Standing at opposite ends of its history, Henry James and Fredric Jameson are two of realism’s most exacting critics. As they remarkably also share an abiding fascination with architecture, explorations of their confluence ought well consider what trusses realism to architecture. It is the wager of this speculative essay that architecture can serve as the foundation for a robust non-mimetic theory of literary realism. Despite deconstruction, the Auerbachian definition of realism as the serious representation of the actually existing world remains paradigmatic. This conceit that realism essentially represents bolsters today’s hegemonic consensus that literature is information and that the task of the critic is to tabulate information, correlating work to cause, word to referent, with ever more granularity. The architectural imaginaries of James and Jameson, I want to suggest, furnish resources for turning away from mimesis and therefore buttressing literary criticism against its reduction to science. What might be opened up by thinking architecturally about realism, thinking realism as architecture? Architecture would mean here not the physical sense of “building” but a figurative projection of “social space.” Such projections, in their formal specificity and their political consequence, weld James to Jameson. Through this bond we might dispense with mimetic fidelity to the single world and assert instead that realism drafts and constructs worlds. Realism fundamentally designs and erects socialities, imagines the grounds of collectivities, probes the mystique and encumbrance of materialities, calibrates and modulates institutions and productions beyond the scope of the given. To behold realism in its architectural dimension is to elevate construction before reference, to esteem the fundaments of world-building independent of mimesis, to appraise production that is irreducible to representation.

**Elevations of the Novel (Jamesian Architecture)**

Why does Henry James make such marked use of architecture within his novels and in his theory of the novel? Jamesian moments of climax are very often intensely architecturally coded. *The Portrait of a Lady*, to take only the most succinct example,
renders Isabel Archer’s grim recognition of her plot thusly: “the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness” (606). More roomily, when Milly Theale commences a counterplot to the one in which she finds herself ensnared, *The Wings of the Dove* depicts this turn as resolute domiciling in a Venetian palace:

She looked over the place, the storey above the apartments in which she had received him, the sala corresponding to the sala below and fronting the great canal with its gothic arches. The casements between the arches were open, the ledge of the balcony broad, the sweep of the canal, so overhung, admirable, and the flutter toward them of the loose white curtain an invitation to she scarce could have said what. But there was no mystery after a moment; she had never felt so invited to anything as to make that, and that only, just where she was, her adventure. It would be—to this it kept coming back—the adventure of not stirring. “I go about just here.” (345)

Most voluminously, *The Golden Bowl* magisterially confabulates Maggie’s dilated anagnorisis, spatializing the time of realization into an exotic locale:

This situation had been occupying, for months and months, the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange, tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard, bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned, at the overhanging eaves, with silver bells that tinkled, ever so charmingly, when stirred by chance airs. (327–28)

James’s novels deploy architecture as an exotic figure for a fugitive uneclipsed sphere of social relations: to comprehend sociality in all its treachery and banality is to experience architecture (see Fig. 1). Reciprocally, James’s prefaces prevalently deploy architecture as a commanding figure for the totality of relations that the novel art produces. For James, “a great building is the greatest conceivable work of art,” and thus the writer as artist “has verily to build, is committed to architecture, to construction at any cost; to driving in deep his vertical supports and laying across and firmly fixing his horizontal, his resting pieces—at the risk of no matter what vibration from the tap of his master-hammer” (*FW* 1130). The resulting “house of fiction” may be the most revered image in all of James, but the house’s floorplan has been too readily domesticated by countless culturalist studies of interior design. Drafting that house, James arrays curious tensions, frequently invoking “bricks,” “buildings,” “cornerstones,” and “foundations,” while accentuating the incommensurability between ordinary employments of matter and mortar and his own extraordinary assemblages:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human
scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. (1075)

Not even the Pritzker-Prize-winning conceptual architect Zaha Hadid could build such a house, with its unreckonable number of pierceable, disparate windows. These infinite apertures “are not hinged doors opening straight,” permitting passage from exterior to interior or from fiction to fact. They are not even portals of illumination but chimeric reverberations, penetrable fenestrations, holes within holes, queer openings casting an ontological paradox: since “dead wall” is the architectural term for a wall without windows, the fabrication here cleaves windows in a place without windows, lacunae unto their own non-existence. The planar distortions and dimen-
sional disjunctions of the house of fiction thus, above all, spatialize the inconsistencies of what exists and excessively mediate openings to what inexists. James repeatedly associates architecture with such excesses (the innumerable, the infinite), outlining a paradoxical science of building impossible buildings.

