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FROM HARMONY TO ATMOSPHERES:
THE MUTATIONS OF THE IDEA OF BEAUTY
IN ARCHITECTURE

ABSTRACT: This article shows how and why the word “beauty” has become rare and progressively devalued in architectural discourse, as it has been in the discourse of other arts and that branch of philosophy known as aesthetics. The devaluation of the word “beauty” in architectural discourse, its rarefaction, and its changes in meaning, are incomprehensible without broadening the focus of reflection to the history of ideas. I will therefore outline the genealogy of this devaluation by distinguishing three historical-conceptual paradigms, and showing how the architectural and theoretical works of Vitruvius and Alberti, Blondel and Perrault, Norberg-Schulz and Zumthor bear the mark of these subterranean mutations.

KEYWORDS: beauty, harmony, taste, aesthetic experience, sensory experience

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“Taken in the ancient fullness of its meaning,” wrote Paul Valéry about the word *beauty* “this illustrious word will join other verbal coins that are no longer in use in the drawer of language numismatists.”¹ In this 1929 note, Valéry aptly observed that, while the common usage of the word remains in everyday language, aestheticians and other art theorists are wary of it. And indeed, Etienne Souriau wrote in 1951: “aestheticians have gradually almost completely ceased at the present time to [...] include [the notion of beauty] in the basic notions which define the object of their study,”² and André Lhote declared in 1967: “I will conclude this study by proposing only to remove from the list of pompous words with which one bothers one’s memory: that of Beauty.” The concept of beauty was thus widely blacklisted in the 20th century, as that of the soul had been by psychologists.

This observation of a demonetization of the word still holds true today and applies not only to aesthetics in general, but also to the discourses of architects and architectural theorists. It is these discourses that I will focus on here. Not the beauty or lack of beauty of architectural achievements, but the use that is made of the word today in the discursive production that accompanies these achievements and which constitutes the theoretical nebula in which they are deployed.

I would like to show here how and why the word beauty has become rare and has been progressively devalued in the architectural field, as it has been in the other arts and in this branch of philosophy that is aesthetics. The history of theories on architecture is in fact not independent of a much broader history which is that of ideas and visions of the world. We cannot truly understand the former without putting them in relation to the latter. The devaluation of the word beauty in the discourses of architects, its rarefaction, its changes of meaning, are incomprehensible if we do not broaden the focus of reflection to the history of ideas. I will therefore make here the genealogy of a devaluation by distinguishing three conceptions of beauty corresponding to chronological periods of varying length: the first extends from Antiquity to the Renaissance; the second corresponds to modernity and the third to the contemporary period.

¹ P. Valéry, *Léonard et les philosophes. Lettre à Leo Ferrero*, Gallimard, Paris, 1957, pp. 1240–1241.

² E. Souriau, “Le beau, l’art et la nature,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 9–31, Paris, 1955, p. 10.

I. BEAUTY AS COSMIC HARMONY

In *The Ten Books of Architecture* (1st century AD) Vitruvius states that architecture consists of five things: order (*taxis*), arrangement (*diathesis*), proportion (*eurythmy*), decorum, and distribution (*oconomia*). Where is beauty mentioned here? At first glance, one might say that it resides in proportion (*eurythmy*), which concerns the assembly of all the parts of the work and makes it pleasing to the eye when height corresponds to width, and width to length, the whole being in proper proportion. Proportion also concerns the relationships between the constituent parts of each of the building's components (the base, shaft, and capital of a column, for example), and the relationships between these parts.

We see how the Pythagorean vision of the world, inextricably intertwined with Platonism, was alive and well in the first century AD. This vision conceived of beauty in terms of proportion and harmony, terms that would continue to haunt aesthetics for centuries to come.

Pythagoras' fundamental assertion, reported by Iamblichus in the fourth century in his *Life of Pythagoras*, is simple, but it has far-reaching consequences in all areas: it consists of maintaining that the principle of all things is in number.³ Pythagoras is said to have had this fundamental intuition one day as he passed by a blacksmith's workshop. In the sounds produced by the impact of the hammer on the anvil, Pythagoras is said to have recognized the three chords of fourth, fifth, and octave, and to have understood that the sound varies according to the weight of the hammers used. Having weighed these, he is said to have noted that the hammer that produced the octave sound weighed half the weight of the heaviest, the one that produced the fifth weighed two-thirds the weight of the heaviest, and the one that produced the fourth weighed three-quarters the weight of the heaviest.

