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Thomas Reid and the Problem of Architecture

ABSTRACT: The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710–1796) widely as one of as David Hume's most perceptive contemporary critics, wrote nothing about architecture. In his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* published in 1783, however, the essay on "Taste" contains thoughts that are relevant to the aesthetics of architecture. The purpose of this paper is to show that on a central question in the philosophy of architecture, namely "What transforms the activity of building into the art of architecture?," Reid's essay can be used to throw more light than the familiar approaches to aesthetics that take their cue from Hume and Kant. The key lies in Reid's exploration of the relationship between beauty, grandeur and excellence.

KEYWORDS: Thomas Reid, art and purpose, Kant, excellence in architecture, beauty and grandeur

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The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710–1796) was regarded in his own day, and is still so regarded by some philosophers, as David Hume's most perceptive contemporary critic. Reid wrote nothing about architecture. The indexes to the three major works that he published in his lifetime do not contain a single reference to architecture, or even to building. In the volume of *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* that he published in 1783, however, there is an essay on "Taste" in which the sections on beauty and grandeur contain thoughts that are relevant to the aesthetics of architecture. The purpose of this paper is to show that Reid's essay, and these sections in particular, can be used to throw some light on what I take to be a central question in the philosophy of architecture: What transforms the activity of building into the art of architecture?

1.

From earliest times, theorists of architecture have identified three aspects of a building as essential to its assessment, namely form, structure and function. It is easy to see the relevance of the first of these to building as architecture. The distinction between beauty and ugliness can apply to buildings no less than to paintings, poetry or music, and while there is more to form than appearance, the form of a building in a wider sense—shape, proportions, definition of space—evidently matters. This is the dimension that many people think most relevant to its architectural merit, and indeed it is the only relevant dimension according to some thinkers. "Contesting beauty" in this context does not imply that beauty is irrelevant to architecture—as others have thought—but only that it is insufficient.

It seems plain, for instance, that sound construction is no less essential than form if a building is to be regarded as a successful work of architecture. A beautiful construction could be spaciously conceived, elegantly organized and beautifully decorated. But if it is nonetheless unsuited to the terrain on which it has been built or unable to withstand predictable adverse weather conditions, such a construction must be deemed a failure. Neither fine appearance nor spacious organization can counter this adverse judgment. The point may be extended beyond the occasional failure. It would be seriously misleading to describe *temporary* constructions as works of architecture, even if they have an attractive appearance, and serve a useful purpose for a period of time. It is a condition of something's being a work of architecture, we might say, that it is meant to last.

The dimension of function is also key to architectural merit. We can easily imagine a soundly built, three-dimensional structure intended as a work of art for our appreciation. On these grounds alone, however, it would not count as architecture. While its compelling aesthetic interest may qualify it to be a work of *sculpture*, without some function it is not architecture. And its purpose must be something other than simply that of being available for aesthetic appreciation. Nor are we confined to imaginary objects in considering this issue. Such constructions do exist. One of the best-known examples is to be found in the *folies* that were built in many eighteenth-century gardens. Often these took the form of miniature replicas of ancient buildings—Grecian temples, for instance—and were intended to enhance the aesthetic experience of people walking in the garden. But charming though they were, and are, they were functionless. It is for this reason that they are to be regarded as ornamental sculptures. No one ever intended, or supposed, that they could or would be called into service for the worship of Athenian gods.

These observations are sufficient to support the contention that the aesthetic assessment of a work of architecture, properly so called, must go beyond a pleasing form. It is possible, plainly, to assess these three dimensions separately. There is no logical difficulty in claiming that an ugly building has been very well constructed, or that a beautiful building is dysfunctional, or that a building which serves its intended function superbly, is ugly and in need of constant maintenance. Yet it seems impossible to deny that dysfunction and poor engineering, no less than ugliness, are faults in architecture. If this is correct, then it follows that form, structure and function are *all* necessary dimensions of architectural assessment. At the same time, *all* buildings must take some form. They can be constructed well or badly, and they serve some purpose or other. So we cannot explain the difference between buildings that merit the title "architecture" and those that do not, in terms of these dimensions alone.

One response lies in approaching the matter the other way around. First, let us determine the essential characteristics of a work of art, and then ask if and when a building might be classified in this way. This approach has the advantage that it connects the subject of architecture directly with a longstanding topic within philosophical aesthetics—the definition of art.

2.

