The Semblance of Use
History, Function and Aesthetics in the Serpentine Pavilions

John Macarthur
The University of Queensland

Abstract
In the recent phenomenon of pavilions commissioned from architects by visual arts institutions, a recurring criticism addresses their functional failure. Pavilions, it seems, leak, are too hot, are uncomfortable to sit in, or lack a discernible use all together. While it is common to assume that the relaxation of functionality is necessary for these works to be artistic, their frequent negligence of the limited functions that they might have in enabling a reception, a talk or debate, rankles many critics in a way that is obvious, but not trivial. The similarity of architectural pavilions to aspects of contemporary visual art reveals much about the differential specificity of cultural disciplines today. It seems, however, that these complex ideational games cannot commence unless the pavilion is first constituted as architecture in its own right, by virtue of a utility which it largely disregards. This paper takes Immanuel Kant's description of garden art as having only 'the semblance of use' to consider the logic of ornamental buildings in their history back to the eighteenth century. Despite their primary role in the spatio-visual structuring of a landscape, follies, fabrique, temples and grottos also had uses as dining rooms, gatehouses, icehouses and dairies. According to Kant, if an object is considered to be determined by a pre-existing concept (in the case of a building, a concept of its use), it could not be an object of aesthetic judgement. Therefore, we can think of historical ornamental buildings as having shown a path for architecture to be considered art, by achieving an impure but effective aesthetic autonomy, by having a utility which was experienced as mere semblance. The current pavilion phenomenon has been criticised for its popularity and ubiquity. Against such a view, I argue that by putting contemporary pavilions back into the longer history of ornamental building we can see why a pavilion's negligence of its function raises fundamental aesthetic issues that are as relevant to the visual arts as they are to architecture.
The Semblance of Use

London’s Serpentine Galleries annually show innovative architecture in the form of temporary pavilions in Kensington Gardens. In 2016 the Bjarke Ingels Group’s main pavilion was accompanied by four smaller ‘summer houses’ which referenced an eighteenth century structure in the Gardens: Queen Caroline’s Temple designed by William Kent, built in 1734-5 and named for the consort of George II, Wilhelmina Charlotte Caroline of Brandenburg-Ansbach. Caroline had a taste for the arts and was the patron of Charles Bridgeman and then William Kent in the project of turning Hyde Park from a royal hunting ground to a landscape garden in the then novel fashion. The Temple was used for summer entertaining, and later converted to the Park keeper’s home. The task of the four Summer House architects (Kunlé Adeyemi, Barkow Leibinger, Yona Friedman and Asif Khan) to respond to Kent’s temple underlines the historical legitimacy that the Serpentine can claim by mounting their pavilions in Kensington Gardens. The Gardens were laid out by Bridgeman, from 1728 and completed in 1733. Bridgeman invented the hidden boundary or ‘Ha Ha!’ to separate the Gardens from Hyde Park. Kent’s role at Kensington overlapped his replacing Bridgeman as designer of the more famous garden at Stowe. Kent was laying out the Elysian Fields at Stowe around the time that the Temple was constructed. Of course, the Serpentine Gallery itself is a garden pavilion, converted from a neo-Palladian tea-house designed by J. Grey West in 1934. Similarly, the adjacent and newer Sackler Gallery was an armaments magazine built in a neo-Greek style in 1805 and converted by Zahah Hadid in 2013.

The Summer Houses with their reference to Kent and the history of landscape gardens thus reinforce a typological view of a current fashion for architectural pavilions, one that stretches back to the follies and fabriques of the eighteenth century and earlier. This story stands in mild contrast to the idea that the pavilions are in some way avant-garde and mark a new relation of architecture and the visual arts, one that commenced with Julia Peyton Jones, and Hadid’s first Serpentine pavilion in 2000. But this longer time frame and typological classification also complicates the critique that the Serpentine’s pavilions are not true to the experimental aims of Modernist pavilions such as those by le Corbusier or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. A longer history suggests that we might see Kent and Lord Burlington’s neo-Classical revival; the national exhibition architecture of the nineteenth century; the proleptic architecture of Modernism, the neo-avant-gardes of the late Twentieth century; and the Serpentine Pavilions as different moments in the life of a building type. Equally, one could argue that, despite these historical connections, the different moments of pavilion history might be so conceptually disjunctive, that it is more useful to treat the phenomenon as something of the twenty first century.

