

Plaster Archeology in Budapest's Seventh District: Toward a Mode of Engagement with Architectural Surfaces

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Abstract: Used as a predominant covering material in Central and Eastern Europe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, plaster's malleable characteristics also enabled its efficient utilization as a material for imitating decorative features traditionally made from stone and marble. Instead of looking at plaster as an imitation material, this article proposes studying it as a material archive containing unintentionally preserved traces of the past that may include fragments of advertisements, graffiti, bullet holes, or virtually any inscription in plaster that would otherwise be bound to disappear. Plaster archeology is a mode of looking at plaster less as a conduit of architectural form and more as a material surface involving depth. As a discipline, plaster archeology entails a set of practices that allows one to attend to these surfaces, although not with the intention to save traces of the past from disappearance, but rather towards reconceptualizing plaster as a material in its own right that constantly transforms at the whims of human and climatic forces. By using two buildings located in the heart of Budapest's seventh district as case studies, I will then demonstrate how the plaster archeologist views and examines façades. Finally, through an exploration of plaster's characteristics and history, I argue for plaster archeology as a non-interventive mode of engaging with architectural surfaces.

Keywords: *architecture, Budapest, façade, haptic vision, plaster*

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A façade bears the patina of time, the wrinkles of age as well as the signs of contemporary makeup. It is haunted by the ghosts of the past and projections for the future. An architect sees the façade on a model, without reflections, shadows, wires, projections, posters, graffiti, or the scars of time. For me, a façade is a scarred and retouched material surface, the site of multiple practices of urban self-fashioning that go beyond architectural modeling. (2017: 152)

Svetlana Boym



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The above excerpt from Svetlana Boym's posthumously published collection of essays, *The Off-Modern*, conveys a particular type of sensibility regarding architectural façades. For Boym, a façade is more than a two-dimensional surface riddled with doors and windows. It is also more than a material manifestation of an architect's vision and design skills. Instead, she sees the façade as an archive of traces left behind by the mundane practices of everyday life. While the city that has captivated Boym with its multi-layered façades is the Albanian capital, Tirana, the present article has been inspired by a similar kind of sensibility toward façades found in my own hometown, Budapest. Similar to Tirana, a great many wall surfaces in Budapest bear age-old scars and self-fashioned additions that I regard as a storehouse of unintentionally preserved traces of life. In particular, my interest lies within the materiality of plaster as one of the most common materials used to cover walls in Eastern and Central Europe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While plaster is conventionally perceived as the material out of which decorative details are molded for buildings' façades, my underlying purpose in this article is to shift this perception toward understanding plaster as a "scarred and retouched material surface" (Boym 2017: 152) replete with traces of the past that are bound to disappear as a result of either neglect or the renovation of the façade. Such engendered, ephemeral traces include fragments of advertisements, graffiti, bullet holes and virtually any inscription in plaster that would have otherwise disappeared. What I call plaster archeology, however, is not geared towards saving these details from disappearance, but rather strives to reconceptualize plaster as the material archive preserving these traces. Plaster archeology is a mode of looking at plaster less as a conduit of architectural form and style and more as a material surface containing depth; it entails a set of practices that allows the viewer to attend to these surfaces, albeit without the urgency originating from the aim to preserve its contents. In what follows, I first lay the theoretical foundations for plaster archeology. By using two buildings located in the heart of Budapest's seventh district as case studies, I will then demonstrate how the plaster archeologist views and examines façades. Finally, through an exploration of plaster's characteristics and history, I argue for plaster archeology as a non-interventive mode of engaging with architectural surfaces.