For all the inventive intensity of Jamesian architecture, his edifices nonetheless hew to firm standards of integrity, to what he calls “the principle of cohesion” (FW 1170). Employing architectural metaphors to convey the “proper fusions” that scaffold his visions, James labors under the imperative of precise engineering:

for erecting on such a plot of ground the neat and careful and proportioned pile of bricks that arches over it and was thus to form, constructionally speaking, a literary monument . . . a structure reared with an “architectural” competence. . . . I should clearly have to pile brick upon brick . . . I would leave no pretext for saying that anything is out of line, scale or perspective. I would build large—in fine embossed vaults and painted arches, as who should say, and yet never let it appear that the chequered pavement, the ground under the reader’s feet, fails to stretch at every point to the base of the walls. (1080)

When novelists fail, in James’s estimation, as in the cases of Eliot’s discursivity without dramatic intensity, Dickens’s action without character density, or Trollope’s distension without limit, the failure rests in this register of architectural integrity—of proportioning and intercalation. His renderings for the house of fiction famously tighten such “large loose baggy monsters” into crystalline design; his theory of the novel repeatedly advocates for “fusion”—the interrelation of parts (character, incident, description) but also the ultimate inseparability of “substance and form” (FW 1135). The precisely fused work is one in which it is “impossible to say . . . where one of these elements ends and the other begins” and one is “unable . . . to mark any such joint or seam”; “the continuity of things is the whole matter.”

Structural integrity of impossible structures. James houses this supple theory in that ambivalent edification of his corpus, the New York Edition, where he extravagantly engages architecture: every photographic frontispiece James commissioned (twenty-three photos in all) addresses colonnades, arches, bridges, gates, courtyards, grand halls, cathedrals, palaces, plazas, shops, neighboring clusters, houses, and doors, doors, doors—so many forms of open enclosures, of publics spectacular and mundane, of exteriors equally important as his famed interiors. Just as the prefaces’ discussions of settings emphatically dislocate his works from recognizable geography (one thinks also of the decided fictionality of Trollope’s Barsetshire, Hardy’s Wessex, Eliot’s provinces), James was “insistent that no illustration to a book of his should have any direct bearing upon it,” (Blackmur xxxviii) prescribing that each photograph should “speak for its odd or interesting self” rather than speak for a definite context or for the story (FW 1327). The prefaces and the photographs, sister foyers for his fictions, powerfully articulate the work of the novel chez James: myriad productions of unindexable social space (see Fig. 2).
Production, Not Representation (Architecture’s Architecture)

What if we thought of realism as a mode of production instead of as a mode of reflection? Our relentlessly referentialist methods in literary study demolish the heights of James’s constructivist conceit: build fiercely, soundly, cohesively, firmly—but without correlate. Build buildings whose infinite windows and crooked hinges, queer portals and speculative crevices, confound all who enter, defamiliarizing space itself. This essentially fantastical and estranging dimension of Jamesian architecture is no mere literary flamboyance—it is instead, I want to suggest, a magnification of the fantastic dimension implicit in the very architectural medium. For architecture at root is less the imposition of a pattern or order upon extant materials and space, less the erection of windows, walls, and doors around a given reality—less, in short, the kind of building with which canonical notions of realist mimesis would find their close analogue—and more a radical production of fluctuant realities.
Across a wide array of theoretical traditions, architecture lays claim to this radicalism, to production rather than representation, to creation of social spaces, to first-order formation. Architecture, Hegel philosophizes, is the first art, not only etymologically (arche—tekne) but because it limns the distinction between function and symbolism, between necessity and freedom (630–700). Though Hegel discerns this liminality as a limit, a measure of architecture’s inferiority to poetry, the firstness of architecture may be most thinkable precisely in its proximity to, rather than distance from, writing. Thus Derrida:

at the outset architecture is not an art of representation, whereas painting, drawing, and sculpture can always imitate something which is supposed to already exist . . . it is a Riß [rift, rupture] which should be thought of in its original sense independently of modifications such as Grundriß (groundplan), Aufriß (vertical section), Skizze (draft). In architecture there is an imitation of the Riß, of the engraving, of the ripping. This has to be associated with writing. (“Architecture” 322)9

