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The European Legacy



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Editorial correspondence, including manuscripts, disks, and books for review, should be addressed to Professor Ezra Talmor, Editor, *The European Legacy*, Kibbutz Nachshonim, D.N. Merkas 73190, Israel. Fax: +972 3 938 6588. E-mail: issei@nachshonim.org.il

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Cities in Flux: Bergson, Gaudí, Loos

~ GIOVANNA BORRADORI ~

ABSTRACT Philosophical theories that take analysis as their methodological centerpiece compare objects and events by setting them in individual relations to one another. For Bergson, this privileging of discontinuity, which requires picking the processes of change apart, is driven by the adaptive needs of our species but does not probe into the essence of reality. For him, the ontological point of departure is not a series of discrete states or events, but rather the temporal continuity in which they flow: a qualitative multiplicity he refers to as *durée*. In this article, I will examine the echoes of Bergson's theory of *durée* in two inaugural figures of architectural modernism: the Catalan Antoni Gaudí and the Austrian Adolf Loos. The deep consonance between Gaudí and Loos, all the more surprising given their antithetical aesthetics, offers a view of architecture as the framing of an unbounded flux. This is what I have called the durational life of their respective cities, captured in a state of permanent self-transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Henri Bergson died in Paris under the Nazi occupation. He was an old man who had lived through riveting international stardom in Europe and the United States. Few philosophers in history, if any, have enjoyed more public recognition than Bergson, who was even sent as a diplomatic emissary by the French government to meet with President Woodrow Wilson in the vain attempt to avert the outbreak of WWI. In January 1913, *The New York Times* announced his first visit overseas with a long article. The result of one of his lectures at Columbia University, on "Spirituality and Liberty," was the first traffic jam in the history of Broadway.¹ An architect of the League of Nations, in 1922 Bergson was nominated President of the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation, the forerunner of UNESCO. This public appointment marked the starting wane of the Bergson legend, which was paradoxically sealed by his being awarded with the Nobel Prize for literature in 1927.

One way to read through this paradox is that the Bergson legend concealed a process of marginalization by the French academy that haunted Bergson's career since the beginning. While Bergson was indeed appointed to the prestigious Collège de France, where his lectures, open to the public, gave him exposure beyond the walls of philosophy, he was never appointed to the Sorbonne and never had one single graduate student. Bergson was also a man hard to encapsulate in any ordinary set of expectations. The son of a Polish musician and a British mother, Bergson was raised Jewish, and yet, he

Department of Philosophy, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY 10922, USA. Email: giborradori@vassar.edu

refused to publicly intervene in the Dreyfus Affair, perhaps the most divisive and defining public debate in modern France. It appears that later in life he came close to converting to Catholicism. Be that as it may, the Vichy Government offered him exemptions from its anti-Semitic regulations, but he refused them in solidarity with the victims of the Nazis. At his death, his loyal wife of fifty years, Louise Neuberger, a cousin of Marcel Proust who was their best man, fulfilled her husband's last wish that all of his papers be destroyed and threw them into the fireplace of the modest apartment where they had been living near the Porte d'Auteuil.

Nineteen years before Bergson's archive was burned into ashes a very different man, an eccentric gadfly of the Viennese artistic milieu, disowned by his mother at age twenty-three and three times divorced, expressed the same wish but had it only partially implemented.² Just before resettling in Paris in 1922, the architect Adolf Loos, a harsh critic of the social and cultural institutions of his city, ordered all the documents in his office at 25 Beatrixgasse, Vienna, to be destroyed, leaving his collaborators, Heinrich Kulka and Grethe Klimt-Hentschel to scramble for a few remaining fragments. These fragments would be the basis of the first monograph on Loos, which appeared in 1931.

In contrast to both Bergson and Loos, the great Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí, another eccentric, but on the ascetic side of things, who often fasted and remained single all of his life, paid no attention whatsoever to the issue of his archive. Its fate was left, however, to the violent history of his country. In the last decade of his life what Gaudí really cared about was finishing his last massive project, The Cathedral of the Poor, otherwise known as Sagrada Família. Since 1915, as a consequence of personal tragedy and professional setbacks, he set up his workshop in the construction site and even collected alms in the hope of bringing it to completion. But unexpectedly, in 1926, while stepping back to admire his greatest commission in Barcelona, he was killed by a trolley car. Since that day all of his documents were left in the Cathedral in the midst of relative neglect of his work, both nationally and internationally. Unexpectedly, right at the outbreak of The Spanish Civil War, a group of revolutionaries stormed the premises of the Cathedral, set fire to the crypt, burned the Temporary Schools, and destroyed Gaudí's workshop. All of the original plans, the drawings, and the photographs were lost. Most of his scale plaster models were also smashed into pieces.

Not much biographical data other than the complete or partial destruction of their archives link Bergson, the great philosopher of duration, fluidity, and the irreducibility of states of mind, Loos, the master of austere geometric shapes and silent gaps, and Gaudí, the poet of wild organic forms and hyperboloid vaults. No immediate resonance can be found between the contexts in which each one of these men operated either. At one end of the spectrum is Bergson's Paris, the emerging "Capital of the Twentieth Century" to use Walter Benjamin's image, the art capital of the world: a bastion of cosmopolitanism, in which the new seems to spontaneously crystallize at every street corner as new mediums of expression are found, and new languages of representation as well as the very limits of representation are being experimented with. At the opposite end lies Loos's Vienna, the ailing capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a city in which the biggest challenge is not so much for the new to simply emerge as to avoid being immediately re-inscribed within the bourgeois institutional mold. On a different plane altogether lies Gaudí's Barcelona, the "emotional capital of 1900," according to Le Corbusier's definition, but also a booming industrial center.³ After being gutted of its old walls in

1954, it more than quadrupled its population in only five decades, which was progressively redistributed on the grid pattern established by a comprehensive master plan, named the "Extension Plan," or the *Eixample*, a creature of progressive urban planner Ildefons Cerdà.