As an urban practice, plaster archeology is primarily based on walking and looking. Thanks to the growing demand for biker- and pedestrian-friendly cities that is occurring on both sides of the Atlantic, the cult of walking has been on the rebound during the past two decades. The figure of the *flâneur*, the nineteenth-century urban stroller who emerged as a typical urban figure in the writings of Baudelaire and Benjamin via their interpretations of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd," has become a common point of reference in the growing body of literature on walking (see: Solnit 2002, Coverley 2010). To a certain extent, the plaster archeologist is a kind of *flâneur*, one who goes "botanizing on the asphalt" (Benjamin 1993: 36), yet is also an endangered type who, in the wake of Baron Haussmann's restructuring of the urban texture of Paris, is destined to disappear together with his favorite hangout, the arcades, where he observed the rise of consumer culture and the circulation of commodities. In much the same way that these glass-covered shopping streets fell victim to the wrecking ball in the 1860s, the derelict façades that attract the gaze of the plaster archeologist are threatened by the looming prospect of restoration. While both the plaster archeologist and the *flâneur* are susceptible to the ephemeral in the bustling metropolis, the *flâneur* is a man of the crowd whose existence as a type is defined by the act of walking; for the plaster archeologist walking is rather a means to an end. He walks with his eyes trained on façades and whenever he encounters traces of the past embedded in

plaster he feels compelled to interrupt his stroll. Rather than going with the flow and capturing fleeting glimpses of urban life as the *flâneur* does, the plaster archeologist is characterized by his occasional and sudden stops to observe wall surfaces up close, often to the puzzlement of passersby (Munteán 2011: 47).

By resisting the pull of the crowd and dedicating his attention to seemingly featureless surfaces, the plaster archeologist turns the layered materiality of plaster into his area of operation. What was once the arcades of Paris for the *flâneur* is the wall surface for the plaster archeologist. In much the same way that the *flâneur's* gaze pierces through the veil of the crowd, the plaster archeologist looks for depth *in*, rather than *behind* surfaces. By doing so, he no longer sees plaster as a vehicle of form but as a material archive. His gaze is what the media theorist, Laura Marks, and anthropologist, Tim Ingold, describe as haptic vision. Building on Alois Riegl's distinction between optical and haptic visuality, Marks defines the former as a way of looking geared towards identifying objects while investing them with meaning. This mode of looking would see the façade as an expression of architectural style. The latter kind of looking, on the other hand, "tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze" (2000: 162). Ingold writes about haptic vision in relation to surfaces in the following description:

A haptic vision seeks not to freeze the surface corrugations in some momentary form, so that they may be modelled in the mind through a one-to-one mapping of data points on the surface and in the model, but to join with the currents and with the wind. It is to feel the waves, the ripples and the swish of the field as movements... haptic vision is always along in the continual birth of things, alert to the movements going on behind your back, or, more likely, on the periphery of the visual field. (2017: 103)

Once the plaster archeologist interrupts his walk, his eyes continue the stroll, constantly alternating between a haptic and an optical mode of seeing. Through privileging the detail over the whole, fragmentation over unity, and palimpsest over two-dimensional surfaces, this haptic mode of looking enables him to touch the texture of plaster with his eyes.

Recent theories in architecture, anthropology, and archeology have also been helpful in rethinking the interaction between architecture, social forces and the environment. Eyal Weizman, for instance, founder of the field of forensic architecture, describes buildings as structures that constantly transform; by doing so, they subsequently bear the imprints of a variety of social and natural forces:

We think of architecture as a static thing, but physical structures and built environments are elastic and responsive. Architecture, I once proposed, is "political plastic"—social forces *slowing* into form. ... Deterioration and erosion continue the builders' processes of form-making. Cracks make their way from geologic formations across city surfaces to buildings and architectural details. Moving within and across inert matter and built structures, they connect mineral formations and artificial constructions. (2012: 7, emphasis in original)

In a vein similar to Weizman's conceptualization of architecture as process, the anthropologist Tim Ingold asserts that, "The real house is never finished. Rather, for its

inhabitants it calls for unremitting effort to shore it up in the face of the comings and goings of its human inhabitants and non-human inhabitants, not to mention the weather!" (2010: 5). Studying material culture requires that the researcher attend to these changes. In order to do so, Ingold claims, one needs to be humble toward the material he studies. Any theory of materiality, he writes, is to be practiced as "a modality of habitation—a way of thinking and working with stuff—on a level with the materials of its trade" (2017: 100). Building on, among others, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze and Guattari, he urges researchers "to think *from* materials, not *about* them (2012: 437, emphasis in the original), which, in the realm of architecture, entails the reconceptualization of the building as an on-going process, rather than a finished product. It is "not the fixed and final structure of the architect's design but the *actual* building, resting on its foundations in the earth, buffeted by the elements, and susceptible to the visitations of birds, rodents and fungi" (2010: 5, emphasis in the original), that need to be taken into account.