A rend in the fabric, a rupture in reality, architectural outlining breaks (Riß) what is, performing the priority that Derrida eminently accords to writing. Such writing, it bears repeating, cannot be assimilated to representation. As Gérard Genette observes, “architecture does not speak of space: it would be truer to say that it makes space speak itself” (44). For the architect Bernard Tschumi, this inscription without representation guarantees “disjunctions,” the gaps between the forms of spaces and the uses to which they might be put, as well as more broadly the critical chasms between the social structures within which architecture is built (particular governments, particular economies, particular cultures) and its faculty for interrogating those structures (207–15). Architecture ruptures; it realizes the priority and force of form.

Radically primary and radically critical, architecture wields power on the ground and masters the practice of “space as the fundamental category of politics” (AC 53). The politics of architecture, in the eyes of someone like Le Corbusier, consist in its radical creativity, its core capacity to protract revolution from the mere seizure of power into the construction and constitution of new spaces (71). Spatializing the possible, radicalizing the political, architecture has thus been held to foundationally activate utopianisms:

there is no [architectural] project without exploration—through the imagination—of a possible, a future. Therefore, there is no plan without utopia . . . concrete utopia . . . it seeks to conceive of a new space, which can only be based on an architectural project. (LeFebvre, Toward 147–48)

That great surveyor of utopian functions, Ernst Bloch, stresses that the relationship is bidirectional: not only is architecture utopian, but utopia is essentially architectural, for it is nothing other than the “anticipation of a space adequate for human beings” (198).10

In the abstract, architecture does not represent, depict, denote, or refer—it rather takes place, makes space, composes shape, inaugurates contour; it negates and exceeds what exists. Antimimetic, political, radical, architecture produces social space, and
in this, I propose, rests the isomorphism with realism. Realism fabricates volumes of sociality and voids of totality that inspire the mapping of extant spaces and incite the design of other spaces, but that must not be construed as the referential representation of a definite society. Architecture is the name of the plastic mediation that is the imaginative construction of social space; realism is its literary instantiation (see Fig. 3).

**Floorplans of Utopia (Jamesonian Architecture)**

What accounts for architecture’s enduring lure for Jameson, and might this lure renovate his account of realism? Jameson’s architecture criticism exalts endeavors that reimagine massings and gradings, installations and institutions, closures and openings. Much like James’s impossible effusions of millions of windows and confounding forays through queer hinges, Jameson’s buildings innovate fabulous openings; much like James’s structural cohesiveness, Jameson’s buildings contrive dynamic totalities. His architectural appraisals listen to spaces that “speak enough for [their] odd or interesting self,” making space thinkable as the groundwork of sociality and social possibility, carving gateways to utopia. For James, architecture embodies the structural integrity of the novel. For Jameson, architecture most prominently bodies forth ponderings of utopia. Engaging the space between them, we can begin to track the utopian potential of the realist novel’s architecture—to think realism aslant of reference, to think its creative constructions in their other-worldly richness.

Over a number of movements, Jameson reads in architecture great utopian potential. His superb essay on Frank Gehry’s Santa Monica House, for example, revels in the way Gehry’s subsumption of a classic pink clapboard bungalow within corrugated steel and chain-link amounts to “an effacement of the categories of inside/outside,” activating a dialectic of interstitiality that performs the sort of mediated openings that can ballast utopias (PM 112). In Robert Gober’s architectural sculptures like *Untitled Installation*, Jameson similarly venerates formalizations of between-ness and dialectical suspension. A doorframe separated by depth from a door leaning against a wall, Gober’s incorporates “what might once have been called painting, sculpture, writing, and even architecture,” becoming a work of multimedia in which “there is, first of all, no ‘representation’ to look at” (PM 162). Moving through the installations, Jameson locates utopia on the threshold of fantastical vestibules, windows in dead walls and doors to nowhere. Utopia here pivots on the aestheticized framing of space itself, delineating extant constellations, exposing the artifice and contingency of constellation as such, precipitating other spaces.