This essay was born from the intuition that what really links the three disparate figures of Bergson, Loos, and Gaudí together is their organic tie with their respective cities: their work in philosophy and architecture does not seem to me to come into full view unless we read it on the background of the transformations and the aspirations that affected Paris, Vienna, and Barcelona at the turn of the century.

While Bergson's relation to Paris has been amply documented in multiple studies regarding his influence on, and reception by, the Parisian avant-garde, especially in the visual arts, cinema, music, and literature,⁴ very little attention, if any, has been given to the relation between Bergson and architecture.⁵ What I am about to reconstruct is not a constellation of historical data recording the actual impact of Bergson's philosophy on either Loos or Gaudí, as has been done with painters such as Henry Matisse,⁶ and musicians such as Claude Debussy.⁷ Rather, I will use Bergson's conceptual toolbox, especially his key notion of *durée* as qualitative multiplicity, as a kind of interpretive magnetic field. What I hope to show is that the Bergsonian philosophy of time as a complex and irreducible manifold has the power to agitate and attract both Loos and Gaudí, in spite of their apparent antithetical aesthetics. This exercise is geared to unearth a deep and elusive consonance between Loos and Gaudí: a view of architecture as the frame of an unbounded flux, which is the durational life of the city, a flux that remains in a state of constant self-transformation. Speaking about Loos, Aldo Rossi, another great architect of the more recent past, beautifully describes what I hope to show animates Gaudí's architecture as well: "In his emphasis on monuments and antiquity, Loos is nevertheless perhaps the first to speak of tradition in the modern sense; and he speaks of it as a man of the city, one who knows its places and houses as if they were family photographs, one who loves old things and their ruin, who knows how each place is steeped in personal history and sees with sadness how all of this is destined to perish."⁸

THE VIEW FROM INSIDE: BERGSON'S DURATIONAL FLUX

Unlike Loos and Gaudí, who were unremarkable students, Bergson was a mathematical prodigy, which allowed him to develop his philosophy in a sustained dialogue with mathematicians and physicists of his time, most notably, G. B. Riemann, to whom he owed his interest in the notion of multiplicity and in the distinction between discrete and qualitative multiplicities. Bergson's interest in Riemann's theories seems to have also informed his public debate with Albert Einstein on the Theory of Relativity in 1922. Even the very concept of *durée*, which alongside intuition was famously branded by Russell as "mystical and repugnant to reason,"⁹ has roots in Bergson's mathematical studies: "at first," he wrote, "this was no more than a kind of puzzlement at the value given to the letter *t* in the equation of mechanics."¹⁰

That Russell was so fiercely opposed to Bergson is no surprise. As a logical atomist he believed that the world is made up of a plurality of ultimate logical "facts" or atoms that cannot be broken down any further. At the metaphysical level, logical atomism prizes

discontinuity: the world consists of a plurality of independently existing entities, exhibiting given qualities and standing in specific relations to one another. In contrast, Bergson's 1889 essay *Les Données Immediates de la Conscience*, translated into English as *Time and Free Will*, attacked the branch of atomism concerning mental states. According to associationism, which since John Locke has defined and refined this view, mental states can be distinguished from one another both at a given point in time and over time. In addition, each of these states may vary in intensity so that one experience of desire or pain may be stronger or weaker than another. This view goes along with the more general view, prevalent in Western philosophy, that change is a succession of states, and that time is the succession of these states, which can be analyzed in their interrelations. An implication of these premises is that states exist prior to, or independently of, change. Bergson takes the diametrically opposite position: processes of change are for him primary.

Whether states are internal or external, mental or physical, according to Bergson we cannot take them as given, even though we are forced to do so for pragmatic reasons. Since the analytical activity of the intellect is for him a response to the challenge of survival, all operations of atomization, identification, and quantification, which pick the processes of change apart, capture an adaptive dimension of our species' behavior but do not probe into the essence of reality. Moreover, in relying on the intellect's mode of operation as the ultimate epistemological tool, we are led to reduce change and differences that are irreducible, because they are qualitative, into quantitative parameters. Not only atomism but all philosophical theories that take *analysis* as their methodological centerpiece are therefore doomed to reducing *differences in kind* to *differences in degree*, and to confuse qualitative multiplicities with discrete or quantitative ones.

Analysis compares objects and events by setting them in individual relations to one another. When I group objects according to their properties, or I group the properties of an object, the parameter that establishes the grouping is "external" to either the objects or the properties being grouped. In this sense, Bergson says that analysis operates within the bounds of what is "relative" ("x as relative to y") and fails to engage with what Husserl called "the things themselves." By contrast, *intuition*, which is Bergson's alternative to analysis, takes us "inside" an object, allowing us to apprehend it as "absolute." External and internal, relative and absolute, are pairs of conceptual oppositions that define Bergson's project.

As Bergson elaborates in his "Introduction to Metaphysics," (1903) "raising an arm" is internally a simple act but externally a complex sequence of events. The same can be said of another example that speaks more directly to our subject matter, the nature of the city:

Though all the photographs of a city taken from all possible points of view indefinitely complete one another, they will never equal in value that dimensional object, the city along whose streets one walks A representation taken from a certain point of view, a translation made with certain symbols still remain imperfect in comparison with the object whose picture has been taken or which the symbol seeks to express. But the absolute is perfect in that it is perfectly what it is.¹¹

I wish to call attention to the fact that, it is precisely in relation to the city that Bergson contrasts photographic representation with lived experience. Photography is the epitome

of a static rather than dynamic, external rather than internal, approach to reality. No number of photographs can render what Bergson is instead proposing to grasp by intuition: the absolute pitch of the city's durational flow.

