BUILDING PRIVILEGE: ARCHITECTURE AND THE PRIVACY FETISH

ROSSEN VENTZISLAVOV

WOODBURY UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION.

Aristocracy has traditionally been associated with determinations of natural descent, social title, accomplishment and financial riches. In contemporary times, however, under the banner of egalitarianism, these vulgar criteria have given way to more subtle ones. The first is that of leisure—an elastic commodity that suggests aristocratic distinction without many of the negative implications of exclusivity. The second and more subtle one is the criterion of space. The fact that we are prone to claim additional room, greater privacy and further remove from others fits the aristocratic template, but is also consistent with the aspirations of the broader population.

With reference to privileged space, the architect occupies the embattled border zone between creative agency and passive receptivity. Before it modifies the architect's work and the attendant self-image, the relationship between aristocracy and the built form is already affected by two fundamental aspects of the human condition—our shared moral landscape and the prevailing modes of socialization it affords. In what follows I will discuss these two factors and their influence on the architecture of privilege. With the help of some historical examples, I will try to show how the use of space for the purpose of social distinction leads to ethical tension. More specifically, I will examine the notion of privacy and the extent to which the pursuit of it leads to social dysfunction. Only through a better understanding of these dimensions, and the imbalances thereof, can we get close to a contemporary critique of aristocratic space.

A DOUBLE BIND.

No human activity requires the sensitivity to space that architecture does. And yet it is in architecture where the grandest spatial transgressions of the aristocratic spirit literally take shape. This is not only because most significant buildings are commissioned by powerful persons and institutions. The privilege of wasted space has always been available to architecture—alcoves, voids, towers, stairways, ramps and pits are not the embarrassing leftovers of cruel tri-dimensionality, but rather often the distinguishing characteristics of the built environment. These problematic elements are, of course, not lost to utility altogether. But their purpose is very often perverse in that they serve an economy of symbolic privilege rather than an economy of lived space.

Architecture has always had an uneasy relationship with aristocracy. On the one hand, all architects retain at least an aspect of the proverbial master builder. Plato recognizes in the architect a special ability to command over others—an ability that has been associated with an executive approach to practical knowledge. [1] This position might not afford the architect total freedom, but it does suggest a mode of social distinction. Each building project can be seen as a temporary fiefdom, over which the bespectacled master builder presides with bona fide authority. The realization that the operatic diva is a category to which only very select opera singers belong does little to undermine the viability of this category as a normative and aesthetic expedient in the hierarchy of the performing arts. Similarly, it takes only a couple of "starchitects" for the entire field of architecture to assume a mantle of knowing superiority. [2]

At the same time, the interests of developers, clients, institutions, the general public, and any combination thereof, are often punishingly restrictive on design freedom. This is a reminder that the architect has always been a functionary in a social system that reaches well beyond architecture. The organizing principle of this social system is a potent combination of economics, politics, culture and history—all areas that the architect is expected to study, but is not allowed to master. [3] The architect's voice is often lost in the negotiation of these "real world" concerns. This makes it difficult for the aristocratic stance of design sensibility—of having a superior creative solution to a mundane problem—to find a fortunate fit within some of the social hierarchies that preside over the mundane. [4]

THE ETHICS OF EXCLUSION.

In its primary meaning the term "aristocracy," as it originated from the ancient Greek, refers to the rule of the best. This meaning delimits the application of the term to the political realm and is thus outdated. The new aristocracy manifests itself as a mode of socialization whereby various forms of perceived superiority lead to concrete behaviors. Overt claims to social superiority became universally suspect with the advent of the French Revolution, but they have never altogether disappeared. Slavoj Žižek locates the last era of overt aristocratic behavior in the United States in the nineteen-twenties, but certain aspects of this behavior have been sublimated into subtler modes of distinction since then. [5] In politics, decrees have been replaced with sponsorship and lobbyism. In society at large, ostentation has been replaced with what Thorstein Veblen has called "conspicuous leisure" and "conspicuous consumption." If in the pre-modern past aristocracy was understood as the opposite of democracy, its new opposite is egalitarianism. This shift is one from the political to the ethical—even if democracy ensures the nominal political equality of citizens (one citizen—one vote), it does not safeguard against economic and social disparity. Disparity, in turn, at all times threatens to render the political process undemocratic. In this vicious circle, egalitarianism plays the role of an ethical corrective to democracy's inherent ailments. [6]

