

Our Relationship to Architecture as a Mode of Shared Citizenship: Some Arendtian Thoughts

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In Memory of Namir Khan

"the public and political realm...is synonymous with architecture."
Daniel Libeskind (Gillmor 2004, 62)

In these reflections, the question I want to pose (a question that comes close to unraveling the whole of my work as a political theorist hitherto) is: Can politics educate us to citizenship? And if it can't, what can? Now I don't want to rush too quickly to a categorical "no" answer to the first question. But what we encounter in the reality of contemporary political life certainly gives us enough reason to lean towards a "no" answer that we should want to have ready a possible "fall-back answer," if I can put it that way. Hence the second question: if politics can't educate us to citizenship, what can? Technology constitutes a significant part of the problem here. Indeed, an alternative way of wrestling with the topic could proceed under the following title: "The Defeat of Citizenship by Technology, and Its Revival By Means of Shared Public Experience (such as Architecture)."¹ But I'm not going to pursue the problem in that way here. Rather, I want to raise some questions about the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt. In particular, the question I'll be posing is, if Arendt sees "public space" as the central category of her political philosophy, why is she so determined to make *politics* the decisive vehicle and standard of public space, rather than public space in a more literal sense, i.e., architecture (and again, I'm fully conscious of how subversive these questions are of *my own* work as a political theorist, not just Arendt's).

In recent years an extensive literature has arisen, at the intersection of Rawlsian and Habermasian political theory, on the notion of "public reason." While both notions share an appeal to "publicity," I think public reason is in some sense less important for citizenship than Arendt's notion of "public space." Public reason, at least as it operates in Rawls's later thought, primarily refers to the appropriate considerations relevant to the discourse of political and juridical elites with respect to the constitutional structure of the political order. Public space, on the other hand, is in principle relevant to *all* citizens. Therefore, although I concede that there are significant affinities between Arendt and the theorists preoccupied

with public reason, I think there's something to be said for maintaining allegiance to *her* notion of the public realm (at least in some version).

The basic idea I want to argue for is this: The fundamental categories of Arendt's political philosophy, such as worldliness and public space or "space of appearances," are architectural ones (one can see this in how certain architectural theorists and even practitioners respond to her work). Hence, precisely where one encounters limits in trying to apply her political philosophy to *politics*, one can perhaps redeem her political philosophy by applying it to architecture.

Let me start with a very brief summary of Arendt's political philosophy. The core problem of Arendt's political philosophy is the problem of *mortality*—the question of how to stabilize a meaningful existence for mortal creatures who come on the scene and then in fairly short order depart again. Arendt has really a dual response to this problem. The first response is the construction of a "worldly artifice" that provides a durable site for our "comings and goings" as mortal creatures. She calls this "reification," in a positive sense. As Arendt puts it, this durable world, "a non-mortal home for mortal beings," offers "a premonition of immortality...something immortal achieved by mortal hands" (Arendt 1998, 168; quoted in Frampton 1979, 110). This core problem in Arendt's thinking is captured nicely by Alex Colville (Cheetham 1994, 59): "Life is characterized by its lack of permanence. Art, I think, tries to compensate for this. Art tries to be permanent, tries to extract from the transitory, that which is durably meaningful."² That this sort of immortalizing function is implicit in architecture as the creation of a lasting habitat and a more durable context for human activities is not a surprise; but Arendt didn't stop here in developing her idea. She also wanted to draw a kind of immortality out of the fact that human beings, as political creatures, *speak* and *act*—they enact deeds, and these deeds are narrated in stories that outlive the deeds themselves. One might say that Arendt's ultimate theoretical project was to experiment with the thought that "collective action" could function as a kind of "art" in Colville's sense (as the quest for durable meaning extracted from what is transitory). The basic idea is that once we have erected a tangible "world" of durable things that gives us an immortal or less mortal place for our doings as human beings, we can enact words and deeds in this space that will achieve, in effect, a second, higher-order immortality. Hence the supremely high existential ranking of politics articulated in Arendt's work.

Can politics live up to this very exalted existential purpose? I'm not sure it can. But in any case, there's something misleading about distinguishing as sharply as Arendt does between the kind of immortality achieved in the fabrication of a

enduring world and that achieved in the enacting of memorable words and deeds. Arendt's "official" view is that architecture is pre-political: "Before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the *polis*" (Arendt 1998, 194-195). There are four other references to architecture in *The Human Condition*, the first three of which (39, 91, 128) celebrate architecture as a "public art" and a "liberal art," whereas the fourth reference (157) relates the Greek view of the inferiority of all crafts, including architecture, in relation to genuine "praxis." According to Kojin Karatani, this latter Greek view was typified by Plato, notwithstanding the fact that Plato made fundamental appeal to architecture as a privileged image of philosophy: "Plato disdained both architecture and the real-life architect" (Karatani 1995, 6).³ In that sense, one could say that in her last-cited reference to architecture, Arendt shares more with Plato than she herself desires, since the broader argument of *The Human Condition* is intended to be thoroughly anti-Platonic.