In the wider group research to which the present paper contributes, we have argued for the latter view, that although much can be learned by looking at the pavilion historically, there is no single typological description that covers the variety of physical forms and cultural meanings of pavilions. Similarly, while the Serpentine Pavilions are the epitome of this contemporary phenomena, we are not proposing that they are or ought to be the model. We would prefer to define pavilions as a loose genre of contemporary practice, one described by numerous programmes such as the Serpentine’s and including other phenomena such as the Architecture Review’s award for pop-up architecture. This genre has intertwining histories, of building forms, temporality, experimentation and relation to landscape. In the present paper I argue that one of these historical threads is an on-going conceptual issue that ‘pavilions’ have addressed since the eighteenth century – how to conceptualise a building’s utility from the point of view of its aesthetic appreciation. I argue that the uses of the pavilions are mere occasions intended to produce what Immanuel Kant called, “the semblance of use”. This issue does have a definite history in landscape discourse and design. But, again, this is not to propose that the utility of garden structures is the principal concept around which the pavilion phenomenon can be defined. Rather it is to propose the Serpentine Pavilions reassert a core issue of the use of artworks and the uses of art that runs through romantic and modernist art and architecture in general, which is relevant again today with the rise of the concept of a creative economy. This issue unfolds from the
question of the circumstances in which the use of a work can be bracketed so that it does not
determine an aesthetic judgement of that work.

The Serpentine Pavilions all have some function. They began as marquees for drinks receptions,
have been tea and coffee vending sites, discos, and venues for the Serpentine Marathon of talks and
debates. In general, they perform these functions very poorly. They drip rainwater and heat the
champagne while providing uncomfortable seating. In the popular press, reception of the buildings
there has developed a trope of complaining about the pavilions’ functional failings. Selgascano’s
2016 pavilion is said to be “embarrassed by […] leaking in the rain and rapidly warming even in weak
sun”. The Times critic wrote of Jean Nouvel’s 2010 pavilion (to which he awarded two out of five
stars) “I would have thought that the last place you’d want to chill out on a scorching summer’s day in
a park is a giant blazing-red tent slathered in plastic. And I would be right”, describing the experience
as “like a wedding in hell”. Marina Otero Verzia has documented the difficulties and the ingenuity of
Fortnum and Mason’s staff in what she sees as an ongoing struggle between experimental design
and coffee. It is typical that issues of functionality arise in popular media accounts of architecture.
What makes the critiques of the pavilions interesting is that these arise in the same space as claims
to the artistic status of architecture. It is as if the architects deliberately chose an occasion to be
negligent of function in order that the conceptual difficulties of appreciating advanced architecture
would be matched by a degree of physical demandingness, and that the prosaic uses of the structure
should be in some way trivialised in order to direct attention to the conceptual and aesthetic agenda
of the project. Perhaps the most extreme versions of the pavilion, with regard to their functions, was that
of Peter Zumthor in 2011 which functioned as a café tea-house without plumbing, electricity or a
barista, but merely by parking a mobile coffee cart nearby. The Summer Houses that accompanied
the BIG pavilion of 2016 have no denoted use to be negligent of, and, in my mind are less successful
because of this. It is not only that they become big sculptures and muddy the disciplinary differences,
but also that they lack the inhabitation and use that Queen Caroline’s Temple, and the main pavilion
has.

The Serpentine Pavilions and others of this genre do have functions at another level. Their
commissioning and opening are key promotional events; they project a stream of images in
publication and social media; they offer sponsorship opportunities; and the cultural occasions
programmed around them are more enabled by the attention that they gain than any weather
protection, comfy seating or acoustic quality that they offer. These former uses are, if you will, second
order functions, a class of function that depend on there being first-order functions (the converse not
being true). In this wider set of second order functions, the pavilions are highly successful. These
are not uses that are integral to the logic of each architectural work, but rather to the success of the
genre as a whole. The success of one year’s Serpentine Pavilion over another is a separate but
related issue to whether the program itself ‘functions’. We could consider these second order
functions as the real uses of the Pavilions, but let us note that these are not different in kind to the
uses of the visual arts at a socio-economic level.