Philosophical esthetics as we now know it is an invention of the eighteenth century, the term, famously, having been coined by Alexander Baumgarten in 1735. Aesthetics it is plausible to hold, is that branch of philosophical reflection which emerged with what Larry Shiner has called "The Invention of Art."[1] Art, in this sense, arises from emphasizing the distinction between "fine" and the "mechanical" arts. This differentiation became increasingly important as the eighteenth century wore on. The end result was a conceptual distinction between two new terms, "Art" and "Design." For Design, functionality continued to be important since the products of Design had to have a use. By contrast, the new category of Art abandoned the concern with utility, and was forged by the ambition of affirming the value of "art for art's sake."

In the course of the century, it is relevant to note, cultural and conceptual developments went together. That is to say, changing social and economic conditions led to changes in the way that people came to think about the arts. Newly founded art galleries, for instance, secured for the art of painting a degree of autonomy from the patronage of Church and State on which it had hitherto been almost wholly dependent. Similarly, cheaper printing and more widespread literacy created a new readership for poetry and the novel. Literature was thereby liberated from the more mundane tasks of recording facts, issuing regulations, and transmitting information. So too, the construction of concert halls gave music a new independence, no longer confining it to liturgical purposes and ceremonial occasions. Sculpture too found a new role that took it beyond the limitations of producing commemorative monuments of a religious or civic nature.

We can identify two lines of philosophical thought that aimed to accommodate this new perception of the importance of art, while at the same time explaining the value of art for art's sake. In Scotland Francis Hutcheson laid the foundations of aesthetic sentimentalism. This view contends that the appreciation of art is an exercise of "taste." This is not a reference to the pleasures of the palate, but the deployment of the word "taste" in an extended, perhaps metaphorical, sense. There is nonetheless this common element between the two. Judgments of taste in both senses are accompanied by feelings. Just as we do not merely consume,

[1] L. Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001.

but relish, fine food, so the experience of beauty pleases and delights us. In both cases, philosophers contended, the perception and the feeling are inextricably allied.

In this extended sense, "taste" became the subject of widespread philosophical discussion. A modified Hutchesonian line of thought received its most influential articulation in David Hume's celebrated essay "Of the Standard of Taste." In this essay Hume, after noting "the great resemblance between mental and bodily taste," offers us this clear statement of his central idea. "Though it be certain [as Hutcheson contended], that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external; it must be allowed that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings."[2] The purpose of this modification of Hutcheson is to solve an apparent paradox. If aesthetics is a matter of personal taste, why do people in general, and critics in particular, *dispute* judgments of taste? Either I am delighted by a work of art, or I am not. Whichever the case, this is a matter of fact. Yet it is no less evident a fact that people engage in arguments about taste. In particular, much ink is split on disputes about the relative merits of works of art. If taste is a personal feeling, how is art criticism of this kind possible? It is this paradox that Hume sets himself to resolve, but it is important to observe that the puzzle arises only if we assume the truth of aesthetic sentimentalism. If we were to deny that aesthetic appreciation is a sentiment or feeling, there would be no paradox to resolve. With respect to the philosophy of architecture, however, it is not the paradox, but a different issue, that the sentimentalist account of taste raises.

Suppose we say, in line with sentimentalism, that architecture is an art to the extent that its productions go beyond usefulness and become proper objects of taste. This implies that while a building's construction and function fall under the category of "utility," its form or appearance can rise to a level that pleases and delights us in the way that other art objects do. Initially, this way of thinking seems to offer a simple and easy explanation of why and when building becomes an art. Some buildings are beautiful objects that stimulate aesthetic delight, while others do not. The former are more than mere buildings; they are works of art.

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[2] D. Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, vol. 1, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2021, p. 187.

On the other hand, though this way of thinking has an attractive simplicity, it speedily gives rise to the difficulty that has come to be known as "the problem of the decorated shed." A humble shed, we can agree, is just a building. If aesthetic sentimentalism is true, however, it can be transformed into a work of architecture provided it is adorned with sufficiently "tasteful" decoration, and disguised, perhaps, by the use of impressive façade. If "taste" is indeed indifferent to utility, and if an appearance that delights our taste is what constitutes "Art," then a beautifully decorated shed would qualify for the highest artistic accolade. A defender of aesthetic sentimentalism could of course deny that the decorated shed is a counterexample to the general principle. Art is in the appearance, and so the shed *is* a work of art. But even if it is not an effective counterexample to the sentimentalist thesis, it brings to the fore this further, and unfortunate, implication. Strictly speaking, the decorated shed is not in fact an illustration that the practice of building can be transformed into the art of architecture. That is because the "art" in it does not arise from the skills of the builder, but the skills of the decorator. It follows that the decoration, and the façade, could be removed from the shed and displayed on an art museum wall. Then, without any artistic loss, there would be no longer be building to be the work of art.