At a 1911 conference entitled "Philosophical Intuition," Bergson claimed that, over and beyond the network of influences exercised by other thinkers, any philosophical system is built on something simple and undivided: this is its novelty, it is what the thinker really wanted to say: "Below each word and above each phrase there is something much simpler than a word or a phrase: meaning, which is more a movement in thought than something thought, more of a direction than a movement."¹² Since his earliest writings on Bergson, Gilles Deleuze has turned this insight back onto Bergson's own thought and suggested that what Bergson really wanted to say is that all being is a movement of differentiation that occurs through time. Being assumed as difference is captured by the concept of *durée*, imperfectly rendered in English as *duration*.

The intuition of *durée* is for Bergson the first responsibility of philosophy because only intuition may "grasp" the movement of differentiation: the movement of change and transformation that makes up the fabric of being itself. Bergson writes:

If there exists a means of possessing reality absolutely, instead of knowing it relatively, of placing oneself within it instead of adopting points of view toward it, of having the intuition of it instead of making the analysis of it, in short of grasping it over and above all expression, translation or symbolic representation, metaphysics is that very means. *Metaphysics is therefore the science which claims to dispense with symbols.*¹³

The articulation of *durée* allows Bergson to argue that the discontinuity that all atomistic claims are predicated on is not in fact real. The point of departure for ontology is not a series of discrete units of experience, temporally spread out and threaded together in the chain of consciousness. The starting point is, rather, a fundamental continuity, the experience of a temporal flow. The components of the flow are individually what they are because of the flow in which they move; but the flow itself does not have a recognizable structure of its own. Each movement within the flow has its individual characteristics, so that movement is, in and of itself, singular and unique: this is its metaphysical status. Measurement of movement can thus only happen when we abstract and extract from it its irreducibly complex texture, the concreteness and absoluteness of which Bergson associates with reality.

It would be a mistake, however, to say that Bergson disowns all measurement as false. On the contrary, in claiming that it represents one end of the experiential spectrum, he recognizes its pragmatic validity, indeed necessity, anchored in the adaptive needs of the human species. His claim is that mainstream Western thought tends to illegitimately attribute to the realm of quantification an exhaustive descriptive power of reality. And here we go back to Bergson's puzzlement concerning the letter *t* in the equation of mechanics that I quoted earlier. Bergson explains:

To state that an incident will occur at the end of a certain time *t*, is simply to say that one will have counted, from now until then, a number *t* of simultaneities of a certain kind. In between these simultaneities anything you like may happen. Time could be enormously and even infinitely accelerated; nothing would be changed for the mathematician, for the physicist or for the astronomer. And yet the difference with

regard to consciousness would be profound...; the wait from one day to another, from one hour to the next, would no longer cause it the same fatigue.¹⁴

Nothing would change from a scientific perspective if the value of *t* were changed, provided that the change was implemented consistently. It would be simply a matter of notation. But metaphysics distinguishes itself from science precisely on the issue of notation, as metaphysics is “*the science which claims to dispense with symbols.*” The ambition of Bergson’s theory of *durée* is to claim that there can be absolute knowledge of the movement of raising one’s arm and of capturing a city’s flow by walking along its streets. And that this absolute truth emerges if we latch onto the specifically temporal aspect of experience

In order to maintain durational focus, we have to learn what Moore has dubbed “thinking backwards,” which refers to shedding the habits of thought mandated by our pragmatic needs, habits that push us to divide and segment experience. In this light, raising an arm or a city’s “durational flow” will emerge as distinct *rhythms of durée*. I wish to underline that, while the notion of rhythm puts the accent on the temporal element, both of Bergson’s examples are spatial in nature. Bergson’s treatment of space as the dimension of quantification, as the juxtaposition of elements as well as the production of the conditions for an external and relative evaluation of phenomena, needs to be qualified. In his critique of Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetics in *Time and Free Will*, Bergson presents the Kantian conception as one in which space has an existence independent of its content and is made into an a priori, quantifiable, and fixed entity into which bodies are placed.¹⁵ Whenever Bergson accuses various philosophical and psychological theories of “spatializing” the temporal character of experience, he has this conception of space in mind.

By contrast, for Bergson space is an effect of movement, and thus of duration. Duration is a multivalent composite, or qualitative multiplicity, made up of differing *degrees of extensity*. Indeed, time and space, or better, temporality and spatiality, form the intricate and inseparable mixture of concrete experience. *Durée* is a heterogeneous multiplicity, encompassing various dimensions of change that include qualitative sensations pertaining to color, sound, and organic aging. “That which is given,” Bergson writes in *Matter and Memory*, “is something intermediate between divided extension and undivided inextension. It is what we have termed the *extensive*.”¹⁶ For this reason, “Bergson compares our consciousness to a melody: similarly sensations such as color are the qualitative manifestations of the absorption of the vibratory matter into the rhythmic tension of duration.”¹⁷

A crucial implication of Bergson’s theory of *durée* is a commitment to complexity rather than construction. What is given is the irreducibly complex, not the constructed. I offer to examine the distinction between construction and complexity to illuminate Bergson’s notion of *durée* and to show the way in which both Loos’s and Gaudí’s architectures express their respective city’s flow. Con-struction has the Latin preposition *cum* reinforce the notion of structure, which rests on the Latin for heap, *strues*, and the Greek for bedding or mattress, *stroma*. The semantic field surrounding construction is thus organized around the centrality of support and foundation as well as the piecing together of discrete units composing a heap. By contrast, the notion of complexity has the classic Latin preposition *cum* modify the modern Latin term for network, *plexus*, which derives

from the verb *plicare*, to fold. What is complex is etymologically folded onto itself, which implies that the inside of the fold is continuous with its outside as in a Moebius strip. The figure of the fold, which echoes Bergson’s own image of the cone in *Matter and Memory*, is useful in order to visualize what he means by the degrees of extensity contained in the mixture of duration. Something folded can be either extended, ex-plicated, or contracted, im-plicated.

