



ON WEATHERING

THE LIFE OF BUILDINGS IN TIME

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Finishing ends construction, weathering constructs finishes.

This assertion would seem to defy one of the most ancient commonplaces of architecture: buildings persist in time. Yet they do not. No building stands forever, eventually every one falls under the influence of the elements, and this end is known from the beginning. How, then, can one say weathering "constructs" finishes when the action of the elements leads to the deterioration of the building? Weathering does not construct, it destroys.

Over time the natural environment acts upon the outer surface of a building in such a way that its underlying materials are broken down. This breakdown, when left to proceed uninterrupted, leads to the failure of materials and the final dissolution of the building itself—ruination—hardly an outcome desired by the architect, builder, or owner. In order to prevent this or retard its occurrence buildings must be maintained. Maintenance, in most general terms, aims at renewal and involves both conservation and replacement. So costly has this process become nowadays that buildings are designed to be maintenance-free, or to require as little repair as possible. Nevertheless, no matter how maintenance-free the construction, weathering still occurs. Perhaps, then, there is some truth

to Victor Hugo's famous argument that buildings are less durable than books, that the "dominant idea of each generation" will be embodied in the book of paper rather than the book of stone, the first being more enduring because ubiquitous, the second being less durable because unique and more costly.¹ Buildings are single substantial structures that can be demolished by men or nature or both in time. In architecture, the gradual destruction of buildings by nature in time is weathering.

In the mathematics of the environment weathering is a power of subtraction, a *minus*, under the sign of which newly finished corners, surfaces, and colors are "taken away" by rain, wind, and sun. But is weathering only subtraction, can it not also *add* and enhance? Deleterious consequences can be complemented by the potential value of sedimentation and the accumulation of detritus on a surface through the action of the weather. This process always marks, and these marks may be intended, even desired. This sense of weathering is often associated with a romantic appreciation of the appearance of buildings that have aged: their mellowed brickwork, moss-covered stone, and seasoned timber. A fascination with ruins was common throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This theme appears very frequently in painting, literature, aesthetics, and architecture. In ancient buildings marks of the environment are added, leaving residual deposits

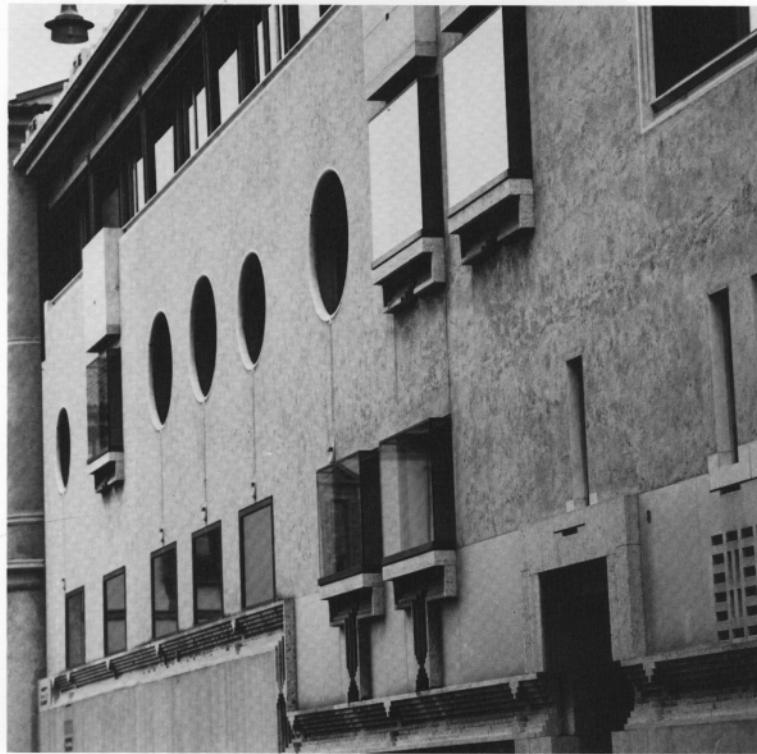
that reveal through traces the coherence of ambient elements on a surface. In the process of subtracting the “finish” of a construction, weathering adds the “finish” of the environment. Subtraction leads to final ruination and intimates, therefore, the end of the building as it would be the death of the figure. Aging, then, can be seen as either benign or tragic—or as both. This raises a question: beyond the general category of weathering as a romantic form of aging, are there other specific ways the unending process of deterioration can be understood, and then intended? Is it possible that weathering is not only a problem to be solved, or a fact to be neglected, but is an inevitable occurrence to be recognized and made use of in the uncertainties of its manifestation?

Our aim in the argument that follows is to revise the sense of the ending of an architectural project, not to see finishing as the final moment of construction but to see the unending deterioration of a finish that results from weathering, the continuous metamorphosis of the building itself, as part of its beginning(s) and its ever-changing “finish.”



