

**Rudolf Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*.
Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977. 289 + vi pp., illus.,
\$14.95**

James Ackerman

Volume 5, numéro 1, 1978

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077341ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077341ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Ackerman, J. (1978). Compte rendu de [Rudolf Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977. 289 + vi pp., illus., \$14.95]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 5(1), 88–90. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077341ar>

The last chapter of Part I describes the carvers of masks and their activities and rôles within Afikpo society. It focuses primarily upon the artistry, skills, and personality of one carver as he made masks commissioned by Ottenberg. The catalogue is, as are most of the photographs, examples of this carver's work. I would have personally preferred examples of other artists' works; however, the fact that the information about the masks is so complete tempers this reservation.

Part II is entitled 'A Play,' and here the full grasp of Ottenberg's understanding of Afikpo art manifests itself. The play, *Okumkpa*, is, as Ottenberg describes it, 'a creative and aesthetic event' in which the ritual and secular are combined in an event which must be described as a communal happening or village theatre. Creative variation is placed within a traditional framework allowing the leaders of the play the opportunity for full and literal expression in the composition of satiric songs and skits as they comment upon Afikpo life and manners. Ottenberg observed two *Okumkpa* plays, in 1952 and 1960, and it is the former which is described in detail. Ottenberg analyses the play in terms of its sociological, psychological, and aesthetic implications, and the rôle of art as a social control mechanism is well illustrated in the section titled 'Sociological Interpretations.' Ottenberg describes *Okumkpa* as 'a sophisticated and well-integrated vaudeville' whose aesthetic aspects and success depend to great degree upon the abilities of the leading actors, who are authors of the skits and songs. As described, the major aesthetic elements are humour, the continuous action of the players, and the interplay between performers and audience.

Part III, 'A Variety of Masquerades,' discusses Afikpo masked rituals not associated to the *Okumkpa*. These include a public parade of masks worn by young male members of the secret society and a masked run as a test of strength and endurance associated to ritual and social prestige. 'Game masquerades,' in which the young, uninitiated boys strive to overcome or 'throw' a masked adult, are interpreted by Ottenberg as symbolic attempts to overthrow village el-

ders, characterized by the mask, and thus acts of ritualized aggression. The final chapter of Part III discusses initiation into secret societies.

In the concluding chapters of the book, Ottenberg restates the interconnected network composed of the sociological, psychological, and aesthetic factors as a framework through which Afikpo art may be interpreted. Ottenberg's discussion of the sociological factors are the most satisfying. The 'psychological factors' are, to a great extent, personal observations based upon a close understanding of the Afikpo people.

The final chapter discusses the aesthetics of Afikpo art. What emerges is an aesthetic not singularly defined but given as an interrelationship between the various arts of Afikpo society: theatre, music, dance, and the visual arts. In Ottenberg's words, 'We are dealing with an aesthetic that emphasizes action, in which beauty and ugliness, delight and foolishness, come out of doing rather than being.' This definition and description of a 'functional aesthetic' of Afikpo art has much potential for further study and application. The aesthetic here defined also encompasses the concept of variation in masquerades and in the appearances of masks. Ottenberg lists twelve basic mask forms in wood and a number of net masks. Though the number of mask types may be small, they gain a great variety of rôles through associated costumes, and in order to fully define a mask, we must know its total costume and masquerade. Ottenberg's book questions the present definition of art history as regards the study of sub-Saharan African art. It indicates the depth of art – the many and complex levels upon which art exists within a single culture – and it avoids the easy tendency to consider only a single topic, style, or theme.

This is a most important addition to the literature on African art and must be considered for its scholarship as well as its humanistic commentary of Afikpo art. The book is well laid out with maps, drawings, charts, and diagrams integrated to the text. It is lavishly illustrated with sixteen colour plates and sixty-nine black-and-white photographs. The illustrations are clear

and informative, and participate in the text, and in many instances provide exciting records of masked dancing. A glossary and a very serviceable bibliography are included.

DANIEL MATO
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg

RUDOLF ARNHEIM *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977. 289 + vi pp., illus., \$14.95.