In the same way that the two sides of a fold are continuous, our states of mind “are characterized by varying degrees of rhythmic tension or relaxation roughly corresponding to the degree of freedom inherent in any given activity.”¹⁸ If the fold were flattened out, or fully ex-plicated, we would reach what in *Matter and Memory* Bergson terms pure perception, which coincides with matter itself. What is tensed is thus the degree of freedom of a given activity: “The highest degree of psychic tension occurs through the effort of willed empathy. Bergson refers to as intuition; this state of mind is both native for artists and a method of understanding for philosophers.”¹⁹ It is this effort that grants us access to the concrete flow of duration.

For Bergson, not only states of mind but any object whatsoever may be approached by this *philosophie nouvelle*, including theoretical objects such as evolutionary and relativity theory. In his 1907 *Creative Evolution*, Bergson rejects both mechanistic and finalist views of the evolutionary process and presents the extension of *durée* to the universal scale. As Moore explains:

The mechanistic approach makes the usual mistake of analysis: for, having divided organisms and living processes up in order to understand their parts, we shall never succeed in putting them together again into the living reality. Nor does finalism help, since it merely inverts the causal order, explaining the segmented process by its endpoint(s), instead of by its initial points.²⁰

In a similar way, for both mechanistic and finalist approaches to evolution the whole is given a priori, preventing either approach from explaining the creation of new forms and new solutions. “It is no longer then of the universe in its totality that we must speak... for the universe is not made, but is being made continually. It is growing, perhaps indefinitely, by the addition of new worlds.”²¹

In extending the duration model from individual consciousness to life itself, Bergson undertakes a kind of super-phenomenology, since we can connect to the *élan vital* based on our status as living creatures. The *élan vital* is the vital impulse that functions as the engine of all evolution, understood as a process of complexification without any pre-ordinated or foreseeable mandate by proceeding along the fundamental bifurcation between two tendencies: instinct and intellect, a parallel conceptual opposition to intuition and analysis. I wish to stress that Bergson’s theory of the *élan vital* was developed also in dialogue with his time’s strong panpsychist sensibility. Stemming from the belief in the sentient nature of all living creatures, panpsychism had a powerful grip on many nineteenth-century figures in a variety of disciplines. Gustav Fechner, a founder of experimental psychology and a committed panpsychist, was discussed by Bergson in his correspondence with William James. In a similar vein, one of Gaudí’s largest influences is Goethe who believed in a cosmic vegetative life-force, an “Ur-Plant” (Urpflanze) that propagates into whatever space is available, adapting to it in such a way so as to allow for the existing life forms on Earth.²² In this context, it would be interesting to rethink

Bergson's critique of the notion of precision in philosophy on the background of the pansychist debate.

Philosophical positions tend to lack precision, according to Bergson, because in shooting for the maximum degree of analytical *abstraction* they build progressive indifference to their subject matter. Polemically, Bergson begins the "Introduction" to his collection of essays, *The Creative Mind*, in the following manner:

What philosophy has lacked most of all is precision. Philosophical systems are not cut to the measure of the reality in which they live: they are too wide for reality. Examine any of them, chosen as you see fit, and you will see that it could apply equally well to a world in which neither plants nor animals have existence, only men, and in which men would quite possibly do without eating or drinking, where they would neither sleep nor dream nor let their minds wander.²³

Contrary to analytical rigor, Bergson sees precision as a criterion of holistic integration of the methods of enquiry and their subject matter. But the subject matter is itself not a given: no definitive picture or number of photographs can be taken to exhaust all of its aspects. It is a moving manifold of images, indefinite in number because endlessly evolving, which is coherent with his emphasis on processes of change rather than states. Bergson does not explicitly articulate a pansychist argument here, but he clearly states that plants and animals are a part of reality that we cannot disclaim as contingent or irrelevant for metaphysical or epistemological purposes. If a superficial reading of Bergson's *durée* might suggest his commitment to a philosophical anthropology, based on introspection as a distinctly human capability, a closer examination of his work readily dispels it. In fact, in a way that I will briefly expand on at the end of the next section, Bergson's notion of *durée* powerfully calls into question the claims of humanism, so deeply grounded in the tradition of French philosophy, from Renée Descartes to Jean-Paul Sartre. A process of questioning of what constitutes the human, similar to what Jean-Francois Lyotard has pursued in *The Inhuman*,²⁴ can also be found in Gaudí's interpretation of the organic in architecture: this is one striking result of looking at his buildings through the Bergsonian lens.

POMPEII IN BARCELONA: GAUDÍ'S INHUMAN ARCHITECTURE

The inhabitants of nineteenth-century Barcelona must have been stunned at the rate of growth and transformation of their city. The driving forces behind the economic boom were the cotton, steel, and iron industries whose immediate needs of labor brought a steady influx of immigrants into the metropolitan area, which grew from less than 20 hectares to over 200 in less than five decades. The industries moved out of their original location within the walled city, the perimeter of which was turned down, and resettled in neighboring small centers. The new industrial belt encircling the orderly grid pattern of the *Eixample* grew into an urban sprawl of unprecedented poverty and destitution. This is the background against which Barcelona rapidly took on the features of what the Berlin sociologist Georg Simmel called a "metropolis:" a location where the division of labor is the greatest and where individual freedom is most expanded. The growth of the city and the shortness and scarcity of human contact makes what Hegel had termed the

"objective spirit," consisting in the social, political, and institutional block, dominate over the individual human self, or the "subjective spirit." This taking over of the subjective by the objective *Geist* explains why, in Simmel's analysis, the defining category of culture in modernity is "distance."