There is therefore indeed a mathematical relationship between the weight of the hammers and the sound produced. This discovery does not only concern music: it applies to everything and extends to the entire cosmos. The Pythagorean school, which greatly complicated the master's doctrine, applied these principles to the cosmos and maintained that, like the intervals of sounds, the movements of the stars are reduced to numerical ratios. Here we find the esoteric theme of the "harmony of the spheres" (or "the music of the spheres"): the Pythagoreans maintain that

³ Porphyre, *Vie de Pythagore* [3rd c. AD], Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1982.

the movement of the planets produces musical scales, a music that our limited senses cannot perceive.

This intuition that number is at the origin of all things leads to a theory of the harmony of proportions. Harmonics govern everything; virtue is harmony; goodness is harmony; health is harmony; education must establish or restore harmony in the soul; medicine must maintain or restore harmony in the body, etc. It also governs beauty.

By moving from the arithmetic concept of numerical ratio to the idea of geometric-spatial ratio, the Pythagoreans extended the empire of number to the realm of perceptible objects. In particular, to the art of sculpture; in the 5th century BC, the sculptor Polykleitos defined in his *Canon* the correct and harmonious relationships between the different parts that make up the body. This text is lost, but we know the summary that Galen made and which is reported by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*: “Beauty does not consist in the elements but in the harmonious proportion of the parts, from one finger to the other finger, of all the fingers in relation to the rest of the hand, of each part to the other.”

The application of the idea of harmony to objects in space is particularly relevant to architecture. The relationships between the dimensions of the different elements of temples, between the different parts of the façade, or between the void and the solidity of the columns, correspond to the relationships governing musical intervals. Vitruvius could thus write:

The arrangement of religious buildings is based on symmetry, the principle of which architects must respect with the greatest care. This arises from proportion, which consists of the commensurability of the components in all parts of a work and in its totality, achieved by means of a specific unity that allows the adjustment of modular relationships. No temple can truly present a rational arrangement without symmetry and proportion, that is, if its components do not have a precisely defined relationship to each other, like the limbs of a correctly formed man.⁴

Vitruvius thus draws on this Pythagorean foundation to establish optimal architectural proportions for architects. The golden ratio constitutes the best and most famous of these mathematical ratios.

⁴ Vitruve, *Les dix Livres de l'architecture*, Jean Baptiste Coignard, Paris, 1673, I, 2, p. 10.

Architectural beauty therefore resides in harmony for Vitruvius, but it must be understood that harmony does not have a narrowly aesthetic meaning. Greek antiquity, like the Christian Middle Ages, did not consider beauty to be different from goodness and truth. The Greek *kalo-kagathia* closely linked sensible and intelligible beauty (*Kalos*) to good (*Agatos*); “There is identity between Goodness and Beauty,” wrote Plotinus.⁵ The Christian Middle Ages considered beauty to be no different from goodness or truth, insofar as God is beauty as well as goodness and truth. The difference between beauty and goodness, it was then asserted, only appears when one places oneself in the position of the human subject: “goodness concerns appetite, since goodness is that towards which everything that is tends, and it has the right of end, for appetite is a kind of impulse towards the thing itself. Beauty, on the other hand, concerns the faculty of knowledge, since that which the sight of which causes pleasure is declared beautiful,” wrote Saint Thomas.⁶ From a human point of view, goodness is Being in its conative dimension, beauty is Being in its perceptive dimension. But in Being, the two are identical, and there is therefore equivalence and convertibility between beauty and goodness, which are predicaments of divinity.

It follows that beauty is not only harmony perceptible to sight, but also moral harmony: propriety as much as order or arrangement. The harmony that the architect aims for is global.

This metaphysical and cosmic conception of beauty, which had a lasting impact on all of Greek Antiquity in its Classical and Hellenistic periods, remained prevalent in Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and continued up to and including the Renaissance. Its manifestation can be seen, for example, in Luca Pacioli’s treatise *The Divine Proportion*. But it is Alberti’s work in particular that interests us here.