Where the postmodern aesthetic activates openings, the *post*-postmodern produces enclosures that, in their very boundedness and limitation, offer equally utopian generations. Most exemplary for Jameson is Rem Koolhaas’s vigorous pursuit of the large form—often a macro-cladding enveloping solids and gaps. Jameson zeroes in on the contradiction dramatized between exterior and interior:

large scale now produces . . . *incommensurability* . . . the contents of the various large-scale projects can also be seen as a selection of all the geometric forms and solids imaginable: an enormous random collection of solids, cones, cubes, pyramids, spheres, and so on, such that what they are housed or collected in (as it were the notorious “class of all classes”)

The Realist Blueprint
The tension between the déclassé block and the particularized solids that it houses, as well as the secondary tension of junctures and misjunctures between the voids and divergent solids, activates a zone of contradictions precariously cantilevered into a delimitable whole. And it is finally this antagonistic whole that Jameson admires, for it eloquently bespeaks an “ambition to grapple with the totality of the social itself” (EE 67). Totality for Jameson, as for the Marxian tradition to which he is shining heir, means the “properly unrepresentable ensemble of society’s structures as a whole”—the mode of production, the relations of production, ideology, and
their negations, the coexistence of other structures, along with the epistemological
impossibility of fixing these dynamic negations and relations (PM 51). Projects like
Koolhaas’s are not therefore representations of totality but enunciations of the ques-
tion of such representation, mediations of space, aestheticizations of logics that rivet
and contradictions that unhinge.

Aesthetic totalization is positioned by Jameson as the distinguishing hallmark
of utopian projects: “it is precisely th[e] category of totality that presides over the
forms of Utopian realization: the Utopian city, the Utopian revolution, the Utopian
commune or village, and of course the Utopian text itself” (AF 5). “The text itself” is
the thorny point for us here. Jameson has notably studied the utopianism of science
fiction, conspiracy cinema, and allegory, but he hardly rates realism on his scales of
utopia, going so far as to argue that “truly Utopian forms...drift out of the province
of realism altogether” and that “realism has a vested interest, an ontological stake,
in the solidity of bourgeois social reality” (AR 215, 5).12 But the question of totality
obliges us to read Jameson against himself here. After all, his scandalous willingness
to proffer Walmart as a paradigmatic utopia ultimately enunciates nothing so much
as the Hegelian point that no place has a place right there where you least expect
it.13 By extension, what has so often been decried as the most conservative of all the
novel’s revolutionary modes might offer something quite radical. Taking the point
that utopian modes and genres are characteristically concerned with totality, should
we not also reciprocally observe that modes animated by what Jameson deems “the
desire called totality” have utopian inflection? As Lukacs conveys, none other than
“the ambition to grapple with social totality” undergirds literary realism; realism is
the epic not of the bourgeois but of the system of capitalism itself.14 Lukacs contrasts
“the epic mentality’s total indifference to any form of architectural construction” with
a realism self-conscious that it “have a strict compositional and architectural signifi-
cance” and equally self-conscious about “show[ing] polemically the impossibility of
achieving” a representation of totality, and thus we might deduce that the encounter
with totality as a problem originates realism’s architecturality (67, 76, 38) (see Fig. 4).

Architecture’s performance of the problem of totality enchants James and
intrigues Jameson. Jameson reads “the desire called totality” palpably exhibited by
post-postmodern architecture, while James elevates architecture as a figure of total
integration in an architectural period we could scarcely deem modern. From their
joint fascination, then, we might detect that the question of totality and totalization
actuates a faculty of architecture as such (and this is avowedly in diverse architectural
movements) (ST 141). In James, as we have seen, architecture densely casts impossible
totality—the aesthetic wholeness of fantastical space. Architecture attracts James as
prism for the art of fiction precisely because a building’s parts are so necessarily parts
of wholes: to manufacture parts without regard to whole is to engineer dilapidation;
to take architecture apart is to demolish, to lose the thing itself.15 Architecture pro-
vides a vernacular for James to house his craft of fictive construction, and it likewise
provides Jameson with a craft to figure the utopian construction of other worlds:

