

A room for running in a world in flux

Abstract

For all the attention paid to notions of flux in philosophy and architecture in recent years – of the movement and oscillation between seemingly hermetic states, the perpetual becoming of the world – it is surprising how little effort has been devoted to the architectural element most concerned with the dispersal of bodies between static spaces, namely the corridor.¹ As Rem Koolhaas argued at the 2014 Venice Architectural Biennale, the corridor has been “forced to retreat to the backstage of architecture.” The following text is neither a eulogy nor a hymn, but rather a zig-zagging promenade through the concept of *corridity*. Here, the corridor is not wholly understood as an architectural typology, *viz.* an interior narrow passage connecting rooms and dictating circulation in space. Neither is it understood solely in terms of its abundant metaphorical uses (such as the humanitarian corridor, or the informal space where politics ostensibly *really* happens). Rather, the thesis seeks to explore the corridor as a narrative element, a concept which oscillates between these real and fictional (non-)spaces, even connecting them (as corridors tend to do). The three stories about the corridor that will be recounted in the following text, could themselves be considered and traversed as a corridor of sorts, moving between the truth(s) and fictions that constitute them.

There are many stories about the corridor, that by no means falsify each other as much as they reveal the subtleties by which the truths and meanings of concepts are constructed and negotiated about in the social world. Etymologically, the corridor denotes “to run” (from the latin *curere*), a word initially used to describe a person carrying political messages across vast territorial distances. Later, political communication was progressively veiled by architecture, such as in the elevated Vassari Corridor connecting the Palazzo Vecchio to the Palazzo Pitti in Florence. From 1565 and onwards, the room served as a secret passageway for the Medici family. The political dynasty did not wish to disclose to their surroundings when, why, or by whom its communication channels were roamed. When the corridor-word appeared in plan drawings in the following century as the metonymic “room for the runner,” replacing the runner-person with the architectural element, they were new manifestations of Giorgio Vasari’s political invention.

In the 1600s, the corridor’s capacity for covert communication made it essential in aiding the Counter-Reformation alliances between the Jesuits and Roman administration. Separating circulation from the official courtyard entrance, the corridor spread to monastic construction, particularly in Austria and Germany, such as in the vast Augustinian complex of St. Florian (1686–1751)². Importantly, the functional political passageway concurrently entered the symbolic realm. By implying to outsiders that the corridor’s proprietor needed a political pipeline into their residences, the corridor itself became a potent sign of influence. The optical illusion of Francesco Borromini’s transformation of Palazzo Spada in 1632, plays out the

¹ Most famously in Bruno Latour and Alben Yaneva's “Give me a Gun and I will make all Buildings Move”, 2008

² Jarzombek, Mark 2010, p. 735-738

fantasy of a purely symbolic corridor in emblematic fashion: while the visual appearance the arcaded passageway suggests thirty-seven meters long corridor, it is in fact only eight.³

Nowadays corridors are most often “narrow hallways” – spatial entities with walls on either side that distributes traffic to connecting rooms, or “a passageway (as in a hotel or office building) into which compartments or rooms open.”⁴ Yet, this general definition enables the corridor to be proficiently used as analogy, applicable for a wide range of phenomena. In the Norwegian national news media in 2022, the corridor was used as analogy in association with the Russian war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming, and the electricity crisis, to name a few examples. These so-called corridors varied in dimension from some interior square meters of a building (“We are standing in the end of a corridor in an office building in Kongsvinger [...]”)⁵ to contiguous spatial sequences crossing geographical borders (“For many years, polar bears have commuted between the ice edge and Svalbard. In the past, there was a corridor of ice between the two destinations all year round, this is no longer the case.”)⁶. There are instances where it is more ambiguous whether the corridor-word refers to a physical place or an abstract phenomenon: “On Wednesday, the Russians tried to storm the facility, although claiming to be opening a humanitarian corridor from it.” Or: “20,000 civilians finally got out through a humanitarian corridor.”⁷ Or even: “Such a corridor will give Russia control over the entire Sea of Azov.”⁸ The corridor-word insinuates both spatial and temporal events, and is even used in poetic subversion, when Willy Pedersen writes of Maria Stepanova’s new book that “the hope is to find a corridor leading to new knowledge, and to new, bright rooms.”⁹

Despite the fit-for-all, explanatory potential inherent to the term’s vagueness, and its full-circle morphology from *exterior route* to *interior passageway* and back to *exterior route*,¹⁰ there are several reports of architectural corridor-fatigue. According to Rem Koolhaas, the corridor is now “simply an exit-route” from what is regarded the architecture proper, only a “void sustained by a glimmering array of devices, from exit signs to motion sensors to fire sprinklers to illuminated, way-finding carpets.”¹¹ “To be honest, these spaces are merely passages, volumes to pass through on the way to somewhere else. These are the parts of the journey most likely to be done on autopilot, the minutes and hours vanishing into routine habit. Dead time and dead space,” writes Roger Luckhurst of the space separating the territory of his London duplex from the street outside¹².

³ *ibid*, p. 738

⁴ ‘corridor’, Merriam-Webster dictionary

⁵ VG, 6.3.22

⁶ DN 7.5.22

⁷ Klassekampen 18.3.22

⁸ Dagbladet 23.3.22

⁹ Morgenbladet 4.11.22

¹⁰ Koolhaas, Rem 2014, p. 903-904

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 904

¹² Luckhurst, Roger 2019, p. 13-14

However, fatigued circumstances in combination with ambiguity can provide first-rate growth conditions for curiosity. Thus, *A room for running in a world in flux* investigates whether the architectural potential of the corridor is not entirely exhausted.

This thesis postulates that architecture becomes more readable as processes in the stories that it co-produces. The text is structured into three separate, but interconnecting *corridor-stories*. Here, the concept of *story* refers to a purposeful narrative frame of meaning. The corridor-concept becomes in the systematization of historical accounts, architectural plans and the abundance of fiction and non-fiction in which it is propositioned. This form of analysis does not suggest a mechanical 1:1 relationship between a story and a physical building. While stories and their propositions about space do not faithfully represent “true” events, they still have an affective purchase on reality, since stories exchange affect as “intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise).”¹³

The first story, *Corridic grandeur and modern progress*, revolves around the notion of the corridor as a device for modern progress. The second, *Corridic alienation and modern discontent* is unsurprisingly more skeptical, dealing with the corridor as a manifestation of class division and disaffection. The third and final story, *Corridic non-space*, discusses the corridor as neutral, insignificant-bordering-invisible – what will be called, paraphrasing Marc Augé, *non-space*. In the final work-based part of the thesis the parallel truths these stories contain are treated as generative, not of specific architectural instructions, but of an architectural way of thinking, judging and valuing.

¹³ Gregg, Melissa; Seigworth, Gregory, 2010, p. 1