The Knowable and the Ineffable: An object-oriented reading of Enric Miralles’ design approach

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Since the early 2010s, Graham Harman’s Object-oriented Ontology (OOO) has drawn significant attention to architecture, whose influenced areas have reconfigured its methods, principles, and value systems around discourses centered on reality and its autonomy, and aesthetics. This means that architecture and its projects are specific ‘realities’ in their own right that transcend any epistemological consideration. Besides, each reality can manifest itself in multiple ways through its ‘qualities’ – some known, and most unknown. However, each of these manifestations (or their sum) is incomplete in the fullness of its reality. In this double condition of a unitary reality surrounded by multiple features/profiles, the (architectural) object emerges as an ambiguous entity for the senses and the intellect, given that it can never be objectively defined because it can never be fully apprehended. Faced with the impossibility of an ontological knowledge of the project, contemporary architects attached to OOO have explored various aesthetic regimes to instill multiple understandings in the audience.

However, artistic, aesthetic, or poetic interests are not new to architecture. For the present case, the architectural thinking of the office in which Enric Miralles was situated stands out here as a paradigmatic example, surely not the only one, whose discourse and methods exceeded practical needs and superficial stylistic concerns. The Spanish architect had no interest in visual form or the architectural object emerges as an ambiguous entity for the senses and the intellect, given that it can never be objectively defined because it can never be fully apprehended. Faced with the impossibility of an ontological knowledge of the project, contemporary architects attached to OOO have explored various aesthetic regimes to instill multiple understandings in the audience.

In his architecture, as he commented, “what is out there, what originates our projects, is extremely important”. What is beyond... What is not seen”, other authors remark about his works. This way of thinking developed a professional and unique willingness to design out of curiosity to discover the project’s intrinsic possibilities. As Miralles said: “I work from curiosity, from getting into things, from discovering them, from finding possibilities”.

While Miralles could not have known about OOO – his professional activity developed roughly two decades before Harman’s work entered the architectural scene – there are enough overlaps to suggest a profound tendency to reduce “objects to a mere caricature of their total reality”. Qualities or manifestations are partial and incomplete features that provide some knowledge about the object through epistemological inquisitiveness, but cannot define or altogether apprehend its ontological nature.

From an object-oriented perspective, what makes an AP’s reality the way it is it’s ‘autonomous existence’. The mere act of existing, i.e., of being, is sufficient to be an object. Such a mode of existence is autonomous because it is different from any other, and cannot be reduced to any of its expressions or how it is cognized. Each AP is an object in itself. The project’s reality is ineffable; there is no form (physical, intellectual, or emotional) that adequately expresses its being. Unlike previous theories of autonomy in architecture (Rossi or Eisenman), a theory of ontological autonomy can only be ‘identified’ rather than defined; one can only realize that the object exists on its own terms. Rather than provide a definitive, unitary, and absolute method capable of unfolding any essential features, the object-oriented approach makes clear that any cognitive effort in the design process or experience is incomplete compared to the fullness and richness of the AP as an autonomous object.

This is nothing negative. On the contrary, it creates an open framework in which each project, although it is an ontological, finite, unique unity, is epistemologically inexhaustible. For this reason, one can “never understand [the] projects as terminated pieces”, stated Miralles. This constant feeling of incompleteness leads to “sacrifice[e] the specific nature of the [tangible] situation to the application of a distant reality...”. The awareness of the AP’s autonomous condition makes the plurality of its sensual profiles evident, which allows us to develop a non-objective approach to the object for the constant discovery of other unknown features. “I like to approach things always through approximated solutions”, said the architect. The project cannot be categorically registered as truth in any of its physical or mental formalizations. This justifies the architect and the philosopher’s interest in the multiple variations in which an object can manifest. “I tend to operate by variation,” the architect claimed, “because I want the elements to be able to incorporate this variety of material conditions. I never work by reduction: I try to reveal the multiplicities, the singularities...”.

Ironically, this approach to things allows for more varied knowledge production than the previous unitary knowledge-based methods. Since no particular reality can be pinpointed, there is a circularity of multiple approximations. Different (even contradictory) understandings of the AP are equally correct and, at the same time, equally incomplete. As Wolf D. Prix says, “everybody is right, but nothing is correct”.