“counterhegemony” means producing and keeping alive a certain alternate
“idea” of space . . . architects . . . projecting and constructing collective
ensembles that express and articulate original new social relations (and
needs and demands) of a collective type . . . are able to form conceptions
and utopian images . . . such Utopian “ideas” are as “objective” as material buildings. (AC 72–73)

The articulation of original social relations, the art of the aperture, the Riß of the plane, the experimental formalization of a spatial ideal—these are architecture’s utopian practices—and they are the very purview of literary realism.

There comes a point when Jameson does address realism as the construction of social space but as the manufacture of the life world that will turn out to be identical with capitalist modernity. In “The Realist Floor Plan” Jameson glancingly remarks
the importance of a “characterization of ‘realism’ less passive than the conventional notions of ‘reflexion,’ ‘representation,’ and the like” (374). His main contribution to theorizing “this productive function” of realism has been to grant the literary mode a significant agency in establishing the parameters of existence proper to the nineteenth-century economic mode of production:

the ideological mission of the nineteenth century realistic novelists . . . is not merely to produce new mental and existential habits, but in a virtual or symbolic way to produce this whole new spatial and temporal configuration itself: what will come to be called “daily life,” the Alltag, or, in a different terminology, the “Referent”—so many diverse characterizations of the new configuration of public and private spheres or space in classical or market capitalism. (374)

When it is productive, literary realism partners with socio-economic forces to inaugurate new conditions. But what if this floorplan were extruded into a blueprint? What if this productive function were thought in less determined, more “relatively autonomous” terms? 16

Architecture improvises paradoxical openings, practices an art of integrity, disorients space. Realist architecture improvises social cohesion, images a mode of social production at once free and constrained, defamiliarizes realities. In its precise calibration of lintels and joists, its ingenious assemblage of interlinking strata, realism proffers not a unified meaning to which its various levels can be resolved but an aestheticization of necessary and contingent webs of relations, a spatialization of implication and determination, a mediation of the particular by the universal and of totality by its impossibility. Put differently, realist structural integrity is the aestheticization of dialectics.

Speculative Theses on Axonometry (Realism’s Architecture)

Realism encompasses not the world but a world, drafting a structuration of social space that does not reify the extant order of things even though it acknowledges the inevitability that constructed realities take on ontological solidity. Realism’s exploration of the city, governmentality, labor, and law affirms that there is institution but does not inherently affirm any particular institution or form thereof. Realism investigates the insuperable dilemmas that destabilize social grounds, the impossibility for any immanent social space, the provisional solutions that contingent constellations afford, the paramount political question of totalization. Realism’s casting of variegated nets, networks, webs, and systems for interconnectedness affirm the insuperability of human interdependence. Realism’s experimentation with omniscience and its limits, focalization and its curtailments, the free indirection of discourse and the impersonality of the personal, affirms that consciousness itself is spatial and that there is no steady point of view for relations. Realism’s evocation of secular causality, democratized providence, and impeachable knowledge affirms that collectivity is a project without logic, an antagonism without solution, a world without natural order. Realism’s interrogative impetus (what is reality? what is real? what processes substantiate realness? what could be real?) queries the possible and thus incites thinking and building more
utopically than utopian fiction’s normativity. Realism contemplates indispensable elements of human affiliation, models relational space, conducts charrettes for sociality. Realism is not the index of fact but the house of fiction; not reference, not evidence, not representation; realism is architecture.

NOTES

1 From the avant-garde of twenty-first-century studies, like La Berge and Shonkwiler, who argue that “realism expresses a desire for the most thorough possible indexing of capitalism,” to theorists of the postmodern, like Belsey and Hutcheon, who declaim the referential naivety and ideological “intelligibility” of the bygone era, and even to scholars of the nineteenth century, like Said, Brantlinger, and Gallagher, who present novels as univocal references to dominant values, “always connected to the stuff of the real,” prevailing conceptions of realism cohere around this conviction that it is first and foremost the indexical reiteration of the extant world (La Berge and Shonkwiler 8; Gallagher 63).

