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Contesting Beauty

Guest Edited by Paul Guyer

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Paul Guyer*

“CONTESTING BEAUTY”

Marcel Duchamp's submission of a mass-produced urinal, modified only by the addition of a signature “R. Mutt, 1917,” to a show of modern art in early twentieth-century New York was rejected, even though the show was supposed to be unjuried, and Duchamp himself was a member of the board of the Society of Independent Artists sponsoring it (from which he then resigned). The urinal, or the work of art, entitled “Fountain,” was not a beautiful or elegant one, at least by our standards a century later, as exemplified by high-end fixtures in fancy homes, restaurants, hotels, and so on. Whether Duchamp was just making a joke or seriously trying to undermine the assumption that art should strive for beauty perhaps we will never be sure—his subsequent statement that art should not be merely “retinal,” that is, pleasing to the eye, suggests the latter, but maybe he was pulling our leg then too (to switch body parts). Nevertheless, many philosophers, writing in English, French, German, and other languages, have certainly taken him seriously, proposing—contrary to the prevailing thinking of the eighteenth-century founders of philosophical aesthetics, from Francis Hutcheson and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten to Immanuel Kant and Thomas Reid—that if the idea of beauty has any content at all, is not an essential end of art. In English-language literature, the names of George Dickie and Arthur Danto spring to mind, and in her paper in this volume Carole Talon-Hugon refers us to French philosophers who adopted a similar position.

What about architecture? Standard translations of the founding father Vitruvius's list of the fundamental goals of architecture, *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas*, such as “durability, utility or convenience, and beauty,” gave authority for two millennia to the idea that of course architecture strives for beauty. To be sure, it went hand in hand with and

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had some relation to functionality, that is, successfully serving whatever specific purpose it is for which their buildings were commissioned, designed, built, and paid for. But whether or not particular architects were aware of what was happening in other areas of visual art, let alone aesthetics as a sub-discipline of academic philosophy, some architects in the twentieth century and beyond have certainly been willing to leave beauty off of their lists of their own goals, denying even that architecture should strive to be beautiful at all. And in the eyes of many, brutalist architecture showed that its architects no longer took beauty as an essential goal of their discipline. Others, however, would argue that such landmarks of brutalist architecture as Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp, Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum, or Kallmann McKinnell and Knowles's Boston City Hall, to name but a few, are works of great beauty, just not beauty in any previously recognized style. No doubt Immanuel Kant could hardly have imagined any of these buildings, but in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) he argued that all art, architecture included, aims at both beauty and originality—so what could he have expected but that beauty should take on forms that neither Vitruvius nor he could ever have expected?

As Kant's contemporary Thomas Reid (discussed in Gordon Graham's contribution to this volume) pointed out, the word "beauty" (and, he could have added, its equivalents in other languages) has two sorts of usages: in one, it is a general term of approbation, for anything that a speaker thinks striking in a positive way, especially anything that is a product of human skill, whether a mathematical proof, a culinary dish, a carefully bred horticultural variety—or a work of art; in the other, it is used as a commendation specifically for works of art, or for works of nature viewed as if they were works of art, in particular for their appeal to the eye or the ear, whatever other value they might or might not have. (Reid's "Essay on Taste" was included in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, published in 1785, thus five years before Kant's work.) As Reid put it, "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. [...] I am indeed unable to conceive any quality in all the different things that are called beautiful, that is the same in them all. There seems to be no identity, nor even similarity, between the beauty of a theorem and the beauty of a piece of music. [...] The kinds of beauty seem to be as various as the objects to which it is ascribed." So, of

course, it can be debated whether architecture must aim for beauty, since the concept of beauty itself is polysemous and indefinable.