An object-oriented approach produces cumulative and diverse knowledge, as what we understand as ‘knowledge’ becomes broader beyond conventional categorization. Designing
and experiencing architecture is a “process of productive accumulation”44 instead of unitary, stylistic, and pre-existing assumptions. Hence, the distance between what we know about a project and what this project is creates an ever-present unknown excess, “a surplus of reality beyond any of its discernible features”45, as Harman puts it. However, such a surplus cannot exist without the autonomous reality of the object. Consequently, each AP has a specific space of abundance populated by more unknown ‘caricatures’ (variations) that can potentially be revealed. This condition interested Miralles above and beyond the immediate practical or functional terms of the project46. In short, given that any AP is an autonomous reality that escapes any formalization, the manifestations that refer to such a withdrawn reality are multiple. Since our cognitive system cannot comprehend the entirety of such abundance, there is always a surplus in each AP that is potentially knowable.

Therefore, the relevant question for architectural design concerning autonomy is not in the exact terms to parallelize the existence or essence of the AP’s reality, but merely ‘being aware of its ontological condition of autonomy’. What does it mean for designers and beholders to know that each AP is a reality in itself beyond its manifestations and our knowledge of them? For Miralles and Harman, it implies going beyond the knowledge-based approaches in favor of a form of cognition that reveals and takes advantage of the object’s colorful interior. Both assume a “je ne sais quoi”47 of the (architectural) object not as a goal to domesticate, but as an ungraspable point of reference to orbit around. As the architect puts it:

The force (of observation) does not consist of grasping the simple truth of things and expressing it with the greatest possible degree of grasping the simple truth of things and taking advantage of the object’s colorful interior. Both assume a “je ne sais quoi” of the (architectural) object not as a goal to domesticate, but as an ungraspable point of reference to orbit around. As the architect puts it:

* Aesthetics as a form of cognition
To address the double condition of the (architectural) object, that is, to be simultaneously an ineffable unity of reality and a knowable multiplicity of manifestations, Harman and Miralles advocate a similar form of cognition: “aesthetics”48. As it will become apparent, the development of their aesthetic discourse and methodologies revolves around the notion of ‘mimesis’ and ‘allure’ (or allusion), which are put into practice through the tool of ‘metaphor’. In addition to this, the depth of the architectural qualities that Miralles practiced during the formalization process deserves attention.

However, none of this can happen without a primary condition: the beholder’s involvement as a fundamental piece in the aesthetic activity. As Harman puts it, “the basic unit of aesthetics is neither the art [or architectural] object nor its beholder, but rather the two in combination as a single new object”49. Consequently, aesthetic responses can be considered another form of expression of the AP, such as the building, the drawings, the models, or the generative idea. This was already clear to German aesthetic theories. As Heinrich Wölfflin commented: “We designate the effect that we receive the impression. And we understand this impression to be the expression of the object”50.

* Mimesis
Hence, the beholder is “an active performer of the missing object”51 (Harman) because “the spectator participates in the intuition of the work...”52 (Miralles). Both authors define this form of participation within the aesthetic unit through ‘mimesis’. In the reformulation of the term, mimesis is something internal to the object, not something external that seeks to replicate a foreign referential model. In Miralles’ words: “Imitation [as mimesis] no longer proposes to linger on the external appearance and tries to copy faithfully...”53. Mimesis belongs to another sphere, to seek the [architect/beholder’s] procedure, not the result but its turning out...”.54. By the same token, “the question of mimesis,” Harman states, “has more to do with our own role, as performers, in sustaining the work of art”55.

In the OOO's mimesis, the beholder 'becomes' him/herself an (internal) ‘imitation’ of the object56. In short, it is another medium of expression of the project: “aesthetic participants themselves provide that medium57”, he concludes elsewhere. Instead of defending the visual and literal referentiality of pre-existing referents outside the AP, the authors’ notion of mimesis is not physical or retinal, but is about the spectator’s ‘modus operandi’ within the aesthetic experience. The architect highlighted this condition during the design process in his “desire to enter” (“quererse adentrar”) into the AP, “because I have hardly ever done anything else in my projects”58. Miralles’ “entering” the thing is Harman’s “becoming” the thing.

In this context, the beholder’s aesthetic participation (designer or spectator) proceeds in two ways: s/he accesses the knowable through the artistic or architectural material, and then the captured profile is rendered ‘in’ him/herself. The AP’s broad spectrum of sensual expression is particularized, meaning it is sorted according to the participant’s cognitive faculties59. In the architectural or artistic experience, it is evident that the ability to infuse an aesthetic response depends on the syntax and composition of the visual, physical forms to provoke one or another aesthetic impression. However, the triggering medium’s nature also plays a vital role in how the beholder expresses his/her impressions60. The more open the manifestation of the greater the multiplicity of the project. What forms and visual arrangements are capable of instilling which aesthetic registers is the ongoing debate among today’s architects working with OOO’s principles61.