Ingold's call to think *from* materials resonates with the plaster archeologist's haptic vision. He finds 'complexion' a better term than 'texture' "to epitomize the constitutive quality of any surface to which a haptic vision attends" (2017: 103). In complexion, Ingold argues, "the lines and wrinkles of the face, and its palette of shades from pallid to ruddy, are so completely blended with health and mood, and even with the atmospherics of weather, that they cannot be disentangled. This has a very important corollary, however. It means that in its complexion, the face does not belong to the head; nor the skin to the body" (103). Ingold's anthropomorphic terminology suggests that the kind of surface that unfolds for haptic vision is not "the outer envelope of a form" (103), as it would be in the optical form, but rather a surface that "emerges in the very fusion of an affectivity that intensifies from within and the weathering—including such atmospheric effects as sunshine, wind and rain—that brings its influence to bear from without" (2017: 104). In the context of plaster archeology, complexion is the surface of the façade unraveled by haptic vision; a palimpsest of multiple temporalities, uses, and scars, to recall Boym's similarly anthropomorphic term.

Dealing with sites as palimpsests of multiple temporalities, however, has long been the prerogative of the discipline of archeology. The "palimpsestal archaeological record," as Bjørnar Olsen contends, "is providing a far more realistic and accurate image of the past than any historical narrative" (2013: 127). For the plaster archeologist it would be logical, not to mention tempting, to take a trowel and brush and unravel what lies underneath the outer layer of plaster. Still, it is precisely this inclination to "dig" that the plaster archeologist must resist. Taking up on Ingold's advice, instead of intervening with the natural process of disintegration or eventual renovation, the plaster archeologist *follows* materials. Following entails the practice of haptic vision as well as meticulous photographic documentation of changes in surfaces over time, archival research, and interviews with inhabitants whenever possible. By refraining from accelerating the disintegration of outer layers of plaster in the hope of revealing information stored at a deeper level of the archive, the plaster archeologist exercises what the English poet, John Keats, describes in an 1817 letter to his brothers as negative capability. This kind of capability, Keats writes, is a virtue that manifests itself "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1899: 277). In resisting the temptation to go beyond the power of haptic vision, the plaster archeologist strives to remain humble in his approach to the wall surface as complexion, according to Ingold's sense of the word. By doing so, he not only embraces the mysteries that remain hidden from his

eyes, but also accedes to the slowness of material changes in the façade. Exploring the shapes, patterns, and colors of water stains seeping through wall surfaces over long periods of time, the artist Lizan Freijssen observes that "For someone living with a chronic lack of time, gaining insight in and understanding of the essence of slowness and growth processes, is a revelation. Letting go of control, embracing imperfection and drawing attention to what we generally fail to consciously see. Everything has its own time" (2017: 6).

Plaster Archeology in Síp Utca

We have seen how plaster archeology serves as a walking and viewing apparatus to engage visually with the materiality of architectural façades. In what follows, I will demonstrate through the examples offered by two buildings found in Budapest's Jewish district how the plaster archeologist works on the street. The first building, number 15 Síp utca, is located in the block between Dohány utca and Dob utca, a stone's throw away from the Great Synagogue. The building's rather eclectic appearance bespeaks the number of modifications it has undergone during the past one hundred years (*Fig. 1.*).



Fig. 1. The façade of 15 Síp utca

The arcades of the ground floor standing on both sides of the main gate attest to the purity of early nineteenth century neoclassicism, while the main gate, as well as the second-floor façade, feature neo-baroque ornaments from the late nineteenth century. The top floor and the cornice

are later additions, dating from the first half of the twentieth century. Archival research reveals that in the 1930s the owner of the building was Vilmos Weber, an influential member of the Jewish community. In 2006 I had the opportunity to talk to one of his descendants, Péter Hertzka, who had lived in this building since birth. Out of enthusiasm—and a lack of financial resources for renovation—Hertzka had done a lot of maintenance work on his own. The wrought iron gate is one of the treasures of which Mr. Hertzka was proudest. The top section of the wrought iron gate features the intertwined initials of “Cs. N. M.,” designating the name of Miklós Nagy of Csécse, a highly esteemed jurist whose son preceded Vilmos Weber as the building’s owner in the early twentieth century.