Vitruvius’s own formulation, for all its familiarity, also presents challenges for translation and therefore interpretation. His term *utilitas* seems straightforward: “utility” is the obvious cognate, “convenience” seems a bit old-fashioned but not misleading; “functionality” would seem to be as good as “utility;” but however this word is translated, it seems clear that whatever else it might be or do, a successful work of architecture should satisfy its program, have the rooms and spaces called for, be up-to-date in its plumbing and HVAC, in other words, be functional. *Firmitas* seems only slightly more problematic: “firmness” or “solidity” seem like obvious choices, “durable” has often been used, although that needs to be qualified since some buildings, say exhibition pavilions, are not intended to last long although they must be safe and comfortable enough while they stand, so maybe a paraphrase like “well-constructed for their intended purpose” would be best, although here we can see that there may not be sharp boundaries between Vitruvius’s categories. But *venustas*—what is that? Liddell and Scott, the standard Latin-English dictionary, defines *venustas*, classically spelled *uenustas*, as “the quality of being charming or delightful,” “charm, grace (of appearance),” “charm, attractiveness (of style, presentation, etc.),” or even “the quality of being lucky in love!” In other words, it is a very broad term, perhaps in the first instance applied to persons rather than objects, meaning appealing in personality, in appearance, in style—the connection with the goddess Venus, whose name is a personification of the quality, seems obvious. Alexander Nehamas’s argument, in his 2007 book *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* and in his interview here, that the beautiful is what we find loveable, “we” in the first instance individually and, if more broadly, then contingently but not necessarily so (as Kant would have had it), seems very much in the spirit of the original senses of the word. At one point in his contribution, David Leatherbarrow and, as Nicholas Ray notes, previously Christian Norberg-Schulz suggest “form” as a translation. However, if “form” is taken with any degree of specificity, such as geometrical form, that seems only one example of what we might find loveable in the appearance of an object, although that has certainly figured centrally in many theories of art—again, including Kant’s—and architecture—think of Louis Sullivan’s “form follows function” (whatever he exactly meant by that). It might seem best to adopt a loose translation of *venustas* as “aesthetic appeal”

or “aesthetic attractiveness,” as I have done in *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture* (2021)—but of course, that just moves the burden of definition to “aesthetic!” If “aesthetic” just means “pertaining to art,” as it has for many since Hegel’s epochal *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1819-1829), then insofar as architecture is considered an art and is also expected to be appealing, it is just tautologous that it aims for aesthetic appeal. Something more needs to be said about what it is to be aesthetically appealing than just that it is to be artistically appealing.

The papers in this collection address this challenge in various ways. In his interview, Nehamas tells us more about what it is like to find a work of art loveable, worthy of our further engagement, in what ways it is and is not like loving a person. He also points out the importance for works of architecture to be found aesthetically appealing in some way or other: because where failures of art in other media can be consigned to the dustbin of history or museums, architecture surrounds us, whether we like or not, as long as it stands. Nicholas Ray shows us that Vitruvius himself attempted to flesh out his own conception of *venustas* with further principles such as harmony, symmetry, proportion, etc., but also argues that perhaps the most fundamental development of, or perhaps addition to, Vitruvius’s conception of *venustas* is the idea of architectural *meaning*, which is closely connected to the ethical significance of works of architecture. That it makes sense to talk of the meaning of works of architecture is also presupposed by Nehamas’s view that we respond to a work of art that we love with an ongoing process of interpretation, and I have myself argued that this is a fundamental expansion of the Vitruvian conception, beginning perhaps with Kant, taken to extremes by Hegel, and needing to be balanced with the more traditional conception of beauty as a visual or at least sensory property. I say “or sensory,” because in her whirlwind tour of the history of the equation of beauty with harmony throughout the history of aesthetics, Carole Talon-Hugon concludes that “architecture has an advantage over the other arts [...] in the fact it summons all the senses except for the sense of taste, not just the traditional senses of beauty: sight and hearing.” She invokes Henry Maldiney for this insight, but here we could certainly also think of Steen Eiler Rasmussen’s enduring experiential approach to architecture. In his contribution, like Ray drawing on his long experience as a practicing architect, Kurt Brandle emphasizes the role of our emotions in our experience of beauty, something that was recognized by an eighteenth-century author such as Henry Home, Lord Kames, in his widely read *Elements of Criticism* (1762) but,