* Allure/allusion
If mimesis is the framework for accessing and representing some knowable features, ‘allure’ (from the object to the beholder) or ‘allusion’ (from the beholder to the object) establishes the method for an indirect connection with the ineffable reality. It creates a cognitive mode where the object’s presence is noticeable without being obvious. Allusion goes beyond the literal and the tangible to elicit an unutterable indication that, paradoxically, needs the literal and the tangible as the door to the allusive object44. For Harman, allure/allusion is the indirect approach to reality, which lacks translatability45. While the project’s emotional effects are another type of the AP’s multiple formal expressions, the allusion/allure escapes analytical considerations; it cannot be formally explained46. Allusion/allure is a ‘singular’ and non-paraphrasable awareness of the object’s existence. Like mimesis, the current notion of allusion does not indicate something external, but is the internal contract in any aesthetic unit in which the object shows its presence to the beholder in an inarticulate way.

Once again, Miralles also accounted for “[t] his allusive mode of expression’ of things, “an exterior discourse – parallel to a visual one”45. When OOO locates the allusion in the gap between superficial qualities and withdrawn reality, the architect recognizes a similar relationship between the outside and the inside of a thing: a tension in which the surface “leads us on its paths ‘to the depths’ [...] one resorts to evocation, metaphor, allusion. [...] Immerse yourself in the artwork, make the shadows speak...[...] what is not seen, ‘what the tree, the tower, or a building hide from us’...”44.

* Metaphor
In the last quote, Miralles anticipates the device of mimesis and allusion: the ‘metaphor’. According to Harman, ‘metaphor’ is precisely what points us towards the depth of things61. It is claimed that this depth is double because it simultaneously unveils some knowable features and alludes to the ineffable reality. More in detail, Miralles’ metaphorical approach to design relates directly to OOO’s concept of ‘fusion’, in which some attributes or qualities are assigned to a completely unknown entity62. For this reason, a design process devoid of preconceptions is always ‘blind’. Designing is “a metaphor with one of the terms deleted”: the AP63. For the sake of clarity, consider the example of the ‘comb’ metaphor in EMBT’s proposal for a stadium in Chemnitz [Fig. 03]:

There is an analogy between the movement of people and hairstyle, because when you see a hairstyle, you ask, ‘How can they do that?’ And really, it’s the same as combing your hair: half over this side and half on the other. And really, you organize people that way too. A comb is very good for organizing people64.

The comb is not addressed through its visual qualities to be replicated on an architectural scale; that would be the “classical” mimesis that Miralles fervently rejected or the “literalism” dismissed by Harman45. On the contrary, the architects reveal the ‘non-obvious’ knowable qualities that the comb...
and the PA-object have in common. In this way, one does not face the imposition of his (rational) idea and external references but also the literal translation of his (irrational) aesthetic response from the AP. Miralles' ignorance and aesthetic expressions of the project are not the only ones of the project. If the architectural representation only expressed that, the author would restrict the public's cognition, that is, the (mis)readings of the work and the individual access to the knowable would be predetermined. To avoid that, the architect's conscious action to "note outside himself" should be seen as a declaration of intent to open up the spectrum of knowable profiles of the AP beyond what his capabilities can address alone. When each aesthetic unit (object plus beholder) has its own personalized degree of unknowability, the beholder has his/her own access to the object's knowable characteristics without external regulation. Miralles prevented this imposition by excluding from the outcome any trace of his architectural criteria, strange as it may seem. As he said, "to judge what you really understand by architecture is actually something that is scarcely part of your conversation".

On this basis, the AP’s ‘caricature’ frees itself from the architect’s direct or indirect intentions. A representational manifestation becomes a ‘placeholder’ in which each spectator finds his/her own way towards the project without the author’s reasoning or emotional charge restricting the scene’s possibilities. Only then is the spectator “emancipated” à la Rancière.

The beholder becomes another “creator” of the AP, unveiling alternative profiles, many of which the architect would never have predicted [Fig. 02].