On this, as on all philosophical topics, much more could be said of course. There are rejoinders available to the defenders of Hutcheson and Hume that are worthy of consideration. My aim here, though, is not to explore the merits of aesthetic sentimentalism, but simply to indicate an important problem that it encounters if we try to apply it to the philosophy of architecture. It cannot attribute aesthetic merit to the activity of building. Reid's alternative account of "taste," I hope to show, avoids this problem, but before turning to Reid, there is another influential line of thought to be considered.

In aesthetics, as in most other branches of philosophy, Hume's most important rival from the eighteenth century is Immanuel Kant, author of three philosophical "critiques" that have become enduring classics. Whereas Kant's first *Critique* aims to establish the rational basis of knowledge, and the second seeks to secure the rational basis of action, the third focusses on a different exercise of mind, namely our ability to judge something to be beautiful. Kant's belief that a third critique was necessary arose from his perception that the activity of apprehending beauty could not be captured within either rational thought or rational willing. When I judge something to be beautiful, I am neither stating a truth about it,

nor commending any course of action with respect to it. Something else is at work. By Kant's account, a judgment of beauty, whether with respect to nature or to human artefacts, is an exercise of the *imagination* as it freely plays on a perceptual object. He captures the focus of this free play of the imagination with what is now a famous expression—*purposefulness* without *purpose*. Beautiful objects have no utility and serve no purpose. Nevertheless, they are not meaningless combinations of elements randomly assembled. Though lacking any purpose, they embody purposefulness.

Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is a lengthy and complex work, in which architecture gets only a few brief mentions. This may not be accidental since it seems obvious that it would be hard to accommodate architectural constructions within Kant's general principle. The architect cannot be an artist, if this requires activity that is purposeful but lacking in purpose', for the obvious reason that works of architecture must have a purpose. That is why people build them, buy them and commission them. Kant does not think, as the sentimentalists do, that judgments of beauty are feelings, but he shares their belief that aesthetic judgment is not interested in utility. As was pointed out at the start, however, a beautiful building that has no use seems to fall much more readily within the category of sculpture. Function is essential to architecture.

Once again, there is much more to be said, but as before, the point here is only to indicate an obstacle that lies in the way of the Kantian aesthetics ability to generate a satisfactory explanation of architecture as an art. It usefully sets the scene for a consideration of Reid's alternative account of taste, to which we now turn.

3.

Reid knew nothing of Kant (and Kant almost nothing of Reid). So, as is to be expected, Reid's relatively brief contribution to philosophical aesthetics is largely shaped by the writings of his Scottish contemporaries. Yet in a way, his account of taste can be seen as occupying a sort of middle ground between Hume's sentimentalism and Kant's intellectualism. An indication of this lies in the fact that Reid includes "Of Taste" in a collection of essays on the *intellectual* powers of man. He agrees with Hume and Hutcheson that judgments of beauty are not exercises in pure thought. Pleasure and delight are intrinsic to them. "Our judgment of beauty is not indeed a dry and unaffecting judgment, like that

of a mathematical or metaphysical truth. By the constitution of our nature, it is accompanied with an agreeable feeling or emotion, for which we have no other name but the sense of beauty."[3] However, he then goes on to dissent from Hume and the sentimentalists by making *judgment*, not *feeling*, the key concept. "This sense of beauty, like the perception of our other senses, implies not only a feeling, but an opinion of some quality in the object which occasions that feeling. In objects that please the taste, we always judge that there is some excellence, some superiority to those that do not please."[4] In short, while Reid agrees with the sentimentalists that beauty delights us, he reverses the causal relation between feeling and judgment. Hume, following Hutcheson, thinks the feeling of delight causes us to judge an object to be beautiful. Reid thinks that judgment comes first. It is our "opinion" that something is beautiful that causes us to delight in it.

