

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



Review of Lars Spuybroek, *Grace and Gravity* (Bloomsbury, 2020)

Author

LARA SCHRIJVER

Affiliation

ANTWERP UNIVERSITY

Grace and Gravity: Architectures of the Figure is the latest book by Lars Spuybroek, architecture professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology. The book addresses a broad array of questions concerning architecture theory, contemporary aesthetics and theories of technology, for which Spuybroek makes use of his wide-ranging knowledge of philosophy, art and architecture.

In the preface, Spuybroek positions himself ‘as a former architect and as a dilettante philosopher’, which allows him a certain degree of freedom, most notably to ‘embark on discussions with philosophers and break them off with such impertinence that I have yet to fully adjust myself to its brutality.’ (xv) With this, he alerts the reader to be ready for an idiosyncratic exploration of moments throughout history and discourse that reveal an undercurrent of thinking in architecture that questions how we relate to our environment – both the world at large, and the manner in which we organise it through buildings, objects and artworks. This exploration centers on a critical question of technology, and how it shapes our perceptions. Spuybroek introduces the idea of ‘phenotechnology’, a neologism to bring together the insights of phenomenology with an approach that acknowledges the fundamentally technical nature of how humans have shaped the world. The main arguments are indebted to the thinking of Heidegger and Bachelard, and at the same time shaped by a broad knowledge of art and architecture history and a range of contemporary thinkers.

In comparison to his earlier work, *Grace and Gravity* is both more sweeping and more intimate, more directed and more meandering. An ambitious

volume, this book explores the central terms of the title throughout history, starting with their foundations in the Greek *charis* and the Latin *gravitas*. In its quest for a general, deep-seated pattern, it evades a chronological history, instead tracing these terms through resonant debates (such as Renaissance depictions of Greek myths, nineteenth-century vitalism, or Romanticism), and building on an array of fundamental notions such as movement, stillness, perception and embodiment.

For the definition of phenotechnology, Spuybroek builds first on the notion of grace as encompassing movement and becoming. This sets a framework for the fundamentally entangled condition of phenotechnology that runs throughout the book, in Spuybroek's words: 'Appearance and workings, present and absent, pheno- and -technology exist in a cyclical relationship where the one turns into the other.' (73) More importantly, the notion of phenotechnology serves to provide what Spuybroek considers an 'inclusive, bridging theory' (121) that draws both on the history of architecture and on Spuybroek's interest in the Gothic and the vitalist theories of Henri Bergson, among others. It stands in distinction to phenomenology, which Spuybroek sees as too circumscribed by human consciousness, thereby neglecting the agency of things. Phenomenology 'assigns all qualities that allow things to be appearances to purely human qualities, namely human consciousness'. As a correction to this limitation, Spuybroek proposes the notion of phenotechnology, which 'states that for things to appear, they must share at least some of the qualities of appearing, imagery or consciousness'. (118) Throughout, Spuybroek emphasises this relationship between things in themselves, and the conscious perception by a human subject, which in his argument connects the 'workings' that are central in theories of technology, to the 'appearances' that are central to phenomenology. He draws these two together, stating that 'phenotechnology connects visibility to workings: we do not 'see' things, we act and move in the glowing halo of their appearance. . . . The whole magical secret lies in the not-stopping and not-looking, in absorbing figuration through our daily routines.' (148)

Central to it all, is a constant motion, an oscillation between distinct perceptions (to borrow from Gestalt theory). The approach to beauty put forward here is far from the traditionally dualist relationships of beauty-sublime, or beauty-ugliness, but rather what Spuybroek refers to as a contrapuntal relationship in constant movement (14). To anyone in the arts, these notions likely feel familiar, but what does this constant movement do for contemporary aesthetics? A number of the categories presented by Spuybroek are not necessarily new; familiar notions of beauty, figuration and the sublime return throughout the book. At the same time, Spuybroek's focus on a moving, fluctuating understanding of beauty helps to situate the notion of phenotechnology as a theory that bridges the traditional opposition between image as 'appearance' and technology as 'working'. In essence, Spuybroek provides a 'misreading' of the classic notions of form and function: what something is

and what it does becomes entangled, but not wholly integrated.

These questions are intimately related to the history of twentieth-century architecture, and more specifically that of modernist architecture, which puts technology and functionality at the center of architectural aesthetics. In interviews, Spuybroek has regularly alluded to a need to ‘undo the twentieth century’, suggesting that the fundamental divide of technology and appearance is at the core of many problems today. In *Grace and Gravity*, this is addressed through the classic distinction between art and engineering, which in architecture became manifest in the separate schools of the *École Polytechnique* and the *École des Beaux Arts*, a divide still tangible in many universities and professional curricula. Where the one is meant to focus on appearance and perception, the other is meant to focus on (infra)structure and functionality (ix). Spuybroek takes on this divide with a fierceness that is perhaps fed by the increasing misunderstandings of the current age. His approach to these issues delves through 2000 years of history, art, architecture, philosophy and engineering, ranging from cave paintings (87-96) to the octopus brain (244-249). As such, the argument requires the reader to accept the various guises of what Spuybroek identifies as deep structures of thought ‘anonymously at work’ (ix). Some might appreciate its encyclopaedic approach, while to others its breadth might incur a certain impatience.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, the book as whole can seem negligent of current urgencies. Climate change? Shifting geo-politics? Social inequality? All of these are notably absent as issues to address, issues that a practicing architect might take into a project. But the book delves deeper. If thinking about architecture and the built environment is also thinking about how we wish to occupy our planet – in which way we want to shape the natural and built environment, then this book, in its own meandering way, addresses that question.