Miralles’ graphic thought intends to keep the AP widely open by omitting his emotional impressions and judgment about architectural formalization. His aesthetic experience or architectural ideas in the design process become irrelevant to the architectural experience. Proof of this is that the ‘comb’ is not a recognizable presence in the Chemnitz Stadium, nor the ‘fish’ at the Madrid Editorial Headquarters. The architect’s impressions do not indoctrinate or govern someone else’s apprehension of the projects.

Hence, the metaphor is not a narrative instrument of justification and reduction of the work, but rather a propelling tool for the architect. In Miralles’ design approach, the metaphor dies in the design process and, therefore, does not condition the beholder’s understanding of the AP. For multiplicity to be effective, the universal shared experience of the transcendental subject must be subverted. For beholder A to grasp some unique profiles of the project other than beholder B, there must be an ‘individualized’ sense of incompleteness in the cognition of any aesthetic unit.

Conclusion

Although separated in time, this paper demonstrates how Enric Miralles’ design approach and Graham Harman’s Object-oriented Ontology blend seamlessly. Both based their work on the autonomous reality of the (architectural) object that is not reducible to epistemological concerns. The awareness of this metaphysical condition produces, paradoxically, an epistemological reaction in which aesthetics appears as a form of cognition that opens up the exuberant interior of the project.

On this basis, Miralles contributes to OOO by emerging as a strong precedent from which the ongoing architectural debate on objects can benefit. Of special interest is his epistemological approach to the AP’s architecture has been described on aesthetic strategies. This means that aesthetic responses are not exclusive to the architectural experience, but the Spanish architect introduced them as the basis of designing. In short, ‘the design process is an aesthetic cognition in itself’. Instead of domesticating what forms can produce emotional or multiple responses, “I don’t care about the form of a building”, he stated. For the architectural task, he appointments the aesthetic process as such to place himself outside the architectural expression right after. In this way, ‘his’ aesthetic impressions are not imposed on the audience, which frees the architect from a design mode that scientifically forces controlled regimes of literalism and ambiguity in experience.

Conversely, OOO contributes to Miralles’ architecture by providing an ontological framework. It is claimed that “what is beyond” in his projects is the architectural project itself as an autonomous entity. His architecture has been described as a “hermetic, inaccessible, difficult, seductive, and labyrinthine universe”. However, this is the very nature of ‘each’ (architectural) object. In other words, a self-sustaining reality behind any architectural manifestation is not exclusive to Miralles’ projects; it is the default condition for ‘any’ project. Thus, each architectural project acquires ontological support under an object-oriented base that unifies the AP’s individuality while maintaining its abundance of expressions. What stands out about Miralles is how he understood this condition and developed a design approach accordingly. Likewise, his methods based on the design tools of mimesis, allusion, and metaphor also acquire theoretical support through the arguments of Harman.

Beyond the examined overlaps between both authors, ‘time’ and ‘mearology’ are issues that require further consideration.

Object-oriented thinking allows methods and practices, many of which remain to be seen, that enhance the inexhaustibility of things without losing their identity. Therefore, any emerging epistemological approach based on these principles should resonate with what Peter Handke says: “[...] challenging one to engage in ceaseless daily discovery that led to no specific outcome, nothing that could be exploited, unless perhaps for keeping possibilities open – discovery as a way of keeping possibilities open”.

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The above text is a summary and analysis of the original content, focusing on the key points and insights provided by the authors discussed in the provided text.
1. These aesthetic effects get beyond, doubt or curiosity. For more about the Object Turn, see Graham Harman and Alexei Tsarkov (eds.), *The Object Turn: A Conversation*, Columbia University Press, 2015.


7. Ibid., 10.


15. Therefore, each beholder’s subjectivity is part of the project’s category, since the project has been defined in line with the concrete condition that this “AP” shares with that “beholder.”

16. For the real world (a drawing or images) only is asked for mental participation. “Ideas” are the essence that is not reducible to an act of the mind. The object-oriented perspective proposed by Graham Harman is defined from an epistemological perspective by the paragraphe ‘in this case,’ in the sense that it is not necessary to apprehend the project’s ontological condition of autonomy. Only that which exists in this case is considered real for the project’s condition of autonomy. The project’s materiality is defined from another perspective: the paragraphe ‘in that case’ which states that what is not reducible to an act of the mind, which is not reduced to a specific project, which is not reducible to the human condition, is reduced to the project’s real materiality.

17. For more about the OOO term fusion, see Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology,* 237–40.

18. For more about the OOO term fusion, see Graham Harman, *It’s Like to Be a Thing.*