His *De re aedificatoria* asserts that the aesthetic appearance of a building is based on two things: beauty and ornament. Beauty is defined by Alberti as “harmony and agreement of all the parts, such that nothing can be added, removed, or modified without altering the whole;” ornament, on the other hand, is “additional brilliance, an enhancement of beauty.” Beauty, conceived as harmony, is essential; ornament adds to it and completes it: “beauty is the charm proper to the whole, which

⁵ Plotin, *Ennéade*, I, 6, 6. [3rd c. AD], Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1976, p. 102.

⁶ Saint Thomas d’Aquin, *Somme théologique*, I, q. 5, a 4, ad. 1. [13th c.], t.1. Cerf, Paris, 1994.

emanates from it and is innate to it; the ornament, on the contrary, is neither proper nor innate, but added and attached to the rest.”⁷

In line with the neo-Pythagorean tradition, Alberti considers that the origin of this beauty visible in stone is a principle that is valid far beyond it. He reaffirms that the laws of harmony apply to everything, including life and the soul. We have “an innate sense of it,” writes Alberti; thus, beauty can only be perceived by the eye because there is a metaphysical correspondence between the structure of the human soul and the harmony of the object. A building constructed according to essential mathematical harmonies immediately produces an echo in us; there is no need for reflection and rational analysis: an inner feeling tells us that it participates in a cosmic principle that includes us and surpasses us, and which ensures the overall cohesion of the universe.⁸ It should be noted that it is this cosmic principle which creates the relationship between the four liberal arts which made up the quadrivium in the Middle Ages: arithmetic (which deals with numbers), geometry (which deals with spatial relationships), astronomy (which deals with celestial bodies), and music (which deals with the relationships of sounds perceived by hearing).

Thus, in the pre-classical paradigm, architecture, whether that of classical Greece or the Italian Renaissance, expresses the world as cosmos, a word whose primary meaning, let us remember, is order. The construction of buildings aims at the harmonic unity of a whole based on numerical relationships. These architectural proportions transcend geometric space because they are based on systems of privileged relationships that constitute the very articulation of the universe. In doing so, good architectural proportions express what Plato calls “the Good.” Thus, beauty, thought of under the category of harmony, goes beyond a narrowly aesthetic conception.

2. SUBJECTIVIZATION AND AESTHETICIZATION OF BEAUTY

For complex reasons, a shift in the way we understood beauty occurred between the 17th and 18th centuries, which had momentous consequences in the arts, particularly in architecture. This change consisted of a shift from a realist to an anti-realist conception of beauty. Until then, as we have just seen, beauty was a real property of the cosmos and its objects;

⁷ L.-B. Alberti, *Art d'edifier* [1440], VI, 2, Seuil, Paris, 2004, pp. 278–279.

⁸ E. Cassirer, *Individu et cosmos dans la philosophie de la Renaissance*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1983.

an object-like quality. Even if there were no human beings on earth to see it, the cosmos, as well as a harmoniously constructed temple, would be beautiful in themselves. The materialist corpuscular physics of nature, upon which the scientific revolution of the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe was based, led us to think differently: no more than bitterness, smoothness, redness, roughness, acidity, sounds, or smells, is beauty truly found *in things*. These sensible qualities exist only for a perceiving subject. They are ideas that arise in us through contact with certain corpuscular properties of things. What then is beauty? It is a particular complex of primary and secondary qualities perceived by an internal sense whose invention occurs at the same time: the taste, which produces a certain pleasure in the subject. Beauty must therefore henceforth be thought of in its relation to the subject and not in its link with transcendence. It no longer has its own ontological consistency; subjective assent does not follow it, but, on the contrary, constitutes it. To the question of knowing “whether things are beautiful because they procure pleasure, or whether they procure pleasure by the fact that they are beautiful,” Saint Augustine answered without hesitation: “they procure pleasure because they are beautiful.”⁹ In the same way, Saint Thomas wrote it is certainly not because we love a thing that it is beautiful, but on the contrary, it is because “it is beautiful and good that we love it,”¹⁰ thereby affirming both that beauty is an objective property of certain objects, beings, acts, or works.