unfortunately, rejected by Kant; Brandle in effect sets Kant right on his denial of the importance of the emotional importance of the arts, including architecture. Glenn Parsons explores the complex relationship between Vitruvius’s two fundamental goals for architecture, functionality and aesthetic appeal (assuming that the goal of good construction is more the means to these ends than an end entirely in its own right). He shows that this relation can take various forms, with functionality as an external constraint on beauty or in a more intimate relation with it, but ends up endorsing what I call pluralism, that is, allowing that this relation may take various forms, and suggesting that it is not for anyone, philosophers or architects, to prescribe a general rule, but rather for architects to find aesthetically appealing and original ways to satisfy the functional demands on their work case by case. Finally, in this more purely theoretical group of papers, David Leatherbarrow offers a fascinating exploration of the difference that often occurs between the imagination and the realization of beauty in architecture. As a historical interlude, so to speak, Gordon Graham’s paper on the implications of Thomas Reid’s essay on beauty for the case of architecture shows how Reid also recognized the emotional as well as more purely sensory “excellence” that can be afforded by architecture; thus Reid on Graham’s account is a forerunner of Kurt Brandle’s reflections. The collection concludes with essays by philosophers that focus on concrete cases: Carolyn Korsmeyer uses the case of an unfortunately now demolished grain elevator in Buffalo, New York, to argue that historical significance should also count as a kind or part of beauty (something that John Ruskin had previously argued, although with very different sorts of cases in mind, in his classic *Seven Lamps of Architecture* of 1849), and Fred Rush’s exploration of fascist (specifically, Nazi) architecture shows how the emotional and multi-sensory character of architectural beauty can be used for ill as well as for good—like much else in life, architecture being part of it. Each of these essays speaks with its own, highly original voice, so I will now let them speak for themselves.

Nicholas Ray*

A CAUTIOUS PRAGMATIC AMENDMENT TO THE VITRUVIAN PARADIGM

ABSTRACT: Vitruvius's convenient *firmitas, utilitas, venustas* triad has been employed since the Renaissance to encompass the goals of architecture. But these terms can be questioned: they were primarily useful to Vitruvius in ordering his book and do not encompass all that was at issue for him and remains so for us today. Architecture is a discipline that displays tacit knowledge, where best practice can only be shown, not described, accounting for the clumsiness of expression for which Vitruvius is often criticised. I argue that the conventional triad undervalues location or context and, whereas *firmitas* and *utilitas* (suitably expanded) may be measurable, and styles and even meanings can be discussed, *venustas*—understood as a demand for beauty in the abstract—is more like an ethical requirement. We cannot blame Vitruvius for the fact that his attractive tri-partite framework was adopted by Alberti and continues to be used. But we can be permitted to think again whether there might be a more appropriate set of terms that takes better account of the full complexity of the practice and interpretation of architecture.

KEYWORDS: architecture, Vitruvius, philosophy, beauty, ethics

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INTRODUCTION

I believe I was invited to contribute this paper because in September 2021 I wrote to the distinguished Guest Editor of this issue, after reading his eloquent little book *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*.¹ Having said how much I enjoyed it, I boldly offered two criticisms: his choice of a particular architectural example (Herzog & de Meuron's Elbe Philharmonic Hall) and, more fundamentally, his use throughout of the Vitruvian triad, variously described in his book as 'a paradigm', as perennial 'ideals', 'categories' or 'general norms': *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas*. I am grateful for this opportunity to expand on the grounds for my suspicion, which I have held for many years, that this convenient triad is a useful but over-simplified interpretation of the lessons Vitruvius attempted to impart, with sometimes dangerous repercussions.²

I begin by outlining what I consider to be limitations to the common use of the triad, arguing that it cannot be comprehensive because matters that Vitruvius himself believed to be important are downplayed or even suppressed. I then consider alternative readings of his text as a whole by historians and classicists to try to better understand Vitruvius's temperament and hence interpret his intentions. I conclude by arguing that there are perennial lessons embedded in his *De Architectura*, but that they cannot be summarised adequately in the conventional triad.³ We can consider whether there might be a more appropriate set of terms—possibly more than three—that takes better account of the full complexity of the practice and interpretation of architecture.