The visual arts are a significant part of the UK economy, artworks are fungible and are objects of
speculation; cultural institutions like the Serpentine are major parts of London’s tourism economy and
city identity branding. Yet these uses and interests are somehow bracketed off from the
consideration of artworks as art. The Serpentine pavilion programme does something of the same for
architecture, producing architectural objects that are indifferent to the usual understanding of the uses
of buildings. And, at the same time, the pavilions are treated as something like artworks. In the
practical sense that they are pre-sold into an art market, currently expanding its trade of architectural
drawings and even whole buildings acquired by collecting institutions. It is also significant that a
number of prominent visual artists make works that are functional spaces or which reference
architecture as a discipline. In this muddied scene, the apparently philistine complaints about the
functional failings of the pavilions have a kind of critical potency.
Eighteenth century garden structures followed this same structure of double utility. Queen Caroline’s structure being named a “Temple” connotes a relation of the Hanover dynasty with Imperial Rome. It would have been the destination for a walk from Kensington Palace, hospitality would have been offered on the site and the walk, arrival and seating at the Temple were occasions for the expression of social rank, which was the political space of courtly society. Caroline conspired with Prime Minister Robert Walpole to guide and manage George’s policies and she regularly acted as Regent after his ascension in 1727. By 1735, when the Temple was completed her major issue was how to continue to hold the powers of Regent in preference to her son Fredrick, the future George III. Expressions of Caroline’s favour towards persons or policies would have been expressed in the order of arrival of courtiers at the Temple, for example in the proximity of Walpole’s seating to the person of the Queen.14 How the food and beverage arrived and were served was not given any more consideration in the building than Zumthor had given in the design of his pavilion with its coffee cart.

Eighteenth century garden buildings existed to structure the landscape through views and destinations, and included symbolism honouring the patron, but they all had some prosaic utility as dining rooms, gatehouses, icehouses, dairies. Kent’s gatehouses at Holkham and Badminton are good examples of this. The Holkham gatehouse announces the great extent of the Holkham estate with a long drive that proceeds from it out of sight.15 Its form as a triumphal arch connotes the imperial pretentions of Thomas Coke, Earl of Leicester, and it also contains the house of the gatekeeper and family, the rooms awkwardly arranged either side and spanning the gate. Humphry Repton later made an early argument for the illogic of symmetrical planning by critiquing the difficulties for the inhabitants of such arrangements, but nowhere is it clear why gatekeepers were required to live in the gates as opposed to near them.16 Worcester Lodge at Badminton is a more complex example, as it is not only a gatekeeper’s house but also a banqueting room from which to view hunting in the park.17 The more fanciful Pineapple of Dunmore Park in Stirlingshire provides a destination within the Park which also overlooks a walled garden and hothouses – the gardener’s residence is split in two by the big fruit.

The practical challenges and expense of serving meals to aristocratic guests in kitchen-less monuments is quite like the role of the modern caterer at the Serpentine’s summer parties. In the past, making gate keepers, dairy maids, woodsmen and so on inhabit the place and their work was symbolic of an aspect of the social prestige and expense that having numbers of servants in highly differentiated roles connoted. When the Gardens were gradually opened to the public it is no surprise that the Temple required a new meaningful occupant and was converted to the Garden Keepers house.18 But, the semiotics of this kind of honorific inhabitation and service is not a world away from the kind of subjectification that contemporary pavilions make of today’s art lover; although the discomfort at sitting in Suo Fujimoto’s grid is only for the length of a talk, not for a working life. In both cases the structures are inhabited with some level of difficulty that connotes the higher purpose of the structure, art in the older sense of symbolic idealism or of modern conceptualism: living references to the Arch of Constantine or the sculptures of Sol LeWitt.