Of all forms of human expression and production, it is in architecture that the reactionary non-egalitarian spirit of aristocracy finds its most natural match. This is so not only because architecture is the grandest and most expensive of these forms. It is, from the standpoint of ethics, also because of architecture's fundamental role in the negotiation between public and private space. The notion of guilt, which Žižek recognizes as integral to the aristocrat's self-image, is translated dimensionally into an architectural differentiation between enclosure and disclosure. It is interesting that none of Vitruvius' architectural principles—firmness, utility, and beauty—address the issue of privacy. The only one that comes close to being relevant is the principle of utility, but this is only if one is willing to concede the importance of dissociating oneself from others by means of architecture.

Some philosophers recognize social integration as a condition for egalitarianism. [7] What this means is that the elastic notion of equality—Is it natural, as in Hobbes, political, as in Marx, or economic, as in Friedman?—begins to make sense only after it has been cross-referenced with a certain mode of socialization. On this picture we are free to suppose that peaceful cohabitation is a condition for the acceptance of natural equality, just as a culture of sharing into the means of production is a condition for political equality and, in turn, freedom of opportunity is a prerequisite for economic equality. On a deeper level, these conditions are not only relevant to the possibility of equality, but also to the intelligibility of the concept of egalitarianism itself.

PAST THE FAÇADE.

Historically, one of the greatest challenges to social integration and egalitarianism has been occasioned by what we perceive as our right to privacy. In his article on the emergence of the Florentine palace, Richard Goldthwaite notices a shift in the common attitude towards privacy at the end of the fourteenth century. While in the *Decameron* "the continual flow of characters in and out of bedrooms and houses almost defies a definition of privacy," [8] by the end of the same century the life of the rich was gradually hidden away behind the massive mute walls of family palaces. [9] Goldthwaite identifies two reasons for this shift. The first is the general prosperity of the era which brought great riches to Florentine manufacturers and tradesmen. The second is a new tendency towards what Goldthwaite curiously calls "the public display of private status." [10] The notion that wealth could and should be displayed for society to see seems to have arrived hand in hand with the realization that any public spectacle needed to be dispensed judiciously enough so that family and business affairs remained secret. In effect, the imposing walls of Florentine palaces played the part of a social membrane—they communicated grandness while denying any access to the distinguished citizens associated with it. [11]

But why communicate grandness in the first place, especially after a millennium of church-sanctioned asceticism? The story of the building of the Basilica of Saint Denis provides an early clue to the answer. On George Duby's telling, the showy ostentation Abbot Suger introduced to cathedral design was in great measure due to, firstly, the emergence of the church as a driving economic force and, secondly, the abbot's own unprecedented vanity. [12] The parallel between this picture and the one Goldthwaite paints of the advent of Florentine palatial architecture is clear—in both cases new economic realities give rise to new attitudes towards extravagance. It is important to note that in both cases the flag-bearers of these attitudes—Abbot Suger in the earlier case and the Florentine nobility in the other—avail themselves of ethical justifications for the accumulation and public consumption of wealth. In Suger's case, the justification comes down to a proclamation of the cathedral as a "monument of applied theology" whereby architectural grandiosity becomes a physical reflection of God's ephemeral glory. [13] On Goldthwaite's evidence, the justification Florentine businessmen provide for their newfound predilection for pompous architectural gestures seems to come down to a misreading of Aristotle's understanding of human greatness. [14] These justifications are dismissible because their value is not explanatory but is purely compensatory with reference to the emergence of privileged space.