In any case, what's properly political according to what I've called Arendt's official view is simply the talking and acting that unfolds in a public space. If, for instance, we construct a parliament, what are political are the speeches that get delivered in this place or space of appearances, not the place itself. But one starts to rethink this conception as one reflects more seriously on the central concept of Arendt's political philosophy: public space. In fact, one could even ask whether it is really a political concept at all. It's not about rule. It's not about power (although she has important things to say about power). It's not about justice, or about the distribution of goods and resources. It's about *how things look*, and how the experience of collective togetherness is organized by how things look. That is, what's at stake here is actually very close to what's at stake in architecture (or an important part of what's at stake in architecture). Arendt herself acknowledges this in an interesting discussion in a famous 1964 interview: she starts by observing that a central problem of the modern world is that nobody cares any longer what the world looks like.

INTERVIEWER: "World" understood always as the space in which politics can originate.

ARENDT: I comprehend it now in a much larger sense, as the space in which things become public, as the space in which one lives and which must look presentable. In which art appears, of course. In which all kinds of things appear. (Arendt 1994, 20)

I would be inclined to say that the notion offered in this re-statement, that public space isn't exhausted by politics (or that there is a kind of broader sense of politics at stake in public space), is already anticipated in *The Human Condition* itself, whether Arendt intended this or not. Evidence for this claim is provided by the fact that, as it appears to me, Chapter 4 of the book (on "Work") is intellectually more powerful than Chapter 5 (on "Action"), or offers a more central account of Arendt's philosophical concerns.

As I interpret Arendt's final reflections on "judging," her project to base an answer to the problem of mortality on the imperishable meaning of what political agents enact through speaking and acting doesn't really work since the self-enacted stories of historical praxis still require "art" (poetry, historiography) in order to fashion them as memorable and therefore durable sites of meaning. One can pose a second challenge: Isn't this whole way of thinking about politics just a mode of political romanticism, since it requires investments of creative energy on the part of ordinary citizens that we know, sociologically, modern societies are poorly equipped to supply? (This is such a familiar criticism of Arendt that it seems rather crass to repeat it, yet if we are to take seriously Arendt's claims on behalf of political life to the full extent of their philosophical ambition, it is an inescapable question.) When one looks at the pathetic rates of political participation, or even of voting, in contemporary democratic society, one can't help but feel powerfully disenchanted about the relevance of Arendtian themes of action and citizenship. One starts to wonder, therefore, whether thinking about "public space" in a literal rather than metaphorical sense might provide a somewhat less utopian focus for these Arendtian concerns. Hence the appeal of putting less emphasis, philosophically, on "action" and more emphasis on "public space" (and therefore architecture) as a response to the existential problem that defines Arendt's project.

Given the huge emphasis that Arendt puts on the notion of a durable world (and on the erosion of durability as a crucial basis for her critique of modernity), it seems a bit puzzling that architecture, precisely with its worldly enduringness, *does not* loom larger in her argument than it does. The answer to this puzzle, I think, lies in her conception of political action as oriented towards ephemeral eruptions of agency without precedent. In Arendt's account of politics there is actually an important tension between the temporal open-endedness and indeterminacy of action, and the givenness and determinacy of the worldly space in which action unfolds. (Or rather, we need the stability of the latter precisely in order to provide a durable setting for the spontaneous "happenings" of the former.) The key to interpreting Arendt's privileging of action over its location,

the privileging of action over the architecturally built world where action transpires, is that for Arendt, politics is fundamentally about freedom. This is why the tension is inevitably resolved in favor of action's spontaneity and openness. Giving more emphasis to the civic dimension of architecture than Arendt herself actually gave it allows us simultaneously to emphasize the need for what is stable over what is unstable in our experience of citizenship.