Now, for the proponents of the new worldview, we call beautiful those things that give us pleasure. “In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful,” Kant declares in the first sentence of the first paragraph of the “Analytic of the Beautiful” in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*,

we do not relate the representation by means of understanding to the object for cognition, but rather relate it by means of the imagination [...] to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure.¹¹

⁹ Saint Augustin, *De Vera Religione*, XXXII, 59. [4th c.], In *Œuvres de Saint Augustin*, vol. 8, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1951, p. 111.

¹⁰ Saint Thomas d’Aquin, *Commentaire des Noms Divins de Denys*, [XIIIth c. AD], Paris, chap. IV, lesson 10, § 439, Aubier, Paris.

¹¹ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [1790], Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, § 1, p. 89.

Montesquieu perfectly summed up this transformation when he wrote in his *Essay on Taste*:

The Ancients [...] regarded all qualities relating to our soul as positive qualities, which is why these dialogues in which Plato makes Socrates reason, these dialogues so admired by the Ancients, are untenable today, because they are based on a false philosophy: for these arguments, based on the good, the beautiful, the perfect, the wise, the mad, the hard, the soft, the dry, the humid, treated as positive things, no longer mean anything.¹²

At the same time as beauty loses its reality, and consequently its cosmicity, it loses its connection with good and truth. Having left the old metaphysical system, beauty is nothing but beautiful, narrowly aesthetic, and Kant, in particular, takes great care to distinguish the judgment of pure taste from that which judges the useful, the good or the true. It is interesting to note that one of the first paragraphs sets out this distinction by taking an architectural example:

If someone asks me whether I find the palace that I see before me beautiful, I may well say that I don't like that sort of thing, which is made merely to be gaped at, or, like the Iroquois sachem, that nothing in Paris pleased him better than the cook-shops; in true Rousseauesque style I might even vilify the vanity of the great who waste the sweat of the people on such superfluous things; finally I could even easily convince myself that if I were to find myself on an uninhabited island, without any hope of ever coming upon human beings again, and could conjure up such a magnificent structure through my mere wish, I would not even take the trouble of doing so if I already had a hut that was comfortable enough for me. All of this might be conceded to me and approved; but that is not what is at issue here. One only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me, however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object of this representation.¹³

¹² C. Montesquieu, *Essai sur le goût* [1757], in *Ouvres complètes*, vol. 7, Garnier, Paris, 1879, p. 115.

¹³ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 2, pp. 90–91.

Kant thus asserts that the beauty of a building has nothing to do with its practical usefulness or uselessness (“things of this kind, which are made solely to be seen”), with its greater or lesser pleasantness (“a sufficiently comfortable cabin” would suffice), with its morality or immorality (“to declaim, in the manner of Rousseau, against the vanity of the great who employ the sweat of the people for such superfluous things”). Beauty is no more than an arrangement of the sensible that provides sight or hearing with a particular pleasure.

Whether it is Hutcheson, Burke, Hume, Kant, or Diderot, modern philosophy thus affirms the subjectivity of beauty and no longer believes in the synthesis of the microcosm and the macrocosm.

Architectural theory and practice are not immune to this new theoretical atmosphere. The same dividing line between the proponents of the old and new conceptions of beauty is evident.

Jean-François Blondel is in the camp of the Ancients. To create a beautiful building, he asserts in his *Cours d'architecture*, we must look to what the Greeks and Romans have left us; their buildings allow us to

establish the relationships that the masses of the building must have with the main parts, and these with the details: we will also see the relationship that must be established between the avant-corps and the rear sections. This knowledge should also help us to determine all the parts of a building in relation to each other,¹⁴

because it is easy to see that if one neglects at the beginning of its composition the relationships that must exist between the width and the height of the façades, and if one does not first foresee the quantity of openings that they must contain, in relation to the interior, the result will be at most a beautiful arrangement; but the interior will suffer from this negligence, the building will be imperfect.

Blondel speaks of “true beauties” and considers the rules of beauty to be a priori; thus, they appeal to everyone, from the ancients who produced models to the people of today.

But in the 17th century, this was no longer an uncontested doctrine. Proof of this is that the French Academy itself put to a competition the question of “whether the just proportion that characterizes good taste is based on a positive rule or whether it is arbitrary.” The vast majority of

¹⁴ J.-F. Blondel, *Cours d'architecture* [c. 1750], vol. 1, chap. 2, Desaint, Paris, p. 213.

architects of the time opted for the positive rule. Blondel, who was part of this majority, was nevertheless aware of a shift among his peers: “most of the beauties of architecture are considered by the great number of young architects as conventional beauties, dependent on the particular taste of the artist.”¹⁵ And indeed, Claude Perrault, like Edmund Burke, believed that beauty “has nothing to do with calculation and geometry,”¹⁶ in other words, that relationships are not beautiful a priori.