The art of compensatory justification proves to be a persistent presence through the history of aristocratic dwelling. In Abigail A. Van Slyck's "The Spatial Practices of Privilege"—a study of the architecture of a children's cottage commissioned by the powerful Vanderbilt family in the late nineteenth century—a parallel is made between the ways in which Italian Renaissance villas and the *fin de siècle* aristocratic homestead use architectural and decorative detail to counterbalance impressions of unsavory excess. [15] Even when commoners are directly confronted with the architectural glory of privileged living, a symbolic veil must be drawn between their eyes and the object itself. An embarrassment of riches is, after all, first and foremost an embarrassment.

Slyck's study of the Vanderbilt cottage emphasizes another aspect of the architecture of exclusivity—its role in the creation and maintaining of what Bourdieu has called social capital. The sublime façades of Florentine palaces might have been enough to create an impression of financial solvency, but in the high capitalism of nineteenth century America the relationship between physical appearances and fiscal realities is more intricate. Social isolation here concerns not only the world outside the homestead's ornate gates, but also the inner family circle. The very presence of the children's cottage already demonstrates a normative division put into practice by way of spatial separation. [16] While children's "existence" is necessitated by their immense potential as "conduits of social capital," their physical "presence" is largely inexcusable. [17] Since children are not yet prepared for direct economic activity,

they are physically implicated in a private simulation of it—behind the cottage's serene exterior, they are taught the rules of decorum, the skills of basic craftsmanship, and the subtleties of social distinction.

FROM MANSION TO SPRAWL.

Privacy has received a deserved amount of attention from philosophers but most of the relevant scholarship is compromised by a peculiar blindness. In her exhaustive entry on privacy in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Judith DeCew identifies two concepts of privacy—as a moral (or legal) *right* and as a moral *interest*. [18] This allows philosophers to argue over the control over information about oneself, the demands of intimacy and so on, but it leaves them strangely insensitive to the social affordances that delimit the application of these principles.

The pursuit of privacy for the sake of social distinction is left unaccounted for because it falls in a space where privacy looks neither like a right nor like an interest. Our rights are something we are entitled to and our interests are something we choose to pursue. Both of these assume a basic freedom of self-assertion. When Thomas Nagel says that "the boundary between what we reveal and what we do not, and some control over that boundary, are among the most important attributes of our humanity," he also assumes that we are all free to determine the boundary in question. [19] In the context of social distinction, however, this is an unsafe supposition. The obvious reason for this is that people in society do not all have the same latitude in deciding their own fate. For people of privilege, privacy goes far beyond the baseline of possible moral rights and interests—it is an artificially created necessity. For the rest of the population, in turn, privacy is anything but a matter of choice—it is an aspiration imposed by the ever elusive dream of upward mobility.

One of the unsavory implications of the philosopher's class blindness is that it renders privacy unintelligible for the better part of humanity. When Nagel says that "everyone knows that there is much more going on than what enters the public domain, but the smooth functioning of that domain depends on a general nonacknowledgment of what everyone knows," he is operating on the premise that we all understand the world around us equally. [20] The concession of not saying what we know, then, is for him a small price to pay for the comfort of discretion. But all of Nagel's operational notions— omniscience, restraint, and discretion—are a matter of specific acculturation and are thus emphatically not available to us all. Ultimately, the argument falls in the trap of assuming the same egalitarian baseline, which it hopes to prescribe.

Curiously, this philosophical tangle throws interesting light on a pertinent issue in architecture. In the negotiation of privacy, the two architectural types that win the race are the mansion and the suburban sprawl. Against the rich history between Florentine palaces and their mutations into homesteads of the Vanderbilt variety, the sprawl appears refreshingly egalitarian—in suburbia distinction is seemingly replaced by sameness and unfriendly walls are replaced by open lawns. On a closer look, however, the suburban home turns out to carry many of the burdens of aristocratic dwelling. Even Robert Bruegman, an avid defender of the sprawl's inherent value for humanity, admits that its purpose is to furnish the multitude with the privacy, exclusivity and comfort traditionally associated with the chosen few. [21] The aesthetics of homogeneity and openness is thus not a marker of social integration or even communication. [22] It is, instead, the pseudo-egalitarian cover under which social distinction assumes the shape of private domesticity.