Rudolf Arnheim, who is Professor Emeritus at Harvard University, and who taught for many years at Sarah Lawrence College, is the most distinguished psychologist of art and is known throughout the world for his pioneering book on the cinema and for his major work of 1954 (rev. ed., 1974), *Art and Visual Perception*. The present book, his first major engagement with architecture, applies the method of the latter but, I think, less effectively. To make the best case for his perceptual approach, Arnheim intentionally excludes most of the social, cultural, and environmental affects that give buildings the flavour of time, of place, and of the individual maker. I find that what is left is too reductive and at many points self-evident.¹

The first two chapters discuss the fundamentals of the formal aspects of architecture: space – including figure-ground perceptions as translated from two into three dimensions – and the rôle of vertical and horizontal in the design of masses. The 'dynamics' of the title are introduced in the discussion of the

¹ The illustrations are primarily line drawings by a student: Arnheim did not want to give a 'treasure of substitutes for the real experience.' That aim was too well realized: the drawings not only are inferior in draughtsmanship, they are in most cases reversed, with the left side flipped to the right, an oversight that poorly serves the discussion of the dynamics of asymmetrical compositions like the Capitoline Hill in Rome (fig. 10), Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center (fig. 33), and Florence Cathedral and its campanile (fig. 65).

column (pp. 48 ff.), the proportion and shape of which contribute to experiences of rising, sinking, and expanding. Chapter 2 concludes by suggesting that dynamic criticism closes the gap which other form-based theories create between form and content by associating such perceptions with psychological states: rising = aspiration = yearning or insolence.

Part III, 'Solids and Hollows,' examines the effects of spaces and masses as one moves into and through buildings, as, for example, the opposition of concave and convex and the visual similarities and differences between inside and outside views.

Part IV, 'It Looks as it Is,' discusses the ways in which perception confirms and distorts the actual forms of buildings. Arnheim shows a keen consciousness of the implications of the observer's ability to move around, viewing buildings from different angles, yet almost always from ground level (a fact that critics too often overlook). A stimulating passage on physiology discusses the implications of the fact that we need wide-angle vision to look at architectural exteriors – except when we can get a good view from a distance – and often at interiors, and that this requires movement of the head and eyes that turns the experience into a sequence of percepts, making the building an 'event.' Having struggled in recent years with the problems of filming architecture, I was delighted to have confirmed my conviction that this event cannot quite be reproduced in cinema because the medium lacks the capacity to convey consciousness of the timeless stability of buildings that accompanies the actual experience of moving through them (here reference to recent research on the physiology of vision would have strengthened the argument).

Part V, 'Mobility,' deals with further aspects of the interaction of the observer and the limits of the space through which he passes and with the different experiences generated by different organizations of the surroundings.

Part VI, 'Order and Disorder,' is an issue perfectly suited to examination by a perceptual method based on Gestalt psychology, because it is referable to the results of testing. The question is what kind

and degree of organization is needed to make a design intelligible – how far do classical precepts of unity in variety, symmetry, and axiality have to be observed to keep buildings from visually disintegrating? Arnheim approves unclassical solutions as long as they are graspable. For example, different functions within one building may require diverse forms and be poorly served by formal regularity.

The last two chapters address two important aesthetic issues – expression and function – and are the most challenging. Arnheim's expression theory is based on what he calls 'the dynamics of visual form' (p. 253). Dynamics, he explains, 'is a property supplied by the mind spontaneously and universally to any form that is perceivable.' This property is inherent in the human mind and appears in its purest form in children and in pre-civilized peoples. Expanding on this principle, Arnheim departs from the proponents of empathy (who claimed that we project ourselves into architectural works by giving them human qualities) by proposing, if I can rightly paraphrase him, that the dynamic quality, while inseparable from the percept, is also attributable to the object of perception, so that the aesthetic event is a dialogue of subject and object. As an example, he cites the case of our perceiving a closedness in a blocky, windowless building through our having experienced 'tightness of mind.' The few lines that expound this theory are the core of the whole system and I should like to have seen them extended, if only to buttress the author's implication that perceptual dynamics are independent of cultural conditioning.

Function, for Arnheim, cannot produce specific form because it is an abstraction that can be made concrete in a whole range of physical realizations. But once realized, forms are perceived in terms of uses – they translate function into perceptual dynamics. Programming is seen as a two-stage process that starts with the articulation of a need through a structured concept and is completed by the translation of the concept into a design. A concluding passage entitled 'All Thoughts Lead to Building' reflects on architecture as the visible metaphor of thought.