In light of these immense changes, Barcelona had to reappraise its most important services, its monuments, and its most representative public buildings in order to conform to the idea of a city that was definitely taking on the characteristics of a great metropolitan center. . . . The process included great changes in the relationship between the city and its port, the laying out of the first large-scale municipal park, and the opening of great new streets, their width and straightness ensuring faster traffic, through the old maze of medieval lanes and alleys that had hitherto been enclosed by the city walls.²⁵

Gaudí's architecture sprung both within the gridded network of Cerdà's *Eixample* and outside of it, in the industrial sprawl that crowned it. Their clash is one ingredient of the durational flow that I see hypostatized in his constructions, each of which gives voice, in its own way and in spite of its aesthetic intensity, to the social and political tensions of metropolitan expansion. This expansion is in and of itself already a political project of "a new class of industrial entrepreneurs who, in their newfound social predominance, wanted to endow the city with a form and an architectural image that would reflect their ability to transform the relationships between production and the social structure, and the space in which those relationships and that structure existed."²⁶

The optimistic mood shared by the members of this new class went hand in hand with the characteristically positivistic faith in economic progress and in the capacity of reason to cope with the new situations. However, the optimism of the emerging Catalan bourgeoisie, which consolidated its power after the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1874, albeit in a Constitutional version, was not embraced wholesale by the artists and the architects it hired to immortalize its ascent to power. The search for a new language of architecture, which Gaudí developed in the context of the rise of the movement known in Catalonia as *Modernisme*, expressed dissatisfaction with regard to the dominant nineteenth-century cultural models. *Modernisme's* agenda echoed the great revolution of Art Nouveau, articulated throughout Europe and the United States in multiple geographical variations and under different names: *Arte Joven* in Spain, *Jugendstil* in Germany, the Vienna Secession in Austria, *Stile Liberty* in Italy, and Glasgow Style in Scotland, among many other designations.

As a young man, Gaudí eclectically experimented with a number of codified historical styles, primarily the Gothic, and disparate historical traditions. Yet, for all his impulse to experiment with architectural form, Gaudí also expressed a deep and innovative engagement with raw materials. His interest in the elemental aspects of construction is clear since his first important commission: the design of new candelabras, or lampposts, for the city of Barcelona. In the description of the project, Gaudí recognizes its innovative aspect precisely in the choice of translucent white opal for the upper portion of the lampposts. This was meant to reflect the light towards the ground but also to provide a sense of grandiosity clad in suspension and mystery. The opal at the top of the lampposts is supported by a hoop intersected by three bronze poles that constitute the frame of the posts (Figure 3). As Gaudí's commissions began to accumulate, his interest in raw materials turned towards coarse materials, which revealed a sense of fragility

and impermanence. It is this that lends to the overabundance of forms, and their dynamism, a sense of anguish and imbalance rather than of mindless self-fulfillment. His wealth of new techniques in the treatment of materials, such as his famous *trencandis*, consisting of leftover ceramic pieces, has an eye to an engagement with waste and the residual that is in line with the social pitch of the industrial peripheries of the new gridded city.

The emphasis on fragility and impermanence emerges not only in Gaudí's use of coarse or residual materials but also in his ability to fracture the sense of the unity of a building. This is revealed already in one of his earliest commissions at the outskirts of the city, Casa Vicens, which incorporates formal vocabularies drawn from both the Mediterranean and the Arabic traditions. Constructed of undressed stone, rough red bricks, and ceramic tiles arranged in checkerboard and floral patterns, the house bears a firm relation to its owner, a brick and tile factory owner. But the intensity of the visual effects obtained by the juxtaposition of the patterns of the tiles, the arrangement of the stones, and the revisited Gothic vocabulary of the façade seem to explode the building into a plethora of individual parts that emerge as splinters of a hardly recognizable whole. Thus, Gaudí manages to make our perception of the building as a whole explode as a consequence of his excessive and obsessive attention to its parts. This version of eclecticism pushes the iconographic sources that constitute its language beyond their coherent reaches, thus making them implode under their own semantic and formal definitions.

In the 1881 project of lighting the Sea Wall, the complex use of symbols, which include the classical lineage, medieval heraldry, ecclesiastical symbols, and an array of natural figures "accumulated in complex systems of discordant scales,"²⁷ makes the individual object emerge as a multiplicity of meanings and forms, complexifying it precisely in the sense of folding it onto itself, intricately reweaving its components and thus breaking any naturalistic assumption concerning the relation between parts and whole. Gaudí seems to express here a commitment to the concrete, understood in a Bergsonian sense, as the indissociability of form and content, a level of reality that analysis misses by disseminating complexity into categories through which objects and their properties can be enumerated and quantified.

Similar to Gaudí, Bergson views abstraction as an emptying out, an ossification or an extraction of what is irreducibly multiple. Again, for both Gaudí and Bergson, the object is captured as a phase of development of an open-ended process, for at every point in time a plurality of transformations is taking place in response to the rich particularity of a context or situation. Each transformation or movement is thus individual, whereas as soon as it is represented, the movement has "each of its various dynamic properties 'extracted' as a concept, leaving a bare, formless and static object behind."²⁸

Yet, in my reading, it is in his mature phase that Gaudí takes on, the durational pulse of Barcelona as a dynamic event, an example of which is the rebuilding of Casa Batlló, on Passeig de Gracià, located within the rigid layout of the *Eixample* (Figure 2). The project was given to Gaudí by a textile industrialist, Josep Batlló, between 1904 and 1906. Gaudí's intervention focused on the design of a new facade, the adding of the fifth floor, and a comprehensive alteration of the interior spaces. A vortex of fluidity engulfs the building from its outer edges as the façade does not have corners but only curvilinear undulations that are replicated at every level of scale and functional detail, including the balconies. For example, the bow windows on the second floor seem warped by a force

that is still in the process of compressing and distorting a Gothic *quadripora* into an irregular series of dramatic apertures (Figure 1). The apertures are in turn slit by an internal rhythmic pulsation in the form of a dramatic stained window that traverses them horizontally, a window that is itself divided into three separate sections and vertically punctuated by individually sculpted pillars that rest unstably on a wavy and thick cornice. The grey stone of the body of the balconies contrasts with the shiny surface of the façade's skin, covered with colored tiles and pieces of glass. An irregularly shaped tiled roof floats over Casa Batlló like a snake whose coils are loosely resting behind a tower, in the form of a floral bulb, which grows out of a cluster of three small balconies on the upper left corner of the building.