Beauty, on the contrary, is relative to the singular subject, “to the fantasy that makes things pleasing according to their conformity to the idea that each person has of their perfection.”¹⁷ Everything is thus a matter of idiosyncrasy, chance, habituation. Proportions are no exception: they are a matter of individual sensitivity. Certainly, Perrault distinguishes a “positive, necessary beauty,” “founded on convincing reasons” and not on taste, and a variable and arbitrary beauty. What does the first consist of? In “the richness of the material, the grandeur and magnificence of the building, the accuracy and cleanliness of the execution” as well as in symmetry. This is to say that beauty, a strictly evaluative aesthetic quality, fades away in favor of descriptive-evaluative qualities: richness of the materials, grandeur of the building, technical perfection, symmetry.

With this rupture introduced by empiricism and sensualism, the entire cosmic background of classical architecture is shattered. Perrault is a modern who no longer believes in the objectivity of beauty and the mystique of proportions. Thus, the disenchantment of the world brought about by modern science is reflected in architectural theory.

Beauty no longer has reality in the sense that it is no longer in things but in the gaze. This is a fundamental ontological change. But beauty remains a value. The declared intention of creating a beautiful building remains. What changes is that there is no longer one architectural beauty, established by the Greeks, eternal and immutable, but rather beauties varied according to tastes and fantasy. However, we will see that in the aesthetic moment, beauty is no longer what matters.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 4, p. 281.

¹⁶ C. Perrault, Preface to translation of Vitruve, *Les dix Livres de l'architecture* [1673], Jean Baptiste Coignard, Paris, s. p.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

3. FROM THE AESTHETICIZATION OF BEAUTY TO ITS VANISHING

Since the mid-19th century, there has been a shift in sensibilities and theories, which can be characterized as a shift from the aesthetic of beauty to the aesthetic of sensible. This shift is evident in the discourses that accompany all the arts, and particularly in architecture.

This movement consists of turning away from beauty and the experience of beauty in favor of the experience of the sensible. The expression of aesthetic experience has come to signify a particular attention to the sensible. “For the artist,” writes Sartre,

the color, the bouquet, the tinkling of the spoon on the saucer, are *things*, in the highest degree. He stops at the quality of the sound or the form. He returns to it constantly and is enchanted with it. It is this color-object that he is going to transfer to his canvas.¹⁸

Making men sensitive to the sensitive then becomes the task of art. This can be seen in music, when Eduard Hanslick, in *On the Beauty of Music*, argued that the eidos of music is to be a pure combination of sounds in which there is no room for words and meanings. For Hanslick, as for Helmholtz or Stravinsky, music is the art of pure musical sensation, unencumbered by meaning, symbol or idea. Stéphane Mallarmé dreamed of making poetry an “unusual vessel of sonic inanity,”¹⁹ and Valéry wrote that in it, “it is sound, it is rhythm, it is the physical connections of words, their effects of induction or their mutual influences which dominate, at the expense of their property of consuming themselves in a definite and certain sense.”²⁰

This program is also found in painting:

The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify, as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.²¹

¹⁸ J.-P. Sartre, *What Is Literature?* [1948], Philosophical Library, New York, 1949, p. 8.

¹⁹ S. Mallarmé, “Sonnet allégorique de lui-même,” 1899.

²⁰ P. Valéry, *Commentaire de Charms* [1922], in *Œuvres*, vol. 1, Gallimard, Paris, 1957 pp. 649–650.

²¹ J. Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* [1857], Dover, New York, 1971, p. 27.

In his *Manet*,²² Georges Bataille praised the painter for having returned painting to pictoriality by freeing it from meaning in favor of the senses and the sensible. Impressionism, which dominated Europe at the end of the 19th century, was the fulfillment of this theoretical program: it sought to rediscover, restore, and give experience of pure visual impression, unfiltered by perceptual judgment.