I like the way Arnheim has related form and function, and his illustration of how ancient vases, though quite varied in form, express the functions of receiving, containing, and pouring, elegantly depicts the interaction. But the fact that people do not live and work in vases limits the relevance to architecture of this illustration. Programming buildings is a social and cultural process, the outcome of which may be 'functional' for some people and not for others. A prison that is functional for the guards may not be so for the prisoners, and the choice between the two interests is a good deal more complicated than can be resolved on strict design criteria. Similarly, office buildings are designed to satisfy corporate officers, realtors, and banks, whose programme for them inevitably differs from one that would be framed by those who work in them, those who enter them on business, or anyone who lives or works in the neighbourhood. The fact that these value overtones in the concept of 'function' have not occupied critics and historians of architecture much in the last century does not justify overlooking them today. The programme as well as the building itself must be subjected to critical analysis and evaluation.

It is hard to know how to classify this book; as either an introduction to the psychology of architecture or as a more general proposal for a system of architectural criticism it is incomplete. As a psychological study it falls short by not bringing to bear on the material the substantial amount of experiment and theory produced in the relevant areas of perception psychology in the past two generations (Theodor Lipps's publication of 1897 is the only work that figures significantly in the text), with the result that we are deprived of the data that presumably validates the many observations on how 'we' perceive space, form, and other aspects of architecture. And as a general system of criticism, it falls short by being restricted to those aspects of architecture that can be assimilated through the eye and brain without the mediation of culture. The vast and rich realm of references in architectural works to social, political, regional, ethical, religious, and other aspects of civilization is purposely slighted in this treatment,

focused as it is on the dialogue between eye and form and the inner responses to it.

To address expression purely in terms of perceptual dynamics is to set aside the symbolic and ideological content that give buildings meaning. The approach seems old-fashioned, as if it sought to flesh out the psychologism of Geoffrey Scott (*The Architecture of Humanism*, 1914) or of Paul Frankl (*Entwicklungsphasen der neuen Baukunst*, 1914). I am sure that Arnheim did not want us to undervalue these non-formal aspects of architecture, but intended rather to offer a perception theory undisturbed by other considerations, but I would argue that it is not possible to isolate perception from conception in this way. Our 'perception' of the nave of Chartres Cathedral can be modified by our feelings about Western Christianity and by the devices the architects used to play on the viewer's responses not only to space, light, and other abstract qualities, but specifically to Christian theology. Further, beneath these conscious levels of communication, there is the immeasurable realm of unconsciously assimilated cultural responses that modulate the way human beings react to form as well as to content.

Which of our perceptions is formed by nature – our physical-electrical makeup – and which by culture? I was disappointed that Arnheim did not even raise the question, because I find the answer absolutely crucial to the validation of a critical theory based on perception psychology. If a response is shaped by the physical makeup of the human mind, it has a virtually permanent validity and provides a persuasive standard for invention and for judgment. But if, on the contrary, a response is unconsciously assimilated from experience, it is bound to a certain environment at a certain moment or period and has no more general validity than preferences of taste or fashion. Accordingly, I want to know whether 'our' positive reaction to the golden section (or to any of a number of stimuli discussed here) is assimilated from the classical tradition of the West, with its educational commitment to geometrical constructs and to ratio, balance, and – to take an example from the book – order over disorder, or whether it is built into the physical circuitry of the human brain. If, as I believe, the former is the case, then we are dealing with a taste that, however long lived, is still impermanent.

Arnheim would probably find my distinction irrelevant on the grounds that he was not proposing a value system in the sense of a basis for judgment, but only describing our visual-mental responses, and for many readers who are ideologically attuned to his position that may appear true. But speaking from outside that position, I find it to be an unconscious defense of the Mediterranean-Western tradition, and hence conservative and ethnocentric to the point of excluding the values, and of course the percepts, of other cultures and of eccentric positions in this culture.² It can therefore be used or misused as a weapon with which to fend off radical innovation today.

JAMES ACKERMAN
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

² As evidence of the evaluative commitments of Arnheim's position, the contemporary architect who figures most prominently in this book is Paolo Portoghesi, whose work is indeed in harmony with the implicit values of dynamic-perception theory, but is from my point of view arbitrary, abstract, and oblivious to the social implications of architectural design.