, and they ultimately stand in opposition, rather than in harmony. Until human action consistently makes sense in relation to the world, humans and the world will remain separate and incompatible.

More than one hundred years after Morris, we have perhaps come to accept the place of machines in the world, as well we should—they are ubiquitous.[14] Human hands can no longer be the masters of production. So Morris' dream remains quite unfulfilled...until we admit that action does not necessarily have to be *productive* to be meaningful. We might still sustain some hope for an improved world if we do not tie our hopes to production. If as Bergson said, "The objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them," then the world will perhaps become meaningful, if not better, if our actions are meaningful. But what actions, if not *productive* actions?

This is where doorknobs come in—as an exemplary case. I quote here from Roquetin's diary:

Monday, 29 January, 1932:*...there is something new about my hands, a certain way of picking up my pipe or fork. Or else it's the fork which now has a certain way of having itself picked up, I don't know. A little while ago, just as I was coming into my room, I stopped short because I felt in my hand a cold object which held my attention through a sort of personality. I opened my hand, looked: I was simply holding the door knob.* [15]

The character in Sartre's novel experiences his most profound moments of nausea when he realizes that objects are no longer just "out there." They are trying to assimilate themselves into his actions. He cannot escape their reciprocal presence, because he is no longer capable of establishing his autonomy from them. Someone used to understanding the world

as object, independent of the human body, will, of course, be profoundly shocked when the world returns the sentiment (like in *Star Wars* when our heroes flew into a crater only to realize that it was the cavernous throat of some bizarre worm...) When things change, when they "have themselves picked up," or when my hands themselves become things, a stable subject-object hierarchy is severely undermined. It seams that I no longer control what I see. Yet such a world need not be unsettling, much less nauseating, if we see reciprocity of action between things and ourselves not as rebellion on the part of the world but as a natural consequence of a proper relationship. Morris hoped to see such a relationship become the core of a harmonious, utopian world. Bergson and Merleau-Ponty saw it as a matter of fact.

Doorknobs are for opening doors. If (again) "the objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them," then a doorknob which reflects the possible action of opening or closing a door makes sense, otherwise it causes all sorts of problems. Loos, in characteristic fashion, berates elaborate doorknobs: "And how difficult it is," he says, "to find good hardware for our doors! I once wrote somewhere that in the last two decades we have successively gotten Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo blisters on our hands because of our door handles."[16] Doorknobs reflect a very specific and commonplace action: that of opening a door—which involves grasping, turning, swinging, stepping and so on. Anything about a doorknob that hinders this action, or that precipitates other actions (blistering, cursing, even admiring) is, according to Loos, excessive and causes confusion (not to mention pain), and should be eschewed.

Though such a demand is perhaps excessive, it emphasizes that the most physically comprehensible objects are those that efface their stance as discrete objects and, instead, precipitate meaningful action. Le Corbusier calls such objects "human-limb objects." Drew Leder demonstrates their potency in his book *The Absent Body*, using the example of a blind person's stick: "When first employing such a stick, one experiences *to* it as an external object exerting impacts upon the hand. Yet as the tool is mastered one begins to feel through it to the experiential field it discloses."[17] The action of searching with such a tool establishes a reciprocity between the hand and the stick, which Leder calls "incorporation," a term quite similar to Merleau-Ponty's notion of "flesh." An effective doorknob facilitates the same incorporation: it demonstrates, in a small way, what I would call an "architecture of human action."

Though such incorporation includes only one aspect of architecture, it establishes a consistent field against which specific moments of overt pleasure might stand apart. Well-designed doors, and vestibules, and foyers, and living rooms, and offices, and bedrooms, and kitchens facilitate this incorporation. In other words they allow themselves to disappear in the context of certain actions, and with these things it is the *action* which most concerns us. Only when such objects establish a field amenable to human action—a field which is primarily meaningful on a visceral level—can architecture's overt visible aspect strike us as significant.

In recent decades architecture has become excessively concerned with its visible aspect, all but forgetting about this field of human action in a quest for "meaning." But Kant showed, over 200 years ago, that things cannot be meaningful to people without demonstrating at least potential human action. Indeed, the things which disappear in action—things which do not present themselves as things which I experience *to* through vision, but *from* through tactility—are often those which are most meaningful to us. For example, the less I notice the chair I am sitting in, the more comfortable my sitting becomes (and my most comfortable chair is my favorite). As Leder says:

As I go through the day...I do not notice my body, but neither do I, for the most part, notice the bed on which I sleep, the clothes I wear, the chair on which I sit down to breakfast, the car I drive to work. I live in bodies beyond bodies, clothes, furniture, room, house, city, recapitulating in ever expanding circles aspects of my corporeality. As such, it is not simply my surface organs that disappear but entire regions of the world with which I dwell in intimacy. [18]

This disappearance is what Loos was looking for in proper doorknobs. I believe it is proper in much of architecture as well: that architecture frequently disappear in action.