2 In this respect, it is no accident that Franco Moretti, prince of digital humanities and distant reading, is rightly a scholar of literary realism: the illusion that realism refers necessarily begets the delusion that it is counting, and not reading, which will yield “better” knowledge of the world of the novel.

3 “Social space” is LeFebvre’s influential construction (see Production). Rather than a neutral terrain upon which society takes place, space is in this view the very medium of socio-political relations, and hence architecture directly molds that medium, fashioning the volumes and voids that shape the social. Eisenman’s distinction between architecture and building is also apposite here: “The real architecture only exists inside the drawings. The real building exists outside the drawings . . . architecture involves seeing whether ideas can withstand the attack of building” (8).

4 Frank provides a different answer to this question, an answer that has found many echoes: architectural imagery portends the mental constructions and spaces of consciousness that we are to take as James’s true subject.

5 “Proper fusion . . . resides in some such measure of these things as may consort with the fine measure of other things too” (FW 1094–95).

6 In addition to the twenty-three photo frontispieces, the New York Edition has one more photo, the portrait of James. A profile, it works arguably as a kind of section drawing.

7 The environs of Roderick Hudson, for instance, rank “a peaceful, rural New England community quelconque—It was not, it was under no necessity of being, Northampton Mass” (FW 1044). London in all its riches must nonetheless be enhanced imaginatively: “we use our material up, we use up even the thick tribute of the London streets—if perception and attention but sufficiently light our steps” (1086). More generally, he recommends, with erotic tinge, making imaginative forays in place of literal visits: “I recall pulling no wires, knocking at no closed doors, applying for no ‘authentic’ information . . . to haunt the great city and by this habit to penetrate it, imaginatively, in as many places as possible—that was to be informed, that was to pull wires, that was to open doors, that positively was to groan at times under the weight of one’s accumulations” (1101). See also: “of the mind, of the author’s projected world, in which objects are primarily related to each other, and therefore not ‘taken from’ a particular establishment anywhere” (1328).

8 See also: “the proposed photographic studies were to seek the way, which they have happily found, I think, not to keep, or to pretend to keep, anything like dramatic step with their suggestive matter” (FW 1327). We should also note that Coburn’s expansive use of filters and soft grain techniques enhance this effect of floating, dislocating the scenes from even themselves.

9 See also: “All other arts have a telos of representation, but architecture seems not to depend on it” (Derrida, Chora 8).

10 On this essentially architectural quality of utopia, it is interesting to note the historical fact that Renaissance architectural utopias precede the literary crystallization by Thomas More in 1516.

11 We could add, so many years on, that Gehry’s signature aesthetics of liminality—his career trajectory toward making the wrapping of a building evermore fluidly sculptural—delves into the depths of surface, probing brave new dimensions.

12 His only direct treatment of realism and utopia symptomatically concerns not literature but television, and, even more symptomatically, content and not form. The instances of utopianism he identifies in David Simon’s The Wire pertain to plot points and characterological idiosyncrasies—to creativity and collectivity, craftsmanship and agency—whereas the form of the thing—its multiplotted, multifocal, integrative network, its figurations of interdependence and causation, its structures of parallelism and concentricity, lieutenanty and repetition, and its scaling of totalization and mapping—seems to me a far more striking utopian site.


14 For commentary on this point, see Cunningham (12).
The realist novel, Miller seminally opines, “is a structure not supported by anything outside itself . . . a structure in which the elements are not detachable pieces . . . every element draws its meaning from the others so that the novel must be described as a self-generating and self-sustaining system” (29–30).

“Relative autonomy” is Althusser’s phrase. Here it is necessary to contravert Jameson. He writes of “the structural and inherent conservatism and anti-politicality of the realist novel as such . . . ontological realism, absolutely committed to the density and solidity of what is—whether in the realm of psychology and feelings, institutions, objects or space . . . the very choice of the form itself is a professional endorsement of the status quo” (AR 215).

WORKS BY HENRY JAMES

WORKS BY FREDRIC JAMESON

OTHER WORKS CITED