The book is constructed in two parts, one addressing grace and the other gravity, which together guide the reader through a variety of classical and 19th-century sources on ideas of space, place and (cultural) meaning. The overall structure betrays a certain (dare I say architectural?) symmetry, with four chapters on grace and four on gravity, each of which are subdivided into four sections. At the same time, the chapters are sufficiently independent that the book can also be picked up to take in a specific chapter, such as the discussion of stone, iron and plastic (chapter 4, ‘lithic, ferric and plastic’, 115-160) as not only material conditions, but as also a reflection of fundamental patterns of human relations. Here, Spuybroek argues that the lithic signifies the spiritual dimension of culture, with the tomb (referring to Adolf Loos’s essay on the monument) and the cave illuminating the human need for significance. The ferric – a stand-in for metals in general – symbolises the machinic dimension of culture. While wood and stone were also used in mechanical constructions of the classical age, metal specifically alludes to our most recent time in history, where robots and automata stand for the truly

synthetic creations of culture. And finally, the plasticity of the soft machine denotes the development of the synthetic, cybernetic and biotechnological, where plastic becomes part of the machine-organism.

These particular perspectives contribute to an overall attitude throughout the book, a way of looking at things. This sensibility is present in a number of key notions that are introduced in chapter 2, which demonstrates how Spuybroek resists clear and unequivocal categorisations. Here, Spuybroek, addresses a number of classical ideas that show an earlier form of integrated thinking. When he first explains his interest in the idea of grace, for example, he refers to its origin in the Greek *charis*, which means ‘favour, generosity, gratitude, enjoyment, recompense, or literally payment’, noting that it ‘lies at the heart of a world that does not discriminate between actions and things: things act, and actions present themselves as things. The ancient Greeks would laugh at us with our miserable division between ethics and aesthetics. Who are we to subjectify pleasure and isolate it from gratitude and giving? Who are we to view activity as purely a means to an end?’ (7)

It is this (contrapuntal and integrated) approach that runs throughout the book, and halfway through chapter 2 its purpose becomes clearly visible. The examples Spuybroek provides continually flip established categories, most notably in relation to technology upending the modern understanding of human autonomy and instrumental technologies. For example, he reverses the common understanding of early human development, stating: ‘It was not the brain that allowed hominids to use tools; tools enabled the growth of the brain.’ (58). Here the interconnected process of survival and technology becomes clear in the argument. After a section devoted to *charis* and movement, it may seem counterintuitive to present the idea that as a species ‘we are destined for a technical life’ (58), but this sets up the heart of the argument. Reframing how we understand technology – not only as how things work but also as a cultural image – is a crucial step in developing a phenotechnical approach that reveals how technology transforms the human figure. This position is part of Spuybroek’s aim: ‘From the viewpoint of phenotechnology, it can never mean the blind engagement with tools or machines while submerging ourselves in a world of pure workings... To ask what it means to lead a technical life is not a technical question at all, but above all one of grace where appearances have workings and workings have appearances.’ (203). Here, as throughout, there is no simple answer, but rather a tracing through technologies, cultural symbols, words and ideas, and how they not only interact with one another, but also shape us.

Spuybroek presents us with an undercurrent that is very much of its time; it is deeply entangled, enmeshed, relational and interconnected. In so doing, the reader is reminded how the modern approach to culture, to building, to creation has reached its limits of separation. In architecture, Spuybroek’s domain of origin, the earliest architectural interventions sought to shield their occupants from the forces of nature and also provide a symbolic touchstone.

As modern industrial society developed, buildings became increasingly spectacular, showing how far technology exceeded natural forces. Spuybroek's retreat from this domain into thinking through the connected nature of site and building is a symptom of the current time. Even architecture, typically determined by boundaries and by clarity, opens up questions of interconnected action.

The core argument of the book might be made in a more straightforward, less circumscriptive manner; but that would also entail omitting the many rich and tangible examples of what a contrapuntal understanding of self and environment might be. It would mean losing such notions as 'jumpology', a phrase coined by photographer Philippe Halsman. Spuybroek uses Halsman's many photographs of people in mid-jump to explore the relationship between stance, jump and posture, as well as addressing painting, photography, perceptual depth and space (264-266). This is perhaps one of the more admirable qualities of this work, that it encourages an engagement with old and new ideas through a very tangible connection, through metaphor and example, and through exploration rather than clinical analysis. If anything, it takes its own message of integrated thinking quite seriously, filling out the bare structure of the idea to an integrated whole that provokes an observer to look, and look again, in the hope of recalibrating the way we think about our world and the actions we take in it.

Lara.Schrijver@uantwerpen.be

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