I. LIMITATIONS OF THE TRIADIC PARADIGM

The "call for papers" of the present issue notes that *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas* "can be loosely translated as good construction, functionality

¹ P. Guyer, *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2021.

² I write as someone who was engaged in practice for fifty years at the same time as teaching architects, predominantly in the studio, writing critical articles and, only more recently, books that seek to bridge questions of architectural practice, its history and what can be said about it more theoretically.

³ Of the numerous translations in recent decades, except where noted, I refer to Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, Penguin Books, London, 2009, referring to numbered books, chapters and paragraphs. I have had the benefit of discussions with Serafina Cuomo, Jane Heal, Christian Illies, Marco Iuliano and Julian Roberts, and helpful comments from James Clackson, Rebecca Flemming and Thorsten Fögen.

and aesthetic appeal” and goes so far as to suggest that Vitruvius saw them, and we can still understand them as “the three chief goals or values in architecture.” Some years ago, Tom Spector described the attraction of the three terms very cogently:

One Vitruvian assertion [...] has exercised a tenacious hold on architectural imagination. This is the statement, delivered almost as an afterthought in a discussion of building types, that all architecture “must be built with due reference to durability, convenience and beauty,” in Latin *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas*. All subsequent theories of architecture’s basic values have been obliged to grapple with the simple wisdom of Vitruvius’ statement.⁴

We are invited to consider whether there might be a broader conception of aesthetic appeal, referencing the scepticism of Nelson Goodman, Arthur Danto and Alexander Nehamas that there are canons of beauty to which we can aspire. The scope of this brief paper is somewhat wider: beauty, whether somehow embedded in architectural form, or relying on the perceptions of whoever may be experiencing beautiful structures and environments, has engendered a long-standing debate that has no easy resolution and the topic will undoubtedly continue to exercise philosophers. Although in trying to interpret his intentions we can surmise where Vitruvius himself stood on this issue, I suggest that is secondary to his ambition to describe the discipline in all its complexity. *Venustas*—which can be taken as an aesthetic question, or demand—was clearly important to Vitruvius and will remain so for us, but it is uncertain that it is a category in the same sense as *firmitas* and *utilitas*. In brief, in this paper, I shall be examining the “simple wisdom” of the three terms.

If you are trying to order your thoughts, or to structure the arrangement of a book, a group of three principles is certainly convenient. One might argue that it is ‘natural’: things have beginnings, middles and ends, or we tend to understand them as having so.⁵ Debates (whether we refer to medieval scholasticism or Hegelian dialectic) tend to involve propositions, refutations and resolutions; columns have bases (where they hit the ground), shafts and capitals (celebrated or suppressed) where they

⁴ T. Spector, *The Ethical Architect: The Dilemma of Contemporary Practice*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2001, p. 35.

⁵ For an interesting brief essay along these lines, see A. Reid, *The Power of Three*, privately published, 2024.

encounter a beam. You might reduce Vitruvius's triad to the two "goals or values" of *firmitas* and *utilitas*: that any cultural artefact will involve first its fabrication and secondly its employment and expect that both aspects will be well fulfilled in the best examples. But in the numerous dialogues that Plato records (or purports to record) Socrates suggests that an overarching expectation of fabricators (of shoes, for instance) or performers (on the flute) is that they should make decent shoes or pleasing music; in the same way, we expect that well-trained pilots will steer us safely and believe these are skills that can be taught.⁶ Yet as soon as we ask that an artefact should be well-made and be effective in use, we tend to imply a value – hence the temptation to introduce a third term to resolve the issue, as it were. Insofar as it affects us, we could call it aesthetic. One might then say that architects have a duty to do their work well, which effectively means that their buildings ought to be beautiful.⁷ Beauty in some sense will indeed be very important for architects—a natural part of their activity *a regola d'arte* (in a useful Italian phrase)—though perhaps it is in a rather different category to the other two terms.