In 1937, in a speech at the second congress of the French Society of Aesthetics, Valéry called for the creation of a discipline: the *esthétique*, which would have as its object

everything related to the study of sensations, but more particularly works whose object is excitations and sensitive reactions that do not have a uniform and well-defined physiological role [...] sensory modifications that living beings can do without, and [...] the whole of which is our treasure.

This *esthétique*, was practiced by Valéry some fifteen years earlier in his little booklet devoted to architecture: *Eupalinos or the Architect*. Eupalinos, he wrote, was this remarkable Greek architect who knew how to produce “the emotions and vibrations of the soul” because he mastered “the mysterious virtue of imperceptible modulations:”

No one noticed, before a delicately elongated mass, so seemingly simple, that he was led to a sort of happiness by imperceptible curves, by tiny and all-powerful inflections; and by these profound combinations of the regular and the irregular that he had introduced and hidden, and made as imperious as they were indefinable.²³

Phenomenology has explored this furrow of the sensory experience of the world, and architectural theory has largely become phenomenological. Like Valéry, Erwin Strauss in *On the Sense of Senses* wants to explore feeling—a mixture of sensoriality and affectivity—for itself and not as psychology had done until then, which considered it in relation to knowledge or action. He intends to scrutinize the immediate contact of our bodies and things; the ante-predicative encounter of our senses with the world. In other words, to explore not the space known to the geographer, but the lived space: what happens when we go under the canopy

²² G. Bataille, *Manet*, Skira, Paris, 1955.

²³ P. Valéry, *Eupalinos ou l'architecte* [1921], in *Œuvres*, Gallimard, Paris, V, 2, 1960, p. 86.

of a wood, for example. Henri Maldiney applied this philosophical approach to architecture. In *Regard, Parole, Espace*, he describes what it means from this point of view, to enter a cathedral for example. The lived space of architecture is a multi-sensory experience: it is a visible space: we see the height of the nave, the light colored by the stained-glass windows, the darkness of the side chapels, the flickering of the candle flames; it is a sound space: we hear the sound of footsteps on the flagstones, the thickness of the silence; it is a tactile space: we feel the hardness of the benches, the cold of the stone, the humidity of the air; It is a fragrant space: we smell the scent of cold stone, incense, dust. In addition, the experience of architectural space is not static but in movement; we move around the buildings and, in doing so, kinesthetic and proprioceptive sensations are added to the previous ones. The whole of this polysensory experience constitutes a global sensitive and affective experience.

We understand how the aesthetic experience understood in the 18th-century manner is no longer appropriate: it designated the experience of beauty and presupposed motionless and disinterested contemplation. It accorded space to only two of the five senses: sight and hearing, the senses of distance which, since Plato, have been the only senses of beauty. The aesthetic experience, however, is no longer the experience of beauty, but the experience of a primitive, holistic feeling. *Esthésique* is aesthetics without *callistics*.

Architecture has an advantage over the other arts in terms of this kind of aesthetic experience: the fact that it summons all the senses except for the sense of taste, not just the traditional senses of beauty: sight and hearing. For this reason, the experience of architecture offers a much broader range of sensations than painting, sculpture, literature, or music.

The notion of atmosphere, so widely used in architectural discourse for the past forty years, is directly related to this transformation of aesthetics into *esthésique*. The new phenomenology, that of Gernot Böhme in particular, which is a phenomenology of the flesh as a vector of our relationship to the world, considers that lived spaces are first and foremost atmospheres, ambiances.²⁴ The visual arts have become largely atmospheric in the sense that art has left its “object regime” and has vanished into “aesthetic ether,” as Yves Michaud writes:²⁵ works tend overwhelmingly

²⁴ G. Böhme, *Aisthétique: pour une esthétique de l'expérience sensible*, Les Presses du réel, Dijon, 2001.

²⁵ Y. Michaud, *L'Art a l'état gazeux*, Paris Stock, 2003.

to become devices, installations, producing pure aesthetic effects, as in *Nimbus* (2013) where Berndnaut Smilde created artificial clouds that vanish in a few seconds, or *Test Pattern*, by the musician Ryoji Ikeda, which plunges visitors into a hypnotic universe of binary patterns (2013).

