AIA Michigan

PERSPECTIVES

# The Built-Environment & Time

## Mark Westphal, AIA; Nuemann/Smith Architecture

Key Points:

•A building may be constructed over the foundations of a previous structure, leaving behind traces of its existence.

• Our advancements as a society has made us more efficient in terms of creating and delivering a built product.

**Mark Westphal, AIA** is a project Architect at Neumann/Smith Architecture. He grew up in Ortonville Michigan, and attended the University of Detroit Mercy, completing grad school in 2010. Mark got his first job in the industry at the age of 16, working as a hand-draftsman in a local Residential Architecture Firm. He is both a licensed Architect and an avid painter, and has been with N/S for 7 years.

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Considering the built-environment, I always find myself coming back to one central theme; time. The word brings with it a full wave of preconceived thoughts and connotations. When time is considered as it pertains to a building, we likely think of its age. How old is the building or how long is it going to last? In its aggregate, we may think of the building by component; material longevity, system and corresponding lifespans, observable in the same way we can recognize erosion over time. Thoughts percolate about scheduling, mapping time intervals between construction bench-marks. These things are measured by time, but ultimately are metadata and do not create a complete picture. Time, in this sense, is to gauge its own passage—it does not offer a deeper reading of the built-environment. Because time is such a perplexing concept, it's difficult to visualize the relationship of time and the built-environment in any abstract way, and not bring with it any of the presuppositions mentioned above, so an analogy serves better.

We may begin to think about the built environment as a palimpsest; a page of antiquated text that has been scraped off and used over again. This comparison can be clearly translated architecturally, if we think of every architectural alteration—a building or otherwise—as a new layer on this page, each either physically or metaphysically built upon the previous ones. Often times, the previous layers of the palimpsest are not completely erased, leaving behind traces of the original texts. In architectural terms, a building may be constructed over the foundations of a previous structure, leaving behind traces of its existence. Every architectural alteration then, is responding to a condition shaped by events of the past. Although this parallel may help create a new perspective on the built-environment, all this pontification eventually leads to the question; is this way of reading the built-environment merely a mental exercise, or is there a greater value?

The answer is not nearly as esoteric as the analogy; it helps inform the architect. The majority of the work in the Architectural profession is not new builds on virgin land, but remodels, renovations, and additions and alterations of existing buildings and spaces. We are typically beginning our projects with a new bucket of paint on an existing canvas. The process and exercise of studying the built-environment through this reading helps contextualize the space, both physically and historically (in the purest sense of the word). We can create an understanding of the built-environment as a sequence of events that has led to a present condition. This is not only useful in a design sense, where the historical fragments can inspire the Architect during the design process, but in a very tangible and physical sense. Knowing when the building was conceived may offer insight to construction methods; why things were built a certain way or certain materials were used. It affords the architect the ability to infer characteristics of the building based on clues left behind. Subsequent alterations can shed light on past problems the building may have experienced or provide lessons learned that can be applied moving the project forward. These fragments together help provide a complete image of the project, as it exists in a present condition, and it's with this image that the Architect may provide greater value to their industry.

As is the nature of the beast, the construction industry is constantly evolving. Technical innovations streamline the process of creation, from the conception of an idea to its manifestation in the built-environment. Our societal access to

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instantaneous information— and our interconnectivity—allow us to disseminate information as quickly as we can conceive it. Material advancements allow designers and architects to push the envelope aesthetically, structurally, and environmentally to deliver new and increasingly efficient projects to clients. The ease with which we are able to create and relay information (verbal, graphic, or otherwise) naturally brings with it a corollary rise in client expectations, specifically in terms of project delivery and project turn-around. In the advent of all things automated, revolutionary software, and the technological advancements that keep people within a finger swipe of each other, the ability for clients to go from planning to occupation in as short amount of time as possible is paramount. As clients opt for accelerated or fast-tracked projects, the traditional design-bid-build project deliveries are being supplanted with the creation of construction documents and construction taking place at the same time—making traces faster and faster.

Our advancements as a society has made us more efficient in terms of creating and delivering a built product. The programmatic and technical achievements, both within and outside of the profession of architecture, not only facilitates a quicker means of delivering the design and details that go into a project, but also provides a means of recording and analyzing the layers of information and data that we collect. But even during this technological evolution, there is something the capabilities of this new technology does not streamline: the ability to read a building.  Only time can do that. Every building studied, designed ,and detailed helps further our ability at reading the continuously evolving built-environment. Each successive architectural chronicle overlaid with one another, building on the foundations by those who preceded, inform us. The start of every new project, the next page of a sketch-book; grooved and dimpled with traces of the past.