For the past decade, architectural discourse has foregrounded questions of affect and atmosphere. What impressions and sensations does a building invoke in its visitors? What is the tone or emotional resonance of a particular space? Such questions are compelling and productive, in that they locate the meaning of an architectural work in a new place - somewhere between physical fact, human perception, and cultural association. However, the dialogues around atmosphere and affect are curiously incomplete. They generally focus upon awe, beauty, humor, and pleasure – all “positive” emotions, and all perfectly in sync with the bright, cheerful milieu forwarded by contemporary architectural representations, photoshopped and rendered to depict maximum civic glee for each new project.

Canadian art and architecture critic Ester Choi questions this predilection:

“The emphasis on architecture’s responsibility to produce pleasure risks losing sight of the limitations posed by immediate aesthetic gratification [...] Unlike other disciplines intimately connected to the affective realm - such as music or art - the architectural discipline has yet to acknowledge the full gamut of experience ranging from delight to disturbance.”

In the essay that follows (entitled “How Does it Feel?” after a song by British psychedelic rock band The Creation, who spliced rock and roll melodicism with bracing passages of feedback and noise) Choi explores the productive capacities for physical discomfort in buildings and installations. Choi hypothesizes that embracing discomfort in architecture may have some political efficacy. She examines conceptual artist Hans Haacke’s 2009 piece “Whether or Not.” Haacke juxtaposed works addressing the disparity of wealth and power, in the aftermath of the global economic meltdown, with bitter cold. He simply opened the windows, allowing the New York winter to permeate the Chelsea gallery space.

Choi’s argument is compelling, and opens up exciting new avenues for affect and atmosphere. However, in the Haacke piece described above, affect is wielded in a didactic way, reinforcing an already legible message in an overtly political artwork. Is there another type of sensation which could fulfill Choi’s call to embrace “the full gamut of experience,” but in a way that is less didactic and more visceral, operating on an almost subliminal level? It is plausible that such an affect would have greater efficacy, since it would creep into a subject’s perceptions, coloring her or his impressions, instead of acting in such an overt and instructive way?

This type of affect would be less obvious than the discomfort that Choi describes. It might be a vague form of fear, menace or dread. How can architecture inspire such feelings? Could certain formal elements or procedures render a building ominous, dreadful? Simply put, can we scare people with architecture?

Of course, there are myriad examples of architecture commonly perceived as menacing. Sometimes, as in the case of ruins or damaged buildings, architecture is representative of a breakdown in social or economic order. Sometimes, a building may have associations with threatening political ideologies – more powerful when its form seems emblematic of those ideologies. Sometimes, certain building types have long-standing cultural associations passed down to us through media, myth, or fiction – old Gothic estates look like lairs of fairy tale villains and sites of horror movies. All of these examples, however, are dependent upon circumstances and perceptions wholly outside of the architecture in question. Is there a way that the building itself, as form, material, physical fact, can inspire dread?

---

2 Ibid. 13.
A handful of historical and theoretical texts focus upon the relationship between architecture and fear. Chief among them is Anthony Vidler’s 1992 work *The Architectural Uncanny*. Throughout the book, Vidler seeks out different incarnations of the defamiliarized and derealized in (then) contemporary architecture. He is insistent, though, that the uncanny is not an innate or absolute quality of any particular architecture:

*The uncanny is not a property of space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial conformation […] Certainly no one building can be guaranteed to provoke an uncanny feeling. But in each moment of the history of the representation of the uncanny, the buildings and spaces that have acted as the sites for uncanny experiences have been invested with recognizable characteristics.*

Despite Vidler’s analysis, whether or not a building may have innately uncanny (or, less specifically, dreadful) properties is an open question. Ongoing debates in music theory center on whether certain chord progressions or dissonance are innately dark or frightening, or just culturally coded as such. The logics of that debate could easily be applied to architecture. However, if one takes Vidler’s assertion at face value, the question becomes, “What recognizable architectural characteristics provoke a feeling of dread now?”

Among the many concepts that Vidler explores in *The Architectural Uncanny*, one stands out as particularly relevant to contemporary architecture, and overtly ominous: blankness. Vidler turns to Etienne-Louis Boullee’s formulations of an “architecture of death.” Boullee suggested an architecture that was compressed in its proportions, with blank walls devoid of fenestration or ornamentation. The walls were to be “articulated only by shadows.” Vidler posits that in its blankness, Boullee’s Temple of Death acts as a skeleton, a morbid double for its human inhabitant – and was, by virtue, the first self-consciously uncanny architecture.

While the associations of blankness and death are powerfully articulated by Boullee, blankness remains ominous outside of the mortuary. A heavy, opaque, visually impenetrable and uncommunicative envelope immediately defamiliarizes a building. The blank building does not fit any pre-existing conception of type. It has few to no innate registers of scale. It does not clearly reflect its use, and begs the question “what goes on in there?” It obfuscates the building’s function, and gives no cues for interaction. Some things about the building are evident – material and possibly tectonics – while others are concealed. This ambiguity heightens the tension. On one hand, such a building is deliberate – even fetishized – in its construction. On the other, it is ambiguous, mysterious in its function and occupation.

Why would such an ambiguous and disorienting opacity be the contemporary mark of architectural dread? While it warrants more exploration, my initial suspicion is that opacity stalks our era. Covert financial market manipulations precipitated global economic disaster. Extralegal prisoners are detained and interrogated at countless unknown locations. The production of our day to day consumer goods is a mysterious process, lost in tangled and inhumane networks of global logistics. Simply put, we cannot see and no longer know how our political and economic systems work. So behind every blank wall is a new, threatening machination.

---

4 Ibid. 168.
5 Ibid. 168-169.