Clearly, Vitruvius was aware of several more elaborate ways in which he could address the discipline and organise his text. He lists six "principles:" planning (right dimensions and correct orthography), harmony, modularity, appropriateness (*decor*, according to customary precedents and according to 'nature') and distribution before going on to remark that they could (or even should) should be viewed through the oft-quoted triad.⁸ There may be a view that we should not revere Vitruvius's thinking:

Architecture is of course a way of interpreting the world. But the world and its interpretations change. Vitruvius, sound though he may have been on military engineering, did not foresee Copernicus, tensile structures or information technology. To assert that his interpretations have ahistorical validity—as opposed to historical importance in the continuum of change—is at best irresponsible nostalgia.⁹

⁶ In the *Protagoras* 324–327, for instance: Plato, *Complete Works*, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis/ Cambridge, 1997. In the earlier sections of the *Republic* a city without culture, designed to cater only for the most basic needs, is a "city of pigs:" *Republic* 369a–372d in *ibid.*

⁷ Christian Illies and I have argued along these lines: C. Illies, N. Ray, "The Ethical Obligation to Beauty in the Design of Buildings" in J. van den Hoven, S. Miller, T. Pogge (eds.), *Designing in Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 211–228.

⁸ The six principles are described at Vitr. I, 2, 1–8; the triad occurs at Book I, 3, 2.

⁹ J. Melvin, "Making Too Much of Vitruvius," *Architects' Journal*, 6 November 1997, p. 60.

But I accept that reading Vitruvius' text is productive, taken as a whole, insofar as it represents a philosophical approach to the complexities of the discipline, which in some ways transcends the particularity of its time and place. Acknowledging, as we must, that Vitruvius' triad would apply to any artefact,¹⁰ we might then ask whether there are goals that are specific to architecture and ought therefore to qualify in an enlarged list: that is a question I have frequently raised with students. Below, I consider whether a modified set of categories could be assembled that were important to Vitruvius and would remain so for us today, first rehearsing briefly the ways in which architectural practice and our understanding of it have changed since Vitruvius's time, and noting how, to remain coherent, the scope of his triad has necessarily expanded to absorb them.

If we take *firmitas* to embrace technology as a whole, it is clear that the changes are profound. Under this category, in Book II Vitruvius is mostly concerned with structural stability and the properties of the materials employed. When, in Book V, he turns to baths, he does not elaborate on the technology involved in the underground heating system nor does he deal with drainage systems in detail: how architects provide for comfort maybe comes under the umbrella of *utilitas*. But in practice for more than a century, technical services occupy a much larger proportion of the budget than the structure does, at the time of construction and in operation during their (usually limited) lifetime. Services could not just run underground, as in Roman drains and at the baths, but would need vertical ducts. The American architect Louis Kahn understood this problem and was reluctant to allow mechanical services to dominate the coherent spaces he sought to create to house individuals or institutions. This involved giving them due attention and distinguishing formally between rooms that were served and spaces that did the serving. Le Corbusier had envied architects of earlier generations: "*pour Ledoux, c'était facile, pas des tubes.*"¹¹ For twentieth-century architects, dealing with the 'means' and deciding how the structure and the services were expressed, or suppressed, became a critical issue. In his book *The Place of Houses*, Charles Moore had a chapter entitled "Including the Machines" and illustrated

¹⁰ For clothing and even food, as Paul Guyer admits: P. Guyer, *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*, pp. 8–9.

¹¹ Cited by the British critic Reyner Banham, who believed architects were ridiculously sentimental in being fixated by traditional "slogans" such as "Firmness, Commodity and Delight." See R. Banham, "A Home is Not a House," *Art in America*, 2, 1965, pp. 70–79.

four ways in plan of catering for them: you could form rooms around them, put the machines inside the rooms, or put them outside, or sandwich them between rooms; what you could not do was ignore them.¹² In the twenty-first century, architects have been wrestling with reducing dependence on mechanical services by eliminating air conditioning and returning to passive means of environmental control, but, as in the *Passivhaus* system, this will usually involve mechanical means discreetly incorporated to assist in ensuring sufficient air changes. Larger buildings may require very generous ducts to encourage ventilation stack effects. In the light of the far-reaching consequences on the environment of architects' servicing strategies, our definition of the technics involved in building certainly needs to expand.