So far, I have engaged with the building on the level of style and history by employing an optical mode of vision coupled with the gathering of information from the archives as well as from one of the building’s inhabitants. A more haptic engagement with the façade, however, reveals a different dimension of the past. Throughout the ground floor façade, the peeling surface of plaster evinces multiple layers, one atop the other. Near the ground-floor windows on the right side of the façade, the outer layer of plaster had fallen in large patches, revealing advertisements originating from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. One can still make out the words “*uradalmi fa*,” which presumably refers to good-quality wooden barrels or wine-stock. Underneath, as if a centerpiece to a crest, the fading contours of a wine bottle can be seen, providing a cue for deciphering the word *borok* [‘wines’], below it (*Fig. 2.*).



Fig. 2-4. Sections of beverage advertisements on the façade of 15 Síp utca

On a different section of the façade, between the two windows of the ground floor apartment, a brand of hard liquor called *Kisüsti* appears, with an image of a narrower bottle advertising a Hungarian specialty spirit, *pálinkák* (*Fig. 3.*). Although the words to the right of the window are barely legible, one may surmise that if wines and short drinks have already made their appearance on the other wall surfaces, only one type is missing: beer. Although the name of the brand has been obscured by later layers of plaster, the font style of the letters that has not changed for over one hundred years gives it away: *Dreher* (*Fig. 4.*). Below these advertisements, on the stone footing of the building, words in the font style of a later period can be deciphered with considerable difficulty: *legfinomabb tearumok* [‘finest tea-rums’], *új bor ’44* [‘new wine

'44'], and *Vegyés likőrök* ['mixed liquors']. As these traces testify, what is now an apartment was once a bar in which 1944 probably marked the last year for the wine that was served. After the war, the arcades opening to the street were walled up and the bar was turned into an apartment that has been vacant for at least ten years. Ever since 2006, when I first discovered these traces, I have paid regular visits to this wall surface to observe their gradual disappearance, in addition to the surfacing of formerly hidden parts of the advertisements as patches of the outer layer of plaster flake off. Apart from the name of Endre Szilágyi, who worked here as barman in 1928, I could not recover any written document in connection to the bar (Munteán, 2006: 42-44).

Adjacent to number 15, the façade of number 17 Síp utca has undergone a different trajectory. Built in 1908 based on the design of Sándor and Béla Löffler, the architects of the Orthodox synagogue in Kazinczy utca, the façade features a menorah combined with Hungarian folk motifs, making it a unique architectural performance of turn-of-the-century Jewish assimilation in Budapest. By the beginning of the 2000s, however, the building had fallen into complete disrepair. On the occasion of one of my walks in the area, I noticed the contours of letters that had formerly been attached to the plaster above the ground floor storefront (*Fig. 5*). While the first word was easy to make out, *Dinner*, decoding the second one was nothing but guesswork. In the Budapest Collection of the Szabó Ervin Municipal Library I found a series of photographs taken by the photographer, Mór Erdélyi, whose work yields an unparalleled photographic archive of the built environment in *fin-de-siècle* Budapest. Shortly after its completion, Erdélyi took three photographs of several details of Síp utca 17; one of these images reveals that the traces I had seen on the façade were the name of Dinner Mór, owner of a chocolate store (*Fig. 6*).



Fig. 5. The old confectionery store before restoration with Dinner's name still visible
Fig. 6. Mór Erdélyi's photograph of Mór Dinner's confectionery store at 17 Síp utca

In recognition of the fame of the Löffler brothers and the building's unique ornamentation, number 17 had been granted protected status in 2005 and funds were raised for the renovation of the exterior façade shortly afterwards. As a result, the subsequent renovation dispensed with the contours of Dinner's name, although the original plaster underneath had not been completely removed. A closer look at the surface of new plaster even reveals the letter r from Mór cutting through the new layer, which has already turned grey over the past decade (*Fig. 7*). The recent history of the façades of 15 and 17 Síp utca therefore presents a paradox. Although the restoration of number 17 aimed to recreate the building's original appearance, this

goal was reached at the cost of dispensing with the traces of a name that had survived for almost a hundred years, even influencing the neighborhood's speech habits as the building was still known among locals as the *Dinner-ház* ['Dinner-building'] long after the confectionery store had closed.