In other words, we need to address the paradox that although Arendt was unwaveringly preoccupied with how modernity undermines the sense of a stable and durable world that we need in order to give meaning to our mortal existence, her own concept of action (and therefore of civiness) seemed almost to relish civic action in its most fleeting and *least* stable aspect (which she construed as an entailment of its freedom/spontaneity). Arendt tended towards a romantic celebration of "episodic" citizenship (similar to Sheldon Wolin's idea of "fugitive democracy"),⁴ and therefore—in her writings subsequent to *Origins of Totalitarianism*—sighted citizenship as a stable identity or a stable political status.⁵ If what truly matters are the spontaneous happenings that play out on the public stage, the stage itself is as it were instrumentalized in relation to what transpires on it (as, for instance, Wenceslas Square in Prague served as a site for grand citizenship in 1989). Conversely, the idea that we're trying out in this essay is the notion of citizenship as *constituted* by a sense of built civic space.

Hence, in contrast with Arendt, who puts the main emphasis on public space as a setting for eruptions of freedom, I would put the primary emphasis on public space as a public good, and as a stable horizon of civic experience. Arendt's political philosophy is emphatically anti-teleological, and her concept of public space reflects this. Hannah Arendt, in the manner of a twentieth-century Tocqueville, was preoccupied by the prospect of modern life as an enforcer of dreary sameness, and so she was correspondingly preoccupied with miraculous possibilities of spontaneity and novelty. She famously coined the term "natality" to express this sense of human beings as capable of giving birth to something unique and unpredictable. On her view, we need public spaces where what is unique, spontaneous, and novel can appear before everyone, and thereby vindicate its reality. To be sure, any human life worth living must allow a place for what is novel, but novelty alone is not a sufficient standard for a viable civic life. In other words, a political philosophy of architecture must be concerned not only with public spaces as settings for freedom, but also with public spaces as themselves instantiating the provision for human needs—spaces that gather us together rather than isolate us, spaces that uplift us rather than crush the spirit, spaces that enhance our sense of civiness rather than reinforce our fixation on

our own private purposes. To use a term that naturally suggests itself when one tries to capture Arendt's idea of worldliness, we need stable worldly "furniture" that helps give us the sense that we are rooted in something permanent or that at least *feels* permanent.⁶

Here, the concept of civic architecture generates a shattering critique of modernity (entirely in the spirit of Hannah Arendt), for virtually nothing in modern architecture meets the standard of enduringness set by great old-European spaces such as (to mention a few of my favorite cities) the Place de l'Horloge and Place du Palais des Papes in Avignon, the old walled city of Santiago de Compostela, and the old city of Dubrovnik—or, to mention a non-European example, the San Angel district of Mexico City. Over against the idea of citizenship as "episodic" or "fugitive," what is at stake here is a conception of *grounded* citizenship—civic experience grounded in shared attachment to a built place that provides an enduring home for members of a political community extended over many generations. This conception of citizenship defined by a relationship to shared architecture can reawaken the etymological *Ur*-meaning of "political" as referring to life in a real "polis." Modernity per se is fundamentally anti-political in this sense: again, virtually nothing in modern experience (including architecture) allows us to think in centuries (compare Nietzsche's root-and-branch critique of modernity in *Twilight of the Idols*: "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," section 39).

Does the immortalizing architecture of cities like Avignon, Santiago, and Dubrovnik make its citizens better citizens, in the sense of improving rates of voting and other forms of political participation? Again, this has the effect of instrumentalizing our relationship to civic architecture, whereas the idea of a relationship to architecture as a mode of citizenship is intended to be *constitutive* of a certain experience of citizenship, one that can't necessarily be measured in conventional ways.

Can modern architecture be as effective as the centuries-old architecture of the most exemplary European cities in building a civic home, while simultaneously being true to itself as modern? Of course it can. But those responsible for such architecture (which in the final reckoning means all of us) *must be much more aware* of the civic purposes that are at stake here, and must come to an understanding of architecture as the deliberate expression of civic identity rather than as just serving purposes other than those that define us as citizens. One example might be the reconstructed Jewish Quarter of Old Jerusalem, which is unquestionably modern but, from a civic point of view, succeeds in expressing an

enfolding, “polis-like” character. Clearly, the focus here is not on the architectural properties of any one building in isolation, but rather on an ensemble of buildings as the site of civic space, or more likely, on a community as a whole as a locus of civic-architectural experience. It's in this sense that one relates to architecture not as the aesthetic spectator of particular products of architectural virtuosity, but something closer to the relation between a citizen and his/her “polis.” If the effect of an ensemble of architectural creation is not the constitution of some kind of “polis,” at least ideally, then the idea of architecture as a source of “citizenship” is a hollow one.