Only by thinking in terms of duration can we find, according to Bergson, what cannot be reduced to anything else, what is irreducibly different. But what does it mean to think from the perspective of duration? It means to take a distance from a description of time as a uniform succession of equal instants, whose gaps we can measure objectively. It means to dive into lived experience as it unfolds as an unbreakable flow of qualitative states. In this inner movement, there is neither a juxtaposition of events nor a mechanistic causality but rather a display of the activity of life as such, which in the microcosm of individual consciousness emerges as the experience of freedom.

Both in the formal and structural senses, Casa Batlló engages meaning as durational force. On the grid of the *Eixample* it unleashes a powerful and "yet abstract naturalism, evocative of floral, animal and geological motifs and a capacity for exploiting these themes on a contrasting and variable scale," in order to provide "a feeling of fragile instability."²⁹ Gaudí stylizes nature, plays it against the determinism of historically codified styles, and wages surprise against distance and estrangement. There is a crudeness of gesture in Gaudí's rejection of the primacy of form, if taken in abstraction from the movement of life, which is organic, aesthetic, social and political, and spiritual at the same time. Form becomes a protagonist in his architecture only to the extent that it is captured as it emerges from the process of its own formation and only as it is about to dissolve in the process of its own deformation.

The formal instability of Casa Batlló highlights the fundamental ambiguity at the root of organic life: on the one hand, its expansive creative force, on the other its savage destructive potential. If read through a Bergsonian lens, Casa Batlló stages a suspended architectural dialectic between human attraction to organic life as a potentially positive force and human repulsion from what it has sought to repress or exclude, but which inevitably returns to it with disruptive effects. This hesitation between a promise and a threat, what is most familiar and what is most alien, and thus impossible to recognize, constitutes what I will call the inhuman coloration of Gaudí's mature vocabulary of which Casa Batlló is a paradigmatic example.

LOOS'S TATOODED CITY

Aldo Rossi recounts that, speaking of Karl Kraus, his dear friend and a great observer of the contradictions of Austrian society, Loos said:

"He fears the end of the world." The end of the world here is also the end of a world without meaning, where the search for authentic quality involves a man

without specific qualities, where the great architecture of immutable meanings carries with it a sort of paralysis of creativity and the non-recognition of any progress of reason. Truth, architecture, art, the ancients—all this is behind Adolf Loos who, like all men of this kind, was well aware that he was traveling down a road without hope.³⁰

Loos's architecture contains the paradox that Rossi describes so well in this quote. The paradox is that a degree of distortion is immanent to the multiplicity of languages that form the metropolis. But if distortion is indeed immanent to the metropolitan condition, life in the city will never be liberated from it. "Truth, architecture, art, the ancients," which coalesce in Loos's great passion for Roman architecture, are his bastion of resistance against the rationalization process of social relations brought about by modernity, which is the matrix of the distortion. For Loos, reader of Simmel, distortion is, as Massimo Cacciari put it, "*Vergeistigung* (the process of the realization of the *Geist*) as a process that abstracts from the personal and rebuilds upon subjectivity as calculation, reason, interest."³¹ In commenting on both Simmel's and Loos's conception of Metropolis, Cacciari claims that, in modernity, Metropolis is the life of the mind.³²

If distortion is an intrinsic component of metropolitan life, any project of redemption is ultimately a lie. Loos's scarring criticism of the Viennese Secessionist architects stems out of his belief that their promise of liberation of a new exuberant subjectivity through architecture is nothing but a kind of ornamental refashioning, and thus, ultimately, an expression of false consciousness. The Vienna of the Secessionists, especially of Joseph Hoffman and Joseph Maria Olbrich, is thus for Loos a *tattooed city*, a profoundly decadent place where "the desperate quest, through language and through the order and measure inherent in the language of the Metropolis, to know all its contradictions and conflicts, is overcome by fleeing backwards, into the utopia of style and ornament."³³

A phrase dominates the entrance of the Secession Building designed by Olbrich in 1897: "To every age its art and to art its freedom." This inscription embodies the reason for Loos's disparaging view of the Secession: the idea that to break the boundaries of academic art is to break a crucial boundary. The naïvete of the Secessionists was, in his eyes, to think that novelty means creating a new style that owes nothing to historical influence. But for Loos, as for Bergson, real novelty is not an aesthetic transformation but an ontological event. A transformation operated within the formal vocabulary of style cannot, by definition, produce real understanding of the spaces of metropolitan life. For style itself is "the fundamental schema through which the artistic idea leaves its mark on the object of use to transform it into quality,"³⁴ or pure exchange value. Style is suspect because it is the instantiation of two overlapping systems: on the one hand, the cultural system of the organization of meaning called historicism, which attributes to any given epoch a certain spiritual profile that finds expression in a determinate style; on the other hand, the capitalist economic and political organization of society, in which style becomes a mechanism of commodification that uses art and architecture to regulate metropolitan life. For Loos, style is a false synthesis, because it exerts a subtle leveling down of difference: it establishes an illusory sense of duration as continuity through time and it surreptitiously integrates the discordant voices that populate reality at any given time. The truth about style is that it is the ideological foundation of ornament, which is the reason why style and ornament are for Loos inseparable.

Those who read Loos as a proto-rationalist, on the basis of his austere geometrical forms, are also interpreting his aesthetics as a forerunner of later rationalists who believed that architecture might have finally been in the position of teaching people how to live. By contrast, as Benedetto Gravagnuolo noticed, "Adolf Loos discourages every *aficionado* of architecture: everyone will live in his own house, according to his own personality, and the house will grow with him outside any style and, in the last analysis, without any imposition."³⁵

In the same way that Bergson hopes to save philosophy from the ills of abstraction, which he sees as the end product of the extraction of the irreducibly complex texture of reality, Loos hopes to save architecture from becoming the implementation of a dogmatic program. Instead, architecture is technique, a doing, a practice of engagement with the concrete and multivalent dimension of reality. This is a qualitative engagement that cannot be translated into any comprehensive formula. Both form and function in Loos's architecture are the response to the very specific possibilities immanent to a site and the solution to the unique practical challenges posed by construction.