One of the arguments for Modernism was that traditional ways of building no longer served contemporary needs (the Crystal Palace which had to be constructed very quickly as an exhibition space is a much-cited example). Another was that there were entirely new uses that were difficult to incorporate into traditional forms, so that meeting the requirements of contemporary *utilitas* would involve a complete reassessment of the nature of architecture. Though that might have been exaggerated, what certainly had changed was an increased demand for flexibility—thereby hindering the fulfilment of Alberti's often-quoted ideal that the most beautiful buildings would be those to which “nothing may be added, taken away or altered but for the worse.”¹³ Architects are less often required to create spaces for stable institutions, such as churches, law courts and civic centres because a space that was readily adaptable to several different needs would be more useful. Moreover, buildings which were no longer suitable for their original purpose might be converted to serve a completely different one, as the Bankside power station in London was to house “Tate Modern.” The problem this raises in both cases, however, is one of expression. It is not a question of just seeking the most efficient volume of spatial enclosure or assessing whether new needs can be fitted into inherited fabric but deciding how ‘universal space’, or a radically new use in an existing building should represent itself.

¹² C. Moore, G. Allen, D. Lyndon, *The Place of Houses*, Holt Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1974, pp. 176–185.

¹³ L. B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass./London, 1988, Book VI, 2, p. 156. Alberti does preface this frequently quoted remark on beauty with the caution that it is a quality that “the mind could perhaps visualize more clearly than my words could explain.”

Maybe such a concern can come under the aegis of *venustas*; as Guyer points out, unlike Alberti and those with a rationalist cast of mind, Vitruvius distinguished content or ‘meaning’ from form so there are two issues at stake.¹⁴ The first is how *venustas* should relate to the ‘manner’ or ‘style’ of a building. In Vitruvius’s time there was clearly an authoritative tradition to which an architect’s building could refer—not by plagiarism as he makes clear, but by inventive interpretation, within the canon established in Greece and interpreted or adapted in Italy.¹⁵ But in post-enlightenment Europe, when many areas of the globe had been explored and recorded, the authority of a single canon was clearly called into question. The manner an architect chose to adopt could assist in summoning up an appropriate response: to employ the Burkean distinctions between the ‘sublime’ and the ‘beautiful’, this would involve deciding whether to evoke feelings of awe or horror, as opposed to presenting an object for dispassionate contemplation. But the purpose might also be referential—a manner that suggested stylistic associations to those experiencing the architecture. Within any given style, to use conventional metaphors, we might distinguish those who used it eloquently – played with it gracefully or showed admirable taste – from those who were less skilled or produced ‘vulgar’ compositions, discordant notes (whether intentionally or not) and buildings that left one’s appetite unsatisfied.¹⁶ There is much more to be said about ‘beauty’, to which many contributors to this issue will no doubt address themselves. Where architecture is concerned it is embedded in aspects of use, construction, style and meaning and becomes difficult to disentangle. For the moment, we can acknowledge that *firmitas* can be subjected to measurement (strength of materials, for instance) even in a wider definition that includes other aspects of technology (acoustic resonance, thermal performance and so on) and *utilitas* can be quantified in some respects (net usable space compared to gross

¹⁴ P. Guyer, *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*, p. 43.

¹⁵ His remarks on plagiarism appear at Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, Book VII, Preface, pp. Iii–x. He is referring to literature but goes on, in XI and XII, to mention the design of stage scenery and it is clear he would apply similar criteria to the design of buildings. Architects need modesty to learn from the best precedents, but also inventiveness in their interpretation. Many of his examples were in Italy, but outside Rome, and part of his purpose seems to be to alert Roman readers to practice elsewhere.