There are then, deep historical resonances between the current explosion of architectural pavilions in visual art settings and the landscape garden structures of experimental architects of the Eighteenth century and later. But this is not to suggest that the current success of the pavilion strategy relies on architects, artists, curators and audiences knowing and recognising these historical relations, beyond some general cultural memory of summer, gardens and toy buildings. My claim is rather, that there is a conceptual knot about the designation architecture as an art that was played with by Kent’s generation and which continues to today. The partial genealogy that the Serpentine Pavilions have with past ornamental buildings bring this issue to prominence.
The meaning of the word art has changed a great deal over the centuries, and while architecture is, in some circumstances such as cultural policy, still considered one of ‘the arts’ along with literature, dance and so on, in general today ‘art’ means the visual arts. Such a definition excludes architecture, as in common usage, in education and in professional associations, architecture is a different discipline to ‘art’. If, however, one seeks a conceptual basis for the disciplinary distinction in aesthetic theory then the argument becomes more complex. The architectural pavilions may not be art in the categorical sense, but are presented to the same aesthetic faculty, which is the basis of art. A certain transgression of categories, particularly institutions of medium and genre is the basis of much contemporary art. On the one hand, presenting architecture as if it were ‘art’ when it is not categorically, but might be conceptually, expresses this same kind of refusal of institutional norms. This transgression of disciplinary categories follows the central tenant of art since Romanticism that an artwork should appear to be made free of prescriptive rules, as if art itself did not pre-exist the artwork. But this aesthetic concept of a particular architectural work being ‘art’ confronts the categorical fact that architecture as a discipline is ‘not-art’ having worked to define itself as a profession over the twentieth century. The critical aesthetic judgment of any of these pavilions seems inevitably to open the more general, recurring and unanswerable question of “is architecture art?” where administrative categories are at odds with the concepts deployed. The one conceptual basis, usually given, for defining architecture as not art, or a compromised art, is a building’s necessity to function. The core of this problem is the on-going importance of Kant’s definition of aesthetic judgement and how this relates to his theory of fine art.

Kant argues that we are not judging the beauty of something if we judge it in relation to a use that we would have of it, or indeed a concept of that function. He then generalises this to say that beauty can have no determinate concept of any kind against which it can be judged. To do so would confuse the judgement of taste with that of reason. This would then preclude judging a building aesthetically with regard to its function, or to that function being generalised as a building type. But in these remarks about the judgement of pure beauty Kant’s paradigm is the beauty of nature, and the only artefactual beauties he considers pure are abstract decorations. None of the arts, not even poetry and painting, let alone architecture, can be pure because as intentional human activities they must be guided by concepts. All art can only be capable of ‘adherent beauty’, a beauty conditioned by concepts. Kant uses buildings as examples, writing in resonance with our current topic: “the beauty of a building (such as a church or a palace, an arsenal or a summer house) presupposes a concept of the end that determines what the thing should be, hence a concept of its perfection, and is thus merely adherent beauty”. Yet what makes art like the pure beauty of nature is that beyond any rational concepts given by the pre-existing rules of art there are ‘aesthetic ideas’ which, unlike rational concepts, do not fully determine the artwork. The adherent beauties of art thus fulfil the wider role of creating a free play of reason with the imagination in appropriating these aesthetic ideas. In art we experience the powers of cognition in play with the imagination and without any purpose.

Kant then ranks the arts according to how they present aesthetic ideas, rather than rational concepts. Arguments as to whether architecture is or is not art being based on concepts of aesthetic autonomy typically miss the complexity of Kant’s arguments. Clearly the typological prescription of a church, fitting certain liturgical rituals, exhibiting particular symbols, are determinate concepts that limit the free play of imagination. But that does not mean that a church cannot also generate aesthetic ideas. Such a building might be held to be well or ill-proportioned, but there is no epitome of agreed proportions against which all buildings can be finally measured. Proportion, despite centuries of architectural theory, remains an aesthetic idea, not a rational concept capable of correct and incorrect application. Kant thought architecture more capable of aesthetic ideas than sculpture, because he assumed that sculpture must always represent, and thus be determined by the human form, whereas architecture is non-representational and its ideas will be more abstract and hence of a higher order.
In Kant’s hierarchy of the arts, painting ranks higher than the plastic arts of sculpture and architecture. For him, architecture and sculpture are ‘sensuous truths’ in that we sense them directly like natural objects. Painting on the other hand, offers only a ‘sensuous semblance’ of what it represents and is thus less constraining of the free play of the imagination. Curiously, and pertinent to our current discussion, Kant claims that landscape gardening is a form of painting.