Loos thought of himself as a "mason who studied Latin" because he conceived of rationality as a practical tool, an indispensable procedure for controlling the project. But he never raises rationality to the status of a system of overall planning of the project: "On the contrary, it is often gainsaid by transgression of the self-imposed rules. The most fascinating aspect of Loos's architecture lies in the simultaneous and contradictory presence of a thin irrational vein that is tightly bound by the rigid links of rational composition. It can make use, for example, of the unpredictability of optical illusions and visual trickery that is typical of the interiors of Loos's houses."³⁶

More than "thin irrational veins," Loos's architecture seems to me to show a commitment, deeply Bergsonian in inspiration, to let form emerge from the specificity of the materials rather than imposing it on the ground of its transcendent justification. In his 1898 essay, "The Principle of Cladding," Loos wrote:

Every material possesses its own language of forms, and none may lay claim for itself to the forms of another material. For forms have been constituted out of the applicability and the methods of production of materials. They have come into being with and through materials. No material permits an encroachment into its own circle of forms . . . Whoever dares to make such an encroachment notwithstanding this is branded by the world a counterfeiter.³⁷

Form is said to emerge from the internal movement, the vibratos, of the materials. Matter and form run into one another as on a Möbius strip. This is why Loos wages his battle against style by practicing semantic subtraction.

In his essay "The Superfluous Ones," he recalls with some satisfaction how some architects called his Café Museum "Café Nihilismus," or Café Nihilism. In fact, for its central and strategic location (in close proximity to the Secession Building and the Academy of Fine Arts) the Café became a meeting place of the city's *intelligentsia*, including Loos's own "lessons in living," which he held at the "wholly unique school which he ran around the café table."³⁸ Café Nihilism, as it was most commonly referred to, is one of Loos's most notable early commissions and a "mature architectural expression of Loosian negation, of the theorized renunciation of style . . . Here the supremacy of absence comes into its own."³⁹ A surface of white plaster envelops the exterior façade,

which is rhythmically marked by rectangular slits in the wall that constitute the windows of the Café onto Elisabethstrasse. "This white, abstract 'untattooed' wall holds a direct dialogue with the *Grossstadt*. In this it is shown to be 'an object without qualities.' (Figure 4)"⁴⁰

Loos avoided all decoration in the design of the interiors of Café Nihilism, shaping it primarily with colored walls, mahogany furniture, and red-stained bentwood models of Thonet and Kohn chairs that he reworked slightly by using an elliptical instead of a round cross-section. The choice of Thonet chairs is meaningful as a symbol of modernity, but it is also a call to practice restraint against the materialistic proliferation of newer and newer models. In line with the Viennese tradition, the Café is L-shaped: in the long arm Loos placed the billiard and the game room, leaving the reading and conversation spaces in the short arm. A cylindrical cash register, which is at the meeting point of the two arms and in line with the entrance, anchors the composition. Nine tall and skinny mirrors stand behind the register disposed in a jagged line that reflects the inside and the outside, producing the illusion of infinite regress (Figure 5).

The space of Café Nihilism frames this moment of unresolvable dialectic and the impossibility of synthesis, both of which raise the question of an irreducible multiplicity of languages in the metropolis, of a One composed of Many that are in potential or actual conflict with one another. This is the situation of Loos's Vienna, the moment of *finis Austriae*,⁴¹ the end of Austria and the Hapsburg Empire. Finally, this is the moment in which impermanence is most visible, in which the awareness of time passing and the transience of things acquire a voice, in which the question of what to do with their fading away becomes more pressing. Time goes by, ideas circulate and quickly turn into ideologies, people, beliefs, institutions, and even simple objects endlessly disappear. Life in the metropolis is all about vanishing, slipping away. Loos's architecture, its clean lines, its gaping holes, its suspended silence is about this specific sense of the city whether he was building within the physical boundaries of Vienna or outside of them, as it is in the case of the houses he built in Paris for the Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara in 1927, and in Prague for the engineer František Müller and his wife in 1930.

At the turn of the century, Barcelona was dilating, unfolding or ex-plicating itself at a breathtaking place. Gaudí's Casa Battló registered its durational rhythm. By contrast, in the same years Vienna was contracting, folding back onto itself as it "wrapped up" its imperial function. Loos's reflections on the role of form in architecture, the meaning of style, and his exercise of subtraction in Café Nihilism all speak of it. Both Gaudí and Loos thus emerge as men of their cities, each of whom "knows its places and houses as if they were family photographs, one who loves old things and their ruin, who knows how each place is steeped in personal history and sees with sadness how all of this is destined to perish." Albeit from aesthetically opposite ends, Gaudí and Loos, as architects, knew what Bergson made clear to philosophy: that there is no such thing as "becoming in general." Movement proceeds from one unique place to another always within a specific context, which is what makes it heterogeneous. And while it is true that movement travels across space, movement itself is not the space it passes over and cannot be completely reduced to it.