To appreciate the relevance of Reid's thoughts about taste for the philosophy of architecture, it is not enough to focus on his modified version of sentimentalism, even though that modification is important. Nor should we suppose that he straightforwardly claims, against Hume, that beauty is a quality in the object *rather than* a feeling we experience. The relevant quality lies elsewhere as a sentence in the passage just quoted reveals. "In objects that please the taste, we always judge that there is some *excellence*, some superiority to those that do not please" (emphasis added). It is this reference to excellence that marks the principal difference between Reid and the other sentimentalists.[5]

Reid is struck by the astonishing variety of things to which the adjective "beautiful" can be applied. On this point he writes as follows.

> Beauty is found in things so various, and so very different in nature, that it is difficult to say wherein it consists, or what there can be common to all the objects in which it is found.
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> Of the objects of sense, we find beauty in colour, in sound, in form, in motion. There are beauties of speech, and beauties of thought; beauties in the arts, and in the sciences; beauties in actions, in affections, in characters.

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[3] T. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2002, p. 578.

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] Reid's Aberdeen colleague Alexander Gerard, who published an *Essay on Taste* to which Reid makes reference, also gives judgment a central role in taste.

> In things so different, and so unlike, is there any quality, the same in all, which we may call by the name of beauty? What can it be that is common to the thought of a mind, the form of a piece of matter, to an abstract theorem, and a stoke of wit?
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> I am indeed unable to conceive any quality in all the different things that are called beautiful, that is the same in them all.[6]

What then explains the use of the same term across this great variety?

> All the objects we call beautiful agree in two things, which seem to concur in our sense of beauty. *First*, When they are perceived, or even imagined, they produce a certain agreeable emotion or feeling in the mind; and *secondly*, This agreeable feeling is accompanied with an opinion or belief of their having some perfection or excellence belonging to them.[7]

Reid's reference to excellence here is the key to his aesthetics. "[O]ur internal taste ought to be accounted most just and perfect," he tells us earlier in the essay, "when we are pleased with things that are most excellent in their kind [...] Every excellence has a real beauty and charm that makes it an agreeable object to those who have the faculty of discerning its beauty; and this faculty is what we call a good taste. [...] Beauty or deformity in an object, results from its nature or structure. To perceive the beauty, therefore, we must perceive the nature or structure from which it results."[8] In short, the judgment that something is beautiful is a *reflective* judgment. It is not the result of immediate perception, but can only be made in the light of what we know about the object. Aesthetic delight, we might say, is a feeling mediated by understanding.

Beauty, however, is only one of the "objects of taste." By "objects of taste" Reid says he means "those qualities or attributes of things, which are by Nature adapted to please a good taste" and he follows other writers in identifying three principal qualities—novelty, grandeur and beauty. Novelty very easily illustrates his point that aesthetic delight must be mediated by understanding. We can only take pleasure in the novelty of a piece of music, for instance, if we can compare it with the works that have

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[6] T. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, p. 591.
[7] *Ibid*., p. 592.
[8] *Ibid*., pp. 575–576.

preceded it. The person who is quite without knowledge or experience of the music of Haydn and Mozart cannot appreciate the extraordinary novelty that is to be found in Beethoven.

4.

What is the bearing of Reid's aesthetics on the philosophy of architecture? Initially it does not seem difficult to specify. If the assessment of architecture must take account of three dimensions—form, function and construction—Reid's account of taste can easily be made to do so. By referring us to excellence, it invites us to assess not only pleasing form and appearance but functional adequacy and structural solidity. Judgements of taste are feelings arising from critical opinion about the excellence of a building with respect to all three dimensions. The problem of the decorated shed has disappeared, and purpose has been given its rightful place. Yet, if we are still concerned to elucidate the nature of architecture *as an art*, we are left with this residual question. Is the art of architecture simply the production of "tasteful" buildings?

The sentimentalist aesthetic of Hutcheson and Hume appears to confine the aesthetic appraisal of buildings to their pleasing (or displeasing) appearance, regardless of the "firmness" of their construction or the success with which they fulfil their intended purpose. The Kantian aesthetic, on the other hand, while giving greater scope to imaginative construction, can only include a sense of purposefulness, and never the actual purpose which a building is intended to serve. Viewed in this light, Reid's account of taste marks an advance on both.