It may start to look as if the project here is a recreation of the polis within modernity (not a small undertaking!). If this means recreating the polis throughout the modern world, then surely this is a completely hopeless project. But there is no reason in principle why good or great architecture cannot, at least in localized instances, give us intimations of a modern version of the polis. This by itself will not revolutionize the cultural and political reality of the modern world—that's too big a project to be coherently conceived—but if we are given even intimations of a lived world outside the horizons of modernity that will itself be a stupendous achievement. If we can build cities that are genuinely livable and genuinely civic, we will have begun to enter a realm that is not “post-modern” in the phony sense in which that term is currently used, but, one would like to hope, post-modern in a more genuine sense—in the sense that the modern world will have begun to become a different kind of world.

My only aim in these brief remarks is to begin sketching a research agenda. But I think it is a research agenda that would richly repay the effort expended in its pursuit. I think political philosophers should attend to architecture with a view to how it vindicates (or ought to vindicate) the public dimension of human experience. To be sure, some important political philosophers have indeed reflected on architecture as a mode of social experience—for example, Adorno (1979), Habermas (1985), and Albrecht Wellmer (1998)—and some architects and architectural theorists have sought to appropriate the categories of political philosophers in pursuit of their own concerns—for instance, Kenneth Frampton (1979) and George Baird's (1995) appropriations of Arendt's theorizing.⁷ Surely, the fact that architects/architectural theorists are drawn to Arendt must tell us something interesting about her political philosophy. But my hunch is that much more can be done in this direction (or rather, in both directions: from political philosophy to architecture, and from architecture to political philosophy); therefore I speak of it as a research agenda yet to be pursued fully. The research agenda I have in mind here is of course not empirical but normative: not what

architecture is or has been, but what architecture *ought to be* in order to fulfill its mission (the mission I am assigning it!) of drawing members of the society into a stronger, more emphatic identification with what's public, and thereby transforming them into better, more "patriotic" citizens.⁸

Is this whole discussion just more Arendtian romanticism? Perhaps. But there's the following crucial difference between citizenship enacted through political participation, and citizenship expressed in the habitation of shared spaces. Citizenship conceived in terms of political participation is merely *optional* in the sense that any citizen can opt either to participate or not to participate. Citizenship conceived in terms of public spaces is *not* optional, in the sense that we have to live in a public world that has some kind of shape, some kind of look—either drawing us together in some kind of animating experience, or failing to do so, but either way, shaping our experience together. Mark Kingwell (2004) makes this point in a recent magazine article. Borrowing Arthur Danto's idea that architectural beauty should be subsumed under a "third realm" of beauty, namely, "the realm of application, where beauty is neither natural (sunsets and fields) nor purely artistic (the so-called fine arts)," Kingwell writes:

It is fair to say, given that this realm also includes fashion, advertising, design, cosmetics, interior decoration and much of everyday visual culture, that it is a far more significant feature of urban life than the other two combined—in volume certainly but also, we might say, politically. In the third realm, beauty is always political because it addresses, in some manner, how to live... [I]t is in this realm that urbanites realize whatever remains of the old Platonic connection between beauty and justice: occupying their public spaces to negotiate the daily business of being citizens together (2004, 75).⁹

One gets a similar idea in Daniel Libeskind's thoughts about the civic relevance of architecture:

Architecture costs a lot of money. It costs a lot of effort. It influences every single person who is on the street. So I believe it has to be addressing every citizen and has to be a stage for life in the full sense of the word (Freeman 2002, F3).

This is what Libeskind refers to as "the cultural, civic nature of what we [architects] do." "Hannah Arendt meets Daniel Libeskind" would be a cute way of summing up what I'm interested in in this essay; yet the meeting between them

is easy to arrange, intellectually, for Libeskind's suggestion that architecture is necessarily civic-oriented because it provides "a stage for life" is already implicitly Arendtian.

The ultimate meaning of citizenship is that we are given a compelling sense that *public things matter*. Obviously, people can become cynical about politics and politicians, and this corrupts their sense of what's public. But it's hard to see how people can become cynical about architecture that actually works in drawing us all into a sense of what's public. If one thinks of politics as, so to speak, "instrumental" in relation to developing a public consciousness, then (and this is the thought that I'm playing with here) architecture (or successful architecture) may be a more reliable source of this public consciousness than politics.