…the first [painting] gives only the semblance of bodily extension; whereas the second, giving this, no doubt, according to its truth, gives only the semblance of utility and employment for ends other than the play of the imagination in the contemplation of its forms. The latter consists in no more than decking out the ground with the same manifold variety (grasses, flowers, shrubs, and trees, and even water, hills, and dales) as that with which nature presents it to our view, only arranged differently and in obedience to certain ideas.27

Here Kant seems utterly persuaded by the then novel aesthetic idea of the English garden as the extension of the forms and the appreciation of painting onto gardening. The landscape gardens in question where generically ‘parks’, that is, land enclosed for raising and hunting game. Hyde Park, from which Kensington Gardens was formed by Bridgeman, was the hunting park of Henry VII. By the time of Bridgeman and Kent, the hunting of deer on horseback was no longer fashionable, and scenery was ‘taken’ rather than game. Nevertheless, the keeping of deer, cattle and sheep continued largely in order to mow the grass and thus maintain the image of a pastoral landscape, but only secondarily for the production of meat. The grand houses that possessed such landscapes had a matrix of rooms, which were largely determined by the display of wealth, and rituals around dining, marking out social rank and precedence. The planning of the main body of such houses was determined by these matters rather than functional utility in the modern sense, and is thus not dissimilar to the social uses of gardens. Kant would not have thought of such social arrangements as functions but as enjoyments. The pleasures of conversation and the table were matters of agreeableness, where one has an appetite, desire or interest that can be satisfied, and thus, according to Kant, not the pure disinterested pleasure that we have in the mere existence of natural or artistic beauties.

When Kant writes that landscapes gives only the ‘semblance of utility’ it is probably agriculture that he is thinking of, but his example of ‘summer houses’ having a determinate concept suggests that we could also include the social functions of landscapes in his thinking. The crucial point is why such uses can appear as semblance and thus open to the free play of imagination and cognition while the ‘sensuous truth’ of architecture, the fact that we apprehend it directly, not through representations, also means that a building’s utility is a concept that constrains its ability to express aesthetic ideas.

A Kantian explanation of the functional negligence and artistic status of the contemporary architectural pavilions would then go something like this. The rainwater dripping on Fortnum and Mason’s clients is a necessary moment of disembodiment. Like sore-arsed listeners and sweaty reception goers; each of them plays a double role. They are the dairy maid, and the gatekeeper at the same time as they are the aristocrats at leisure. The inadequacy of the functional arrangements of the pavilion are what is required to regard the use one is making of the building as a matter of semblance. Kant thought painting and landscape had the greater capacity for aesthetic ideas because they gave only the semblance of bodily extension, and landscape only the semblance of utility. Architecture and sculpture are more constrained because one moves in the space of the object, unifying rather than distinguishing sensory perception from bodily extension. We could further say, then, that it is the bodily discomfort, the lack of fit of one’s person to a task, that makes taking coffee at the Serpentine Pavilion the mere semblance of utility and thus foregrounds a primarily aesthetic person. But this is more than a matter of subjectivity. Each artwork needs to contain its own internal rationality, a rationality that can appear irrational, in that it has no end or purpose, it deals with aesthetic ideas.
rather than definite concepts in Kant’s terms. Theodor Adorno argued that this non-conceptual rationality of the artwork is, nevertheless, the same rationality at work in the empirical world, and that the internal rationality of artworks has the role of showing the faulty rationality of the world.\(^{28}\) The pavilions work when their café/venue functions seem to be definite concepts that ought to constrain their form, but turn out to be mere ideas, images of what it might be like if the everyday world were in fact ruled by reason.