Yet this further question arises. Can there not be buildings which excel in form, structure and function, but which we would hesitate to call "architecture"? Imagine, for instance, a street of country cottages some centuries old. We delight in their appearance, relish their ability to serve as comfortable homes over many generations, and admire the way their construction has for hundreds of years withstood the changing seasons. But are they *architecture*, or are they simply excellent buildings?

On one level, it can be argued, the answer to this question hardly matters. They are attractive to look at, good to use, and reliably constructed. Why should we ask more? Still, though modern architectural guides are very likely to include such buildings, it is natural to regard them as belonging to a different category than the great churches, palaces, castles, theatres, opera houses, parliaments, city halls and so on, that have been

constructed with the purpose of impressing. Such buildings, furthermore, have often commissioned been from architects whose names warrant inclusion with those of the great painters and composers. A history of early modern English art will include reference to Christopher Wren no less than John Donne or Henry Purcell. What do these memorable buildings have that the row of cottages lacks?

Reid has an answer—grandeur. This, he contends, is no less an object of taste than beauty. Reflecting on grandeur, he thinks, provides a useful counter to two long-standing philosophical inclinations. The first is to explain everything in terms of externalities, in the way, for instance, that Plato's philosophy produced "mysterious notions of eternal and self-existent ideas, of *materia prima*, of substantial forms." The other, a modern reaction to ancient philosophy, is a "proneness to resolve everything into feelings and sensations."[9] Neither of these ways of thinking, Reid contends, will accommodate the concept of excellence, which must *both* be sensed *and* reside in objects external to us. "It depends no doubt on our constitution, whether we do, or do not perceive excellence where it really is. But the object has its excellence from its own constitution, and not from ours."[10]

In light of this remark, Reid's thinks that grandeur is properly ascribed to objects to which elicit the emotion of awe. In the case of "grand" objects, it is more accurate to say that we are *moved*, than that we are delighted, as we are with the merely beautiful. The emotion in question has a kind of seriousness and solemnity that "delight" lacks. The plainest instance of this, he thinks, is the emotional dimension of religious devotion. "Of all objects of contemplation, the Supreme Being is the most grand." His eternity, immensity, infinite knowledge, unerring wisdom, justice and rectitude, Reid tells us, "fill the utmost capacity of the soul, and reach far beyond its comprehension."[11]

> The emotion produced by other objects which may be called grand, though to an inferior degree, is, in its nature and effects, similar to that of devotion. It disposes to seriousness, elevates the mind above its usual state, to a kind of enthusiasm, and inspires magnanimity, and a contempt of what is mean.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 538.
[10] *Ibid*., p. 584.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 582.

> Such, I conceive, is the emotion which the contemplation of grand objects raises in us. We are next to consider what this grandeur in objects is.
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> To me it seems to be nothing else but such a degree of excellence in one kind or another, as merits our admiration.[12]

The list of objects Reid goes on to give as instances of grandeur does not include any example from architecture. It is not hard to see, though, how his thought applies. Many buildings can delight us with their beauty, commodiousness and so on. But some go beyond this. They induce a reverential awe. The person of "taste" who steps inside Chartres Cathedral and describes it as "beautiful," without adding "awe-inspiring," has missed its most striking quality. Such buildings go beyond beauty, and "taste" as Reid analyses it explains this additional dimension.

But Reid has something more to say that is of relevance to architecture. Along with his contemporaries, he thinks that awe can be induced by natural objects—cataracts, precipices, towering mountains, and so on—no less than the magnificent achievements of which human beings are sometimes capable. In both instances, we experience "grave and solemn passions":

> [B]oth make a strong impression on the mind; and both are very infectious. But they differ specifically, in this respect, that admiration supposes some uncommon excellence in its object, which dread does not. We may admire what we see no reason to dread, and we may dread what we do not admire. In dread, there is nothing of that enthusiasm with naturally accompanies admiration.
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> [T]rue grandeur is such a degree of excellence as is fit to raise an enthusiastical admiration; that this grandeur is found originally and properly in qualities of mind; it is discerned in objects of sense only by reflection.[13]

Great architecture, then, is more than excellent building. It is building to such a high degree of excellence as can adequately reflect, and make visible, a grandeur of mind—the mind of the architect (or architects). Buildings can be good, and even excellent, in construction, form and

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[12] *Ibid*.
[13] *Ibid*., pp. 590–591.

functionality, and are to be valued as such. But it is when they go beyond this, when they are products of the same sort of imagination that produces great drama, great poetry and great music, that they are rightly regarded as works of art.

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