In the sprawl architects inherit the philosopher's mistake. The suburban home responds to neither our rights nor our interests. Its role is to wedge social aspiration firmly between the life we are entitled to and

the life we should be free to pursue. In the spirit of proper aristocratic mansions, this is done through the ample architectural allowance of space, privacy and protection. All three elements in excess are detrimental to our humanity. Getting more space than one needs or can afford precipitates economic crises. The fetishization of privacy undermines the interconnectedness that sociologists see as constitutive of our shared humanity. [23] Finally, the development and implementation of domestic security measures feeds back into suburban paranoia. [24]

PRIVATE HELL.

As architecture becomes complicit in the harnessing and sapping of various motivational forces, it poses a physical barrier to social integration. The very notion of division—between types of labor, social classes, and the spaces that help distinguish them—becomes an architectural problem. [25] Children are removed from parents so that each can attend to their tasks more fruitfully, commoners are removed from one another in the hope of attaining aristocratic standing, aristocrats are removed from commoners so that the latter will perform better for the sake of the former's enrichment, and, finally, aristocrats are removed from their like for the sake of symbolic individuation. Ethically, the logical conclusion of this progressive dissociation is extreme privacy. Architecturally, it is the lonely lunatic's fortress tower. The following passage from Frederic Jameson perfectly captures the dread of both conditions:

"All of this suggests some deeper drive to repress the social and sociability as such: my reward for acquiring a fortune is my possibility of withdrawing from everything that might remind me of the existence of other people in the first place… Just as commodity reification in capitalism is determined by the attempt to flee class guilt and, in particular, to efface the traces of production and of other people's labor from the product, so here too, in the great estates (imaginatively reinvented in E.L. Doctorow's *Loon Lake*), my deepest social longing lies in the will to escape the social altogether, as though it were a curse, matter or animality from which privacy allows an escape into some angelic realm. It is a contradictory longing, to be sure, whose 'comeuppance' Orson Welles displays for us in Citizen Kane's old age, or in the remorse of the last heir of the Ambersons." [26]

If Sartre is right about hell being others, then, after Jameson and the suburban sprawl, it is also difficult to believe that the avoidance of others will bring about the coveted private paradise. The problem with privacy is that, like money, it readily lends itself to being pursued for its own sake. The danger in the case of money, as Aristotle and many after him have recognized, is that venturing beyond its utilitarian applications tends to compromise its projected value. As I hope to have shown, a similar danger exists in fetishizing privacy. Architecture has always been responsive to humans' right to privacy but it does not have to shoulder the responsibility for its aspirational perversion. Ultimately, an ethics of architecture should resolve the question of privilege before it can proceed towards the harder tasks of economic, social, and cultural integration.

References

[1] Graham Pont, "The Education of the Classical Architect from Plato to Vitruvius," *Nexus Network Journal* 7, no.1 (2005): 76-85.

[2] Among starchitects' feats of hubris, Phillip Johnson's comment on the superiority of Frank Gehry's Bilbao museum is in a league of its own: "If the architecture is as good as in Bilbao, fuck the art!" Martin Filler, *Makers of Modern Architecture* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2007), 278.

[3] Morris Hicky Morgan, trans., *Vitruvius: The Ten Books on Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 5-6.

[4] This predicament is captured by Alan Colquhoun in the following: "With architecture so bound to the sources of finance and power, it is much more difficult for the architect than for other artists to operate within an apparently autonomous subculture or to retain independence from bourgeois taste that has been the ambition of art since the early nineteenth century." David Goldblatt, "The Dislocation of the Architectural Self," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 337.

[5] "The twenties were the last moment in which a genuine American leisure class led an aggressive and ostentatious public existence, in which an American ruling class projected a class-conscious and unapologetic image of itself and enjoyed its privileges without guilt, openly and armed with its emblems of top-hat and champagne glass, on the social stage in full view of the other classes." Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2010), 256.