Well, what happens if people react to architecture just as so many of our fellow-citizens react to the more directly political ways of expressing our citizenship—with a shrug of indifference (or simply lack of taste, lack of a feel for good architecture)? Naturally, there's no real answer to this, nor any guarantee against this civic outcome. Still, architects and those who commission architecture ought to comport themselves as if what's at stake is enhanced versus degraded citizenship. Whether people do or don't fully exercise their civic capacities, we must certainly treat them as *potential* citizens, and make every effort to provide them with a public world that encourages and bolsters civic identity. Citizenship, after all, is not just a consumer preference, but a function of ways of experiencing the world that get objectively "reified" in the structure of our social life, and that are already geared towards civic identity, or (more likely) serve to discourage it.¹⁰ People can feel themselves to be citizens among citizens only if they inhabit a world intended to build civic consciousness; and if what has been suggested in these remarks has some plausibility, architecture ought to be making a substantial contribution to this possibility of responding to the world in a civic mode.

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¹ For a very lucid presentation of how the technological dimension of modern politics tends to defeat possibilities of civic engagement, see Forbes 1988.

² Cheetham's book reveals that Colville read and was influenced by Arendt: see especially pp. 120-121.

³ Cf. Karatani 1995, 126: "Plato admired the architect as a metaphor, but despised the architect as a man because the actual architect and architecture are fully exposed to contingency." By contrast, Arendt's view is not that architecture is too contingent, but rather, that it is *not* contingent enough—that is to say, it's too much a product of design and planning, relative to action (which is ontologically superior), where things just "happen" according to the spontaneity of the moment. Yet there's agreement between Plato and Arendt (at least in the passage where she cites the authority of the Greek view) that architecture, in common with other crafts, other *technai*, is "banausic"—a less than fully human mode of human activity.

⁴ See Wolin 1996. The *advantage* of an episodic conception of civic agency like Arendt's is that it seems to allow one to sustain hope even in contexts where the prospects for civic engagement look quite grim. If it is built into one's very concept of what politics is that true politics only flares up during rare moments of miraculous freedom, then there's already an expectation of long waits in the civic desert; and as well, it means that one can never predict when the long tarrying in the desert will yield another oasis of freedom—hence one never fully despairs. Despite a deeply pessimistic account of modernity, Arendt therefore manages always to maintain a surprisingly hopeful spirit with respect to future re-eruptions of political action (which, by the way, is not the case with Wolin, whose parallel reflections have a much more melancholic tone).

⁵ For a discussion of countervailing tendencies in Arendt's political thought, see Waldron 2000.

⁶ Of course, the notion of architecture as offering the stable "furniture" of a public world has the odd consequence of referring us back to the *private* domain. Yet furniture in the literal sense fulfils an analogous function within the household—namely, it constitutes a "private public space," if that doesn't sound too paradoxical, where an otherwise flux-ridden individual existence is stabilized and made to feel enduring. The analogy can probably go in both directions: architecture constitutes the "furniture" of our public world, and furniture provides the "architecture" of our private lived space. (This conception doesn't really work in French, since *meuble* carries the implication of something "movable," as opposed to the *immeuble*, which is "immovable," in which *les meubles* reside.)

⁷ For Baird's commentary on Frampton, see pp. 355-358, n. 25.

⁸ For an interesting discussion of architecture and citizenship in the context of the 9/11 crisis in New York, see Traub 2003. Traub argues that notwithstanding the fact that "New Yorkers will never be Florentines—we have more transitory things than buildings on our minds," 9/11 brought people back to an awareness that architecture is a key locus of civic consciousness: "the kind of meaning that can be expressed through architecture, and the making of places, comes to the fore at moments of profound civic feeling."

⁹ Cf. Wellmer 1998, 288: "the aesthetic, practical, and political aspects of architecture are indissolubly linked with each other." Consider also our epigraph from Libeskind.

¹⁰ For some relevant discussion, see Winner 1986. Kenneth Frampton judges contemporary architecture by high Arendtian standards, and deems much of it a failure in relation to those standards:

Elevated on freeways or pedestrian decks or alternatively sequestered behind security fences, we are caused to traverse large areas of abstract, inaccessible urban space that can be neither appropriated nor adequately maintained. In a similar way we are confronted by piazzas whose hypothetical public status is vitiated by the vacuousness of the context or alternatively we are conducted down streets evacuated of all public life by the circulatory demands of traffic. We pass across thresholds whose public-representative nature has been suppressed or we enter foyers which have been arranged or lit in such a manner as to defeat the act of public promenade. (Frampton 1979, 118) [For some examples that illustrate this analysis, see n.34, 129]

One naturally thinks of Dundas Square in Toronto, which aroused such high expectations as a civic gathering-place, and which flops so dismally from that point of view: it has the look of a bus terminal rather than a "piazza"! For reflections in a similar vein on the topic of "dead public space," see Sennett 1977, 12-16.