¹⁶ It seems impossible to describe architecture without recourse to metaphor. Linguistic metaphors are most common, though clearly unsatisfactory in many respects; musical and culinary metaphors are no better. See G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003.

constructed floor area is a common calculation), but it is unlikely that we will agree on common measurements of *venustas*. The theory that certain proportional systems, besides their usefulness in providing a discipline to designers and sometimes manufacturers, will result in beauty remains hotly disputed.

I do not think that it is possible or particularly productive to try and eliminate the truism that artefacts will be judged amongst other criteria in the light of their technical robustness, performance, or ‘beauty’. The question remains: in the light of Vitruvius’s text, taken as a whole, are those three paradigms sufficient as a framework for his purposes or would it be productive, in the search for a ready mnemonic as to how to approach the discipline, to supplement or amend them in any way? I turn now to the text itself and ask whether recent interpretations can assist us. I contrast two broad views and proceed to what I believe to be a more rounded understanding that has yet to be articulated satisfactorily.

2. CONTRASTED READINGS OF VITRUVIUS AND HIS TEXT

It is not only, or even primarily, architects that are interested in Vitruvius’s *De Architectura*. Historians of ancient science and classicists more generally have also been hard at work. I refer below to two examples as an illustration of alternative approaches. The first text, by Elizabeth Rawson, a distinguished scholar of Roman intellectual history, is representative of the interpretation to which most architects probably adhered in the second half of the twentieth century. Vitruvius himself

was born perhaps quite early in the first century B.C., was a son of free parents and expressed gratitude to them for his education, which did not however include much literary or historical study, as his apologies for possible contraventions of the laws of *grammatica*, and his clumsy style, half-colloquial, half-technical, show.¹⁷

She goes on to explain that “Vitruvius was apologetic about his style, which might not always follow the norms of the art of grammar (in fact his style is unclassical, his syntax awkward and his genders uncertain).”¹⁸ She correctly identifies Vitruvius’s valiant attempts to analyse—and

¹⁷ E. Rawson, *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic*, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., London, 1985, p. 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.130.

systematise—the complexities of architectural practice and its possible theoretical underpinnings and puts his failure to do so adequately down to his awkward grasp of prose as well as of the mathematical principles that underlie his examples: she cites his attempts to divide a circle into 16 segments, his sketchy understanding of Pythagoras, Eratosthenes and Archytas, and the fact that he was undecided on the value of π .¹⁹ Stylistically his preference is old-fashioned, probably reflecting tastes in Rome at the time, but compared to his near-contemporary Varro, his “approach is rigid and unhistorical.”²⁰ She claims his “chief claim to originality may be in his systematic plan,”²¹ which is of course ordered by his paradigmatic triad.

Such judgments were reflected in architectural commentaries, which echoed Alberti’s view, in his own ten books, of his illustrious but (in his view) inadequate ancient predecessor. He is grateful to have read him, along with Pliny and other writers, partly because his work is an accident of survival. But in the beginning of his sixth book he claims Vitruvius’s

writings have become so corrupted by time that there are many omissions and many shortcomings. What he handed down was in any case not refined and his speech such that the Latins might think that he wanted to appear a Greek, while the Greeks would think that he babbled Latin. However his very text is evidence that he wrote neither Latin nor Greek, so that as far as we are concerned he might just as well not have written at all, rather than write something that we cannot understand.²²

Clearly, Alberti seeks to supersede the clumsy Vitruvius with his more educated text. The late Joseph Rykwert explained in the introduction to his edition of Alberti’s *De re aedificatoria*, from which the translation above is taken, that the essential difference between the two is that Vitruvius “tells you how the buildings that you may admire as you read him *were* built, while Alberti is prescribing how the buildings of the future *are to be* built.”²³ But this oversimplifies: it is clear that the advice

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.157–160.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.189.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.140.

²² L. B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, p. 154.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. x, Rykwert’s emphasis. For a more rounded reading of Alberti, see M. Jarzombek, *On Leon Battista Alberti: His Literary and Aesthetic Theories*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass./London, 1990.