Fig. 7. The old confectionery store after the restoration

Conversely, in the city of Sopron, at the western border of Hungary, the renovation of a building where the vegetable store of Géza Pum had functioned during the 1920s and 30s, resulted in the delicate re-inscription of his name into the façade long after it had been plastered over (Kótai 2018). Pum's fame in the city prompted a collective will to commemorate his store even in the absence of material traces on the façade. In the case of the Dinner's building, despite material evidence, there was no such collective will to save it. Without doubt, the leaders of the restoration were aware of Erdélyi's photographs, as well as of the remains of the letters on the wall; either their preservation was not considered at all, or it was deemed too complicated to carry out. Perhaps preserving this trace of the past was simply less important compared to ensuring the stylistic unity of the new façade. On number 15, however, decades of neglect have preserved painted letters and images that would otherwise have fallen prey to renovation, a paradox that causes no feeling of irritation in the plaster archeologist, whose goal is neither to fight for the preservation of these traces, nor to save them from renovation. Instead, he observes

them as integral elements of the plaster in which they are embedded. In this relation, the plaster archeologist comes to see plaster as complexion. In much the same way that "in its complexion, the face does not belong to the head; nor the skin to the body," as Ingold says (2017: 103), plaster is severed from the wall, as it were, and rather than functioning as the "outer envelope" of the building, it unfolds as a "coherent and self-contained entity" (103) that, instead of "hiding the depth *behind* the surface, allows us to feel the depth *in* the surface" (104, emphasis in the original).

In order to understand plaster in terms of what Ingold calls complexion, we need to explore its characteristics and history in Central and Eastern Europe. To do so, I will use Roland Barthes's essay on plastic as a conceptual platform to free plaster from its generally perceived role as a covering material and reconceptualize it as a surface with depth. Writing in the 1950s while witnessing the proliferation of plastic objects in all walks of life, Barthes describes plastic as the latest example of "imitation materials... aimed at reproducing cheaply the rarest of substances, diamonds, silk, feathers, furs, silver, all the luxurious brilliance of the word." But plastic's ability to reproduce objects made out of more valuable materials is far from being equivalent to fakery, Barthes contends. Unlike fake gold or porcelain, plastic does not pretend to be other than itself. Although it is able to mimic the shape and function of other objects, plastic imitates without pretense, without the intention to deceive. Its mimetic power concerns form rather than materiality. Even then, its ubiquity in our lives eclipses its imitative quality. We barely ever think of a plastic plate as an imitation of a porcelain one: we simply use both in accordance with their affordances and differences in value. As much as plastic imitates the shapes of other objects, it does not attempt to be other than itself: "Plastic has climbed down," Barthes writes, "it is a household material. It is the first magical substance which consents to be prosaic" (2000: 98).

Barthes's observations on plastic also hold true for plaster. Both plastic and plaster find their origins in the Greek *emplastron* and in the Latin *emplastrum*, meaning "daub" or "salve." In Medieval Latin *plastrum* meant both bandage for a broken limb and the material used to cover masonry walls. The malleable texture of *plastrum*, a mixture of lime, cement or sand, and water, survives in the English word "plasticity," a characteristic quality of both plastic and plaster. If plastic is prosaic because it is everywhere and shamelessly acknowledges its cheap materiality, the extensive use of plaster in nineteenth-century Central and Eastern European cities attests to a similar dynamic. At a time when Classical, Romanesque, Gothic, and Renaissance revivals turned streetscapes into an architectural masquerade, plaster served as an expedient means to decorate wall surfaces with faux pilasters, arches, pediments, friezes, and cornices that harked back to their classical counterparts from centuries before. The large-scale application of plaster during mid- and late nineteenth-century historicism and eclecticism turned it into a "household material," to adopt Barthes's term for plastic. It did not pass for stone or marble, nor did it have the intention to do so. Plaster was plaster: nothing more, nothing less. Plaster is often used synonymously with render, both terms denoting a layer of cover either on the inside or on the outside of buildings (Weyer et al. 17). My use of the word plaster refers to the material applied to the outside surfaces of buildings.