Figure 1. Antoni Gaudí, Plaza Real Lamppost, Barcelona



Figure 2. Antoni Gaudí, exterior of Casa Battló, Barcelona



Figure 3. Antoni Gaudí, close-up exterior of Casa Batlló, Barcelona

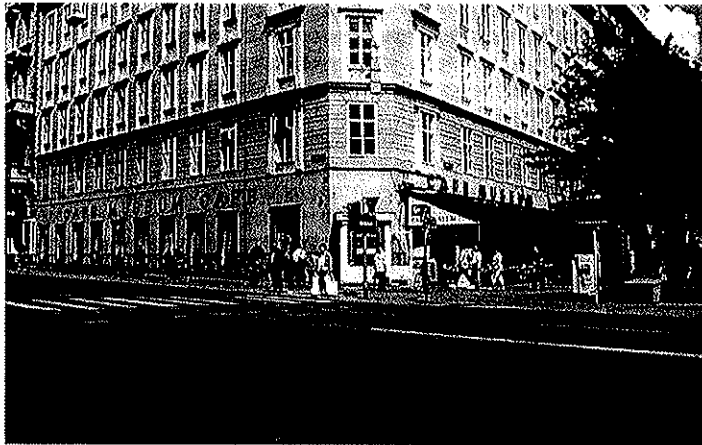


Figure 4. Adolf Loos, exterior of Café Museum, Vienna

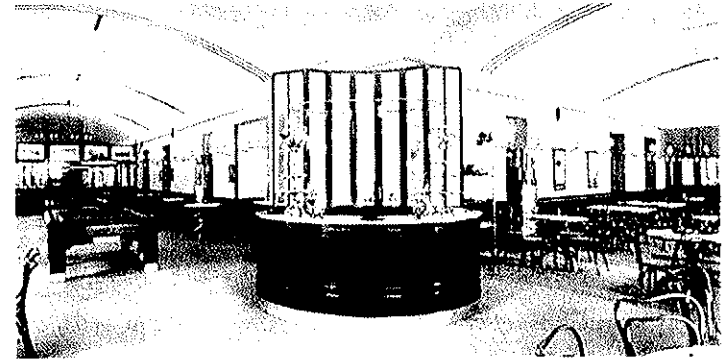


Figure 5. Adolf Loos, interior of Café Museum, Vienna

NOTES

1. Philippe Soulez and Frédéric Worms, *Bergson* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 134.
2. There is ample debate on the extent of the destruction of Adolf Loos's archive by his collaborators: Beatriz Colomina takes the view it was indeed destroyed by his collaborators and that only fragments survived. Cf. Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994). Janet Stewart contests Colomina's claim that the fragments gathered by Kulka and Hentchel "will become the only evidence for generations of scholarship" and points out that Colomina's claim applies mostly to Loos's architectural papers and plans but not to his essayistic work, which, however, underwent a tortuous history starting right after Loos's death in 1933. Janet Stewart, *Fashioning Vienna: Adolf Loos's Cultural Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 15.
3. Le Corbusier, "On Discovering Gaudí's Architecture," in *Gaudí* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 1957), 22.
4. Among the most extensive and rigorous studies is Paul Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
5. Starting from the 1990s, a number of architectural theorists interested in the question of the virtual and the problem of time in relation to form turned their attention to Bergson. See Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
6. Paul Antliff, "The Rhythms of Duration: Bergson and the Art of Matisse," in *The New Bergson*, ed. John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 184–208.
7. There is a large body of literature on the relation between Bergson and Debussy. Suffice to mention Vladimir Jankélévitch's classic study, *Debussy et le Mystère de l'Instant* (Neuchâtel: Baconnière, 1949).
8. Aldo Rossi, Introduction to Adolf Loos, *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays 1897–1900*, trans. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), xi.
9. Bertrand Russell, "The Philosophy of Bergson," *The Monist* 22 (1912): 321–47.
10. F. C. T. Moore, *Bergson: Thinking Backwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 64.
11. Henri Bergson, "Introduction to Metaphysics," in *The Creative Mind* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1946), 189.
12. Henri Bergson, "Philosophical Intuition," in *The Creative Mind*, 143.
13. Bergson, "Introduction to Metaphysics," in *The Creative Mind*, 191.

14. Bergson, "Introduction" in *The Creative Mind*, 11.
15. Cf. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (New York: MacMillan, 1910), 91–93.
16. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 245.
17. Antliff, "The Rhythms of Duration: Bergson and the Art of Matisse," 188.
18. Antliff, "The Rhythms of Duration: Bergson and the Art of Matisse," 196.
19. Antliff, "The Rhythms of Duration: Bergson and the Art of Matisse," 196.
20. Moore, *Bergson: Thinking Backwards*, 9.
21. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1911), 241.
22. Paul Linder, "Encuentros con Antonio Gaudí," *Mar del Sur*, 4, 1950.
23. Bergson, Introduction to *The Creative Mind*, 9.
24. Cf. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press), 1993.
25. Ignasi de Sola-Morales, *Antoni Gaudí* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 7–8.
26. Sola-Morales, *Antoni Gaudí*, 7.
27. Sola-Morales, *Antoni Gaudí*, 18.
28. Mullarkey, Introduction to *The New Bergson*, 6.
29. Sola-Morales, *Antoni Gaudí*, 29.
30. Rossi, Introduction to Adolf Loos, *Spoken into the Void*, ix.
31. Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 4.
32. Around the breakout of WWI, when Simmel's influence on Loos was most crucial, Simmel developed a *Lebenanschauung*, a philosophy of life based on a conception of life as "capacity to go out beyond itself, to set its limits by reaching out beyond them; that is, beyond itself" (Georg Simmel, *A View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010], 10). The tension set by the notion of limit introduces Simmel's idea of *form*, itself assumed as limit, "contrast with what is neighboring, cohesion of a periphery by means of a real or an ideal center to which, as it were, the ever on-flowing sequences of contents or processes are bent back" (11). This language of limit and flow has an affinity with the writings of contemporary philosophers of consciousness, first and foremost, with Bergson.
33. Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism*, 113.
34. Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism*, 111.
35. Benedetto Gravagnuolo, *Adolf Loos: Theory and Works* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1982), 12.
36. Gravagnuolo, *Adolf Loos*, 18.
37. Loos, *Spoken into the Void*, 66.
38. Oskar Kokoschka, "Mein Leben—Erinnerung an Adolf Loos," *Alte und Moderne Kunst* 113 (November–December 1970): 4–6; also quoted in Gravagnuolo, *Adolf Loos*, 18.
39. Gravagnuolo, *Adolf Loos*, 95.
40. Gravagnuolo, *Adolf Loos*, 95.
41. Claudio Magris, *Danube* (New York: Random House, 2001).