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De Bijenkorf Department Store (1955–1957)
Marcel Breuer, A. Elzas
Rotterdam, Netherlands



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Banca Popolare di Verona (1974–1981)
Carlo Scarpa
Verona, Italy

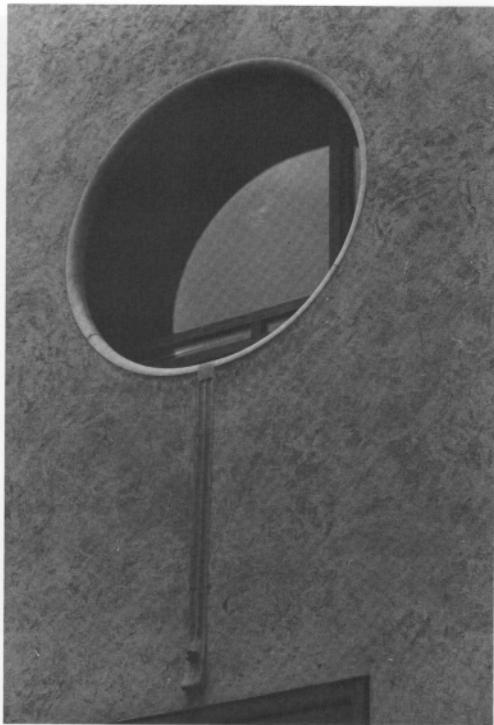
The distinction to be observed is between adding to or subtracting from a given condition and attempting to reproduce the appearance of the same condition. Seen accordingly, the work of Carlo Scarpa, at least in its details, is a demonstration of the creative transformation of traditional elements. His projects for the Banca Popolare di Verona and the chapel in the Brion cemetery are examples of reinterpretation. At the bottom of each of the circular windows of the Verona bank is a vertical line running in the direction of the likely flow of rainwater. These lines demonstrate the possible effects of rainwater on the building's surface as they retard its effects; a virtual drip has been formed as an element of actual retardation that "reveals" what it removes and retards what it quickens. The likelihood of a mark of this sort was no doubt well known to Scarpa, as it is a commonplace on the facades of Venetian buildings. In the Brion cemetery, the tall, blank exterior wall of the chapel has become a setting for showing the effects of weathering in a dramatic manner. Scarpa interrupted the horizontal run of the stepped parapet with a gap that has allowed

the rainwater to seep through, leaving a black stain in the middle of the wall. This marking reveals, through weathering, nature's temporality; the beginning and end of things.

A simple cornice and a blank wall: is the mark a stain? Should it be cleaned? It seems possible to argue that Scarpa designed the blank (white) wall as the possibility for showing the life of the building in time, which was a creative reinterpretation of the fact of weathering.

Why would Scarpa or any other architect intentionally provide the means through which stains would appear? Seeing stains as aesthetic deformities calls for their complete elimination. Dirt, filth, grime, stains: must they not be removed? Do they not infect? Why set up the possibility of contagion? Removal will be seen as necessary as long as all stains are seen as signs of a deformation of an intended pure state. But dirt is not necessarily impure, buildings are made out of matter, earth is part of their fabric.

Can one not distinguish sediments or deposits that taint from those that do not? Surely this is a matter of intention and circumstance. In the Brion cemetery wall an element of everyday building deterioration has been used deliberately as a device for marking and infecting the purity of the new building surface. This intended marking can be distinguished from other cases of sediments or tainting insofar as it has been singled out or framed as unique.



Banca Popolare di Verona (1974–1981), window
Carlo Scarpa
Verona, Italy



100/101

Santa Maria dei Miracoli (1481–1489)
Pietro Lombardo
Venice, Italy

Weathering marks the passage of time. This time is not the moment of a pre-occupancy photograph; time's passage in architecture includes a building's inception, construction, and inhabitation. The project, too, endures *through* these phases. In construing an architectural project the introduction and consideration of the time of weathering brings the project closer to a condition of actuality based on its potential transformations through time. This condition of actuality and potential for staining and fault complements the ideality of the project, making it both independent of the passage of time and caught up within it. Thought of in this way, weathering brings the virtual future of a building into dialogue with its actual present, as both are entangled in its past.

This temporal structure of building can be compared to a person's experience of time. At every moment in one's life earlier times of infancy, childhood, youth, and all other stages up to now are still present, increasing in number yet unchanged and familiar, and subject to redefinition and appropriation. Never is one's past not present, nor is the individual's past ever cut off from the tradition of one's culture and the time of

the natural world. Duration invokes recollection in each of its advancing moments. The differentiation of the present (as something in itself) presumes the reality of the past as the context from which it has emerged. Every act preserves the coherence of temporal continuity against its theoretical disintegration into separate parts: past, present, and future. Yet one's sense of the past or of the future involves a reach out of the present into some time when it (one's present) was not yet, or some time when it will be no longer. Events in the past—at least our feelings, thoughts, tastes, and so on about them—“mark” the memory, like a signet on a “good thick slab of wax” said Socrates in *Theaetetus*. What remains from the past is a trace or impression of an event, not the thing itself as it existed when present. Likewise, mnemonic experience in architecture is not of the present but of the past. The past in this sense is not a specific and limited period or time over and done with, rather it can be seen as “what has come to be.”³⁵

The fact of weathering inheres in all construction. No architect can avoid this fact; it was never escaped in the past, nor can it be in the present. Weathering reminds one that the surface of a building is ever-changing. While a potential nuisance, the transformation of a building’s surface can also be positive in that it can allow one to recognize the necessity of change, and to resist the desire to overcome fate—an aspiration

that dominated much of modernist architectural thought through its resistance to time. The preoccupation with the image or appearance of the building in current practice is in part symptomatic of this desire. Images are media of representation that communicate a building's style, character, and identity and are often thought to do so without change, like the printed word. This ironically vindicates Hugo: buildings have become like books because their images have attained the status of text, whether the text-image simulates historical buildings or not. What makes this ironic is that books themselves are "artifacts" that sustain multiple readings—as buildings always do.

The ideas of a project, hypothesized in sketches, drawings, and models, are its past, which will be soiled by the marks of weathering after construction. The effects of these marks can be retarded through inventive solutions. These solutions could be elements that direct or prevent the flow of water, or they could respond to the effects of the weather by creating situations that both recognize and utilize the ever-changing characteristics of materials as a way of renewing beginnings by allowing refinishing.