This interest in atmospheres is very evident among theoretical architects. Christian Norberg-Schulz, for example, titled one of his works *Genius Loci. Landscape, Atmosphere, Architecture*. Claiming to follow Heideggerian phenomenology, he does not seek to create works of beauty through his architectural creations, but to return “to things themselves,” to the space experienced beneath measured space.²⁶

In *Thinking Architecture*, Peter Zumthor says he wants to “create this atmosphere that seems filled with the obvious presence of things, where everything has its proper place and form.”²⁷ Thus, regarding the construction of the thermal baths in the French town of Vals, he details what he used to create the atmosphere conducive to well-being and relaxation expected of these spas: cedar wood rather than rosewood or mahogany to go with the concrete, attention to sound reverberation, the creation of spaces inviting one to linger, the temperature of the places, the design of the objects surrounding the spa guest, the height and width of the doors, the light sources, etc. When he speaks of the “hard core of beauty,” Zumthor simply means things in their natural, authentic state: “earth and water, sunlight, landscape and vegetation” when they are “unadorned, uninvested with meaning and message.”²⁸

The beauty value is irrelevant, and artistic value is subordinate to what one might call atmospheric value: “A building can possess artistic qualities when its various contents and forms combine to create an atmosphere capable of moving us.” Architectural quality is not to be sought in style: “Architectural quality is not having a place in an architectural guide or in the history of architecture or even being cited here or there. For me, it can only be architectural quality if the building moves me.”²⁹ It is not about making it beautiful, nor about being part of the history of styles; it is about giving the experience of sensations in their pathetic dimension, of emotions.

²⁶ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci. Towards a phenomenology of architecture*, Rizzoli, New-York, 1979.

²⁷ P. Zumthor, *Penser l'architecture*, Gallimard, Paris, 2007, p. 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Another instance of this contemporary sensibility can be found in Céline Bonicco-Donato's book: *Se mouvoir et être ému*. Asking herself what the specific satisfaction that built spaces can produce lies in, she takes the example of the passage from Rousseau's *Confessions* in which the author describes the happiness of his stay at Les Charmettes, the house where he lived for a time with Madame de Warens. This happiness, writes Céline Bonicco-Donato, lies in a "general affective feeling," in "a consciousness without reflection entirely immersed in feeling."³⁰ This joy is that of "the harmony between the lived body and the body of the world [...] permitted by the body of architecture." The interior spaces of the house that resonate with our own body make us experience ourselves "as living and sensitive flesh." Architecture is thus no longer thought of in aesthetic terms of beauty or style, but as that which allows us to experience our existence as a sensitive and feeling being.

CONCLUSION

The word beauty has been understood to mean very different things over time. When we moved from aesthetic realism to aesthetic anti-realism, beauty ceased to be cosmic and metaphysical harmony and became subjective assent to certain visible and audible sensory configurations. Reflecting on beauty then meant reflecting on the aesthetic experience. Then, this aesthetic experience expanded beyond sight and hearing to encompass four of the five senses, becoming an *esthésique* experience. At each of these stages, the word beauty becomes less visible. The persistent emergence of the notion of atmosphere constitutes a kind of culmination of this process. Beauty without object reality remains a stable relational quality as long as we believe in a relatively invariant human nature. When this is no longer the case, beauty becomes subjectivized, one might say, to the power of two, and no longer even has the consistency of a relational quality. It is nothing more than a feeling without any identifiable anchor in things. The atmosphere is precisely this evanescent object pole, this non-thing that affects us.

Like all the arts, architecture is caught in this theoretical nebula, affected by the movements of the deep currents of ideas and representations of the world. The architectural and theoretical works of Vitruvius

³⁰ C. Bonicco-Donato, *Se mouvoir et être ému*, Éditions Parenthèses, Paris, 2024, p. 88.

and Alberti, Blondel and Perrault, Norberg-Schulz and Zumthor, bear the mark of these subterranean mutations.

Architecture has an advantage over other arts in terms of aesthetic experience. It summons four senses, not just the traditional senses of beauty, such as sight and hearing. For this reason, the experience of architecture offers a much broader range of sensations than painting, sculpture, literature, or music. While architecture has been difficult to include in the circle of fine arts with their ethos of beauty due to its utility and therefore aesthetic impurity, architecture has become the art most suited to the expanded aesthetic experience, the latest mutation of the idea of beauty.

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