While brick, stone, and terracotta façades have been widespread in Western Europe and are still known for their resilience to the vicissitudes of weather, the plaster surfaces commonly found throughout the Central and Eastern parts of Europe are more vulnerable to the effects of climate. The long decades of state socialism took their toll on the plaster-dress of a great many

cities in the former Eastern Bloc, and Budapest was no exception. Regarded by the state as unwelcome mementos of a bygone bourgeoisie dating from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Horthy era, the bulk of the city's nineteenth-century building stock was left to fall into disrepair. If renovated at all, the new, plaster surface was often of poor quality, applied inattentively and consequently quickly started to flake away. In the wake of the regime change in 1989-1990, the proliferation of boutiques and new private enterprises resulted in a new kind of architectural masquerade. New storefronts glowing with fluorescent colors—often applied directly onto disintegrating layers of plaster—emerged as a characteristic feature of post-communist streetscapes. Along with the new colors of capitalism came a nostalgia for the material culture of the pre-communist past: as objects associated with Socialist Realism and the Socialist Modern were considered embarrassing, Biedermeier and Art Nouveau furniture, associated with *polgári* ['bourgeoise-citizen'] experienced a comeback throughout the 1990s, accompanied by a surge of public and scholarly interest in the city's pre-communist architectural heritage (Fehérvári 2013: 182-6). Today, the restoration of the city's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century buildings are in full swing, but, as the example of 15 Síp utca illustrates, Budapest still features a great many buildings that bear the scars of war, decades of neglect, pollution, changing owners and functions and, of course, the weather.

Given plaster's history, it is not surprising that people are often puzzled by the activities of the plaster archeologist. When I stop to take photographs of disheveled wall surfaces during my *flânerie*, I often see a frown on the faces of local passersby as an indication of their discomfort in seeing me scrutinizing what is for them a signifier of a quality of life and social class. In such situations I am perceived as a tourist who exoticizes plaster as an archive of traces that have survived decades, while the very exposure of these traces is interpreted as a marker of poverty or the lasting imprint of the communist regime. Simultaneously, Budapest's heavily gentrifying Jewish district is also the home of so-called ruin-bars, temporarily established in buildings slated for renovation or demolition, which embrace decay as part of an international retro-sensibility, a "*nostalgie de la boue*, or memory with the pain taken out," as Mark Crinson puts it (2005, xi). The proliferation of facadism, the preservation of a building's façade with the complete refunctioning of its interior, is yet another example of the contemporary fetishization of urban decay, which transforms layered façades as props for ambience. For many tourists walking down Síp utca as part of their tour of the Jewish district, the disintegrating façade of number 15 is part of this ambience.

As a form of *flânerie*, plaster archeology also runs the risk of fetishizing the materiality of the past as unrelated to the social, financial and political conditions in which that past is now embedded. My conversations with the inhabitants of number 15 and 17 have confirmed, however, that my obsession with layers of plaster on their buildings was more important to me than to them. Although they were pleasantly surprised by my interest in their buildings' façades and rewarded me with long conversations about current and former inhabitants, it soon became obvious that they did not share my fascination for their building's peeling plaster. Instead, they would have preferred having their buildings' façades fixed up. The plaster archeologist's unwillingness to fight for the preservation of traces of the old bar in number 15, or Dinner's name in number 17 stems from his recognition of the position of privilege that allows for the haptic engagement with these traces. This kind of engagement, as I have argued throughout this article, goes beyond the fetishization of a trace as an archeological find: it is a mode of looking at plaster as a material surface with depth. If I fashioned the plaster archeologist as a figure that

embodies a sense of humbleness towards the materiality of the façades, this humbleness additionally entails that he does not encapsulate his "finds" in the form of protection. In this sense, negative capability is not simply the ability to resist the temptation to accelerate time by removing layers that would surely fall off in a matter of years, but also a sense of humility towards the myriad of social, political and environmental changes that constantly affect the complexion of architectural surfaces.

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