[6] These same ailments, according to Manfredo Tafuri, were the reason why Jefferson feared the consequences of the American Revolution: "Essentially this was fear of the dangers of involution, of the transformation of democracy into a new authoritarianism, brought into being by capitalist competition, urban development, and the birth and growth of an urban proletariat." ManfredoTafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Lugia La Penta (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 27.

[7] Here is a concise outline of this dependency from an entry on egalitarianism in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: "Many philosophers hold that requirements of social justice including requirements of egalitarianism are triggered by social interaction. When people interact in certain ways, then and only then do egalitarian justice requirements apply and become binding on them. Call egalitarian justice theories that adopt this position "social interactionist."" Richard Arneson, "Egalitarianism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013), accessed June 2, 2014. http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/egalitarianism/

[8] Richard A. Goldthwaite, "The Florentine Palace as Domestic Architecture," *The American Historical Review* 77, no. 4 (1972): 984.

[9] Ibid., 984.

[10] Ibid., 989.

[11] "Just as the façade of the palace as a public monument embodies the public and civic implications of a new individualistic morality, so the living arrangements behind the façade reflect the changed social conditions underlying that new morality—the withdrawal of the family into a world of privacy." Ibid., 997

[12] Georges Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals*, trans. Eleanor Levieux and Barbara Thompson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 111.

[13] Ibid., 99.

[14] "Drawing heavily on Aristotle's ideas about magnificence and the good man, they praise wealth precisely because it gives man the wherewithal to express his status publicly." Goldthwaite, *The Florentine Palace*, 990.

[15] Van Slyck notes that the porch figures of the Vanderbilt cottage represent various occupations and states of character, with the ostensible goal of cautioning the young against excess of any kind. She then draws a parallel between this use of symbolism and that of earlier times: "These details are akin to the iconography of Italian

Renaissance villas whose owners—perhaps like the Vanderbilts—worried about their propensity for hedonism and disguised it with allegories of restraint and sin punished." Abigail A. Van Slyck, "The Spatial Practices of Privilege," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 70, no. 2 (June 2011): 228.

[16] "Ever more insulated from adults in spatial terms, the bourgeois child was increasingly inseparable from adults' perceptions of themselves… In these social circles, children were explicitly excluded from adult sociability but implicitly central to their parents' drive for social status." Ibid., 213.

[17] Ibid., 214, 231.

[18] Judith DeCew, "Privacy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013), accessed November 2, 2014. http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/privacy/

[19] Thomas Nagel, *Concealment and Exposure: And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

[20] Ibid., 7.

[21] See: Robert Bruegman, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[22] "Indeed for many contemporary Americans, community seems more an optional pleasure than a civic obligation. Privacy is prized in new developments. Windows that face onto the neighbor's house are voided. So are side entrances that might lead to chance encounters…The urge for control and privacy begets sameness. In planned communities across the United States, consistency of image is the most important contributor to the sense of shared public space." Mitchell Schwarzer, "The Spectacle of Ordinary Building," in *Sprawl And Suburbia: A Harvard Design Magazine Reader*, ed. William S. Saunders (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 79.

[23] In sociology, the classic theory of interconnectedness and its social value appears in: Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers,1994).

[24] Statistics on gun possession consistently show lower numbers in large cities than the suburban areas that surround them. On the issue of suburban paranoia more specifically, see: Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990).

[25] "The built environment also granted Vanderbilts and their guests—young and old—a freedom of movement that was denied to the adults employed as their servants. Curving paths encouraged them to meander through the site, allowing them to develop a kind of muscle-memory of leisured existence. They did not need to think self-consciously about exercising their social privileges; they would simply act naturally—that is, in the way their environment suggested—and they would find that others naturally treated them with deference." Van Slyck, "The Spatial Practices," 235.

[26] Frederic Jameson, "Is Space Political?," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), 264.

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