In applying Kantian aesthetics to the Serpentine Pavilions, I am not suggesting that it provides a comprehensive explanation of what the pavilions do or what they tell us about the commonalities and differences of contemporary architecture and the visual arts. It tells us something about these issues but as much because of the historical impact of Kantian thought on Romanticism and then Modernism; in the critique of the aesthetic subject in minimalism and then conceptualism. Jacques Ranciere calls the epoch of art that began in the eighteenth century ‘aesthetic art’ because of this imbrication of art practice and criticism with philosophical aesthetics, and the on-going contradictions of an aesthetics based on sensuous experience and an idea of art as presenting ideas. In this mix of ideas, taste and practices, utility is a major thread which opens the productive disjunction of art and aesthetics at several points.\(^{29}\) It touches on the interest or disinterest that we have in a thing and how we reflect that. It opens the distinction that Kant makes between concepts which are subject to reason and artistic or aesthetic ideas, that exercise rationality without an end.

There are good arguments for seeing the current fashion for pavilions in longer history precedents and cultural memory, such as the site of the Serpentine in an eighteenth century landscape and the 2016 summerhouses’ reference to William Kent and the origins of the landscape architecture, but this is not to argue that they are determined by this history. Rather, I have argued that the historical connection of eighteenth century ornamental park building and the pavilions is a felicitous frame in which to see a wider issue in intellectual history. The contemporary pavilions continue to exercise problems in the understanding of art and the experience of it that originate in the new kinds of ‘aesthetic arts’, such as landscape architecture, that Kant was trying to place against the traditional forms of art. The functions of the Serpentine pavilions are not just tokens to maintain some arbitrary disciplinary distinction between architecture and the visual arts. The semblance of their use opens fundamental issues of how we relate the uses of art to its conceptualisation and experience.

Thanks to: Greg Bamford, Wouter Davidts, Rosemary Hawker, Susan Holden, Ashley Paine, Annalise Varghese, Rosemary Willink, and especially Jana van Wijk who showed me that the question of function in the pavilions is unavoidable in her “On Top of Function”, Master of Architecture Thesis (UQ, 2016).
Endnotes


4 This is how they are seen by the popular site http://thegardenvisitor.co.uk/kensington-gardens-and-hyde-park-serpentine-follies/ (visited 7 February 2017) which states that ‘pavilion’ is a more tactful term for ‘folly’. For a scholarly account see Bergdoll, Barry, "The Pavilion and the Expanded Possibilities of Architecture". In Peter Cachola Schmal (ed), The Pavilion: Pleasure and Polemics in Architecture, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009) 12-33.

5 As is claimed by Hans Ulrich Obrist.

6 see for example Sylvia Lavin, "Vanishing Point: Sylvia Lavin on the Contemporary Pavilion". Artforum International 51, no. 2 (2012): 212.


11 These ideas are complicated by remembering that the concept of a building functioning like an organism arose, like aesthetics, in the Enlightenment. Forty, Adrian. Words and Buildings London: Thames and Hudson, 2000.

12 For example: the export of paintings and sculpture from the UK in 2014 was £2.6 billion or 25% of the UK's creative exports. UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport, "Creative Industries Economic Estimates" January 2014.

13 for instance Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jorge Pardo, Allan Wexler, Andrea Zittel, Thomas Hirschhorn, Callum Morton. The role of functionality in 'relational art' is the subject of a parallel paper by the present author.

14 In fact, by the time the Temple was built Caroline was crippled with gout, and if she ever went there it would have been by carriage. Van der Kiste, George II and Queen Caroline. 100-108.


16 Repton, Humphry. The Landscape Gardening of the Late Humphry Repton Esq. Edited by John Claudius Loudon( London, 1840).


18 The gardens were first opened to the public seasonally from 1821. Queen Victoria moved the Court from Kensington to Buckingham Palace in 1837 and the Gardens were open all year round by the 1840s. The Temple was restored in 1976. Edward Walford, 'Kensington Gardens', The Royal Parks, "Kensington Gardens".


20 At the origin of this debate is Norman Shaw, R, and T G Jackson. Architecture, a Profession or an Art. (London: John Murray, 1892).


23 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §44-§54.

24 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §16.

25 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §16, but quoting Guyer’s architecture article which has summer house where his translation has ‘garden house’.

26 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §51.

27 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §51.