Yet, a life lived unaware of things does not strike me as particularly appealing. There are certainly instances when we want to be perfectly, even vividly aware of things which are distinct from us. Walter Benjamin praises nature because it maintains an "aura of distance"[19] from us; it somehow defies action, because it fails to be useful. Le Corbusier wanted to maintain a clear distinction between art, which he saw as somewhat inaccessible and autonomous, and tools, which he hoped might come to unite perfectly with human needs as extension of human limbs. But he also wanted to sustain a relationship between them: this was to be architecture's task. He considered architecture to be, above all, "an art of relationships"—the field upon which humans interact not only with other people, but also with tools and art.[20]

At some levels a work of architecture, like a doorknob, reflects and propels human action, and its meaning *stems* from action. Yet architecture involves quite a bit more than doorknobs. Architecture can arrest action as well; it must be capable of elucidating a sense of opposition and allow moments of clarity to *emerge* out of the disappearance of ordinary actions. Le Corbusier believed that this latter is art's task;[21] I believe that architecture bears the burden as well. This is where I think it may still be useful to look to Morris' dream: he hoped not only to attain joy in doing, but to also reap the benefits of a leisure that allows one to step back and look at a job well done.

NOTES

1. See Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961). *The Republic* lays down Socrates' ideal state. *Critias* describes the physical constitution of *Atlantis*, a Utopian place.
2. There is an extensive literature which discusses the concept of Utopia and its articulation at different periods of architecture's history. Such discussions are beyond the scope of this work, but a good beginning point for investigating the topic might be Hanno-Walter Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present*, trans. Ronald Taylor, Elsie Callander and Antony Wood (Princeton: Zwemmer, Princeton Architectural Press, 1994) which briefly discusses the Utopian conceptions of Filarete, More, Bacon, Owen and Fourier.
3. William Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) 291.
4. William Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 293.
5. Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) 181. See Also Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).
6. William Morris, "The Lesser Arts," *News from Nowhere and Other Writ-*

6. William Morris, "The Lesser Arts," *News from Nowhere and Other Writings,* 253-254.
7. "Life in a Peaceful *New World"* (New York: Watchtower Bible Tract Society, 1987). It declares: "The 'new earth' will be a righteous society of people living on earth, and the 'new heavens' will be a perfect heavenly kingdom or government, that will rule over this earthly society of people." (2) "The whole earth will eventually be brought to a gardenlike paradise state." (3) A man handed this pamphlet to me on a plane bound for Kathmandu, Nepal in July of 1989. Some teenagers handed me *the same pamphlet* on an afternoon in Reims, France in July, 1992.
8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 1781, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1990) 157.
9. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983) 58. See also Hanno-Walter Kruft, 146-148.
10. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory, 1908,* trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991) 21. (author's italics) David Michael Levin discusses a similar notion in *The Body's Recollection of Being* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1985) 94: "...I think we need to ask ourselves: of what are we capable? This question focuses attention on our capacity to *develop* the character of our primordial relationship to Being as a whole *by virtue of* our motility." (author's italics)
11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1962) 203.
12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) 133-134.
13. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* 134. (author's italics)
14. See Paul Valéry, "Art and Technology" and "The Conquest of Ubiquity," *Aesthetics,* Bollingen Series XLV, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964) 222-228.
15. Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea,* 1938, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964) 11.
16. Adolf Loos, "The New Style and the Bronze Industry," *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays, 1897-1900* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1982) 17.
17. Drew Leder 33.
18. Drew Leder 35. Shaun Gallagher makes a very similar argument in "Lived Body and Environment," *Research in Phenomenology:* XVI, 1987,139-170. See especially 153.
19. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 222-223.
20. Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today,* trans. James Dunnett (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987). See especially Chapters 6, "Type-needs. Type-furniture," and 7, "The Decorative Art of Today."
21. "First of all the Sistine Chapel, that is to say works truly etched with passion. Afterwards machines for sitting in, for filing, for lighting, type-machines, the problem of purification, of simplification, of precision, before the problem of poetry." "If decorative art has no reason to exist, tools on the other hand do exist, and there exists also architecture and the work of art." "But science provides us, furthermore, with tools...and we cater to our needs with every imaginable aid: our comfort is assured...The work of art will find there its atmosphere, we will show the respect for the work of art that is its due. And how will this atmosphere be created, except by architecture, whose objective is to create relationships?" Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today,* 76, 115, 126.