

Session 4

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Reading Architecture Through Bergson's Schema of Memory

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This presentation proposes a reading of architecture through Henri Bergson's philosophy, i.e. through the reading of the Nadir Afonso Contemporary Art Museum designed by the architect Álvaro Siza. Bergson's theory of time and memory offers a new understanding of how we experience and produce architecture and the environments we inhabit. According to Bergson, understanding time as a mere measurement is to ascribe positions to things in space; it makes time an abstraction to make sense of the world around us. Instead, Bergson understood the nature of reality as transient and in constant transition and invites us to think of time through our subjective experience. Therefore, his theory of 'duration' is a dynamic system where time constantly unfolds, and memory becomes a fundamental schema for the workings of reality.

When positioning architecture within Bergson's theory of duration and his notion of matter as "an aggregate of images," movement becomes more than a mere sequence of moments, and memory becomes more than the simple recollection of events. Bergson's philosophy can unveil new understandings of our environments by inserting the subject into the real, not as an observer, but as an integral part of the images that constitute the universe, putting subjectivity and objectivity on equal terms. Through his philosophy of memory, i.e. the notion of unconscious images and the virtual, Bergson opens the horizon of existence beyond what we can perceive, rendering the past with an ontological status.

We have an inherent cultural assumption that regards works of architecture as something fundamentally stable and everlasting, or at least to embody a particular attitude of permanence. We continuously search for stable backgrounds upon which human action can unfold – stable institutions, values, traditions, etc., and enduring societal structures. Memory and identity become critical in these structures; however, we continuously resist change, particularly the change of values – ideological, aesthetical, or otherwise. This expectation leads to a misconception of the true nature of architecture and, for that matter, of reality itself. For example, compared to other art forms like painting or sculpture, we find that architecture can only be fully understood when experienced through time. When we look at a painting or a sculpture, we build an understanding from our observation – it is a relationship between an object and its observer. In architecture, this relationship is blurred and disrupted; we need to experience the architecture by becoming part of it and rely on our unfolding perceptions and experiences – time becomes a fundamental element of architecture.

In a world that tends to perceive architecture as a stable and fixed image, we find that its solidity is merely apparent. Buildings have history, and memory can be substantiated or embodied in their walls. When we live the built environment, we bring our own histories and memories, and these play a critical role in our experience. Following Bergson, we can say that our duration interpenetrates the durations of the environments we inhabit. In this way, architecture participates in the durations of those who insert themselves in the materialised spaces where memories are embodied. While the ways we produce architecture and our practical understanding of buildings are inherently spatial and objective, the moment of contact between our individual psychic life and the memories and meaning of a particular space strikes us as unique. For a moment, our character, identity, and memories intertwine with the environment of that space in a common duration, as if a melody.