Vitruvius conveys, though based on past precedents, is partly intended to guide architects and their patrons in best practice. Viewing Vitruvius as Alberti did, which is often the case, does his thinking—or let us say his ambition—a disservice. Introducing her 1999 translation of Vitruvius, Ingrid Rowland similarly explained that he was an important writer but not a good one:

It is difficult to translate him without at the same time trying to improve his sometimes clumsy phrasing, his endless sentences, his abrupt digressions, and his congenital failure to use one word when he can use two, especially when they sound alike (“evade and avoid” is a typical example).²⁴

But more recent scholars disagree with this and similar judgments. In the later 1980s Italian scholars such as Elisa Romano and the Frenchman Pierre Gros argued that Vitruvius was a more sophisticated figure than was generally claimed.²⁵ By the 1990s Anglophone interpretations had caught up. Marden Nichols’ *Author and Audience in Vitruvius’ De architectura* illustrates this different approach. Vitruvius “never intended to provide an accurate and objective view of the contemporary built environment” but “pitched a treatise on architecture [...] to his elite Roman readers, most of whom were undoubtedly laymen.”²⁶ He aimed to “entertain and engage rather than to purely instruct” and his book is a self-conscious contribution to literary culture; as readers we need to see “apparent contradictions, factual blunders and other peculiarities” in this light. Nichols goes so far as to compare Vitruvius to the Roman poet Horace. They both refer to “a rich array” of philosophical positions: “at one pole, enthusiasts of a corrupted Stoicism and, at the other devotees of Epicureanism and the Cyreniac philosopher Aristippus” – the pupil of Socrates whom Vitruvius cites in the preface to Book VI, where he

²⁴ Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. xiii.

²⁵ E. Romano, *La capanna e il tempio: Vitruvio o dell’architettura*, Palumbo, Palermo, 1987; P. Gros, “L’auctoritas chez Vitruve”: contribution à l’étude de la sémantique des ordres dans le *De architectura*” in H. Geertman and J. de Jong (eds.), *Munus non Ingratum: Proceedings of the International Symposium on Vitruvius De Architectura and the Hellenistic and Republican architecture*, Bulletin Antieke Beschaving, Leiden, 1989, pp. 126–133, both cited in M.P. Nichols, *Author and Audience in Vitruvius’ De architectura*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

argues that “education should be valued above wealth.”²⁷ Nichols spends much of her book discussing Vitruvius’ treatment of the house and its decoration – questions of its propriety (too ‘magnificent’ or ‘elegant’) as well as how to ensure the longevity of vermilion paints. Eventually, the technical issues might be of some interest to archaeologists, she claims, but what Vitruvius’ text illustrates most clearly are the ethical complexities involved for Stoics such as Vitruvius himself or Pliny who “criticised luxury building as contrary to *natura*.”

3. VITRUVIUS – A “REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER”

A reader of Vitruvius who is also an architect (such as myself) is likely to be unpersuaded by either of these interpretations, informed though they are by admirable close reading and scholarship, as to the principal thrust of Vitruvius’s influential text. The most important characteristic of this ancient author is that he is first and foremost an *architect*. Architects have to be generalists: they learn by personal experience and by leaning on the experience of others and examining their works.²⁸ There are some things they need to know. Much else they need to find out: what to watch out for, from whom to take further advice and which texts and conversations might be informative and maybe inspiring. Vitruvius is not an engineer writing a handbook to explain in detail how to construct cities, timepieces, fortifications or siege engines, though his text refers all these artefacts.²⁹ Nor is he writing primarily to situate himself in a philosophical or literary discourse, though of course he writes within the discursive context of his time. He is a self-reflective architect, unlike many practitioners, and that is one of the reasons he wants to record the discipline in writing, for himself, for his contemporary readers (whether architects or prospective patrons) and for posterity.³⁰ He is equally intrigued by the conversations he has had with ballistics experts, his reading of myths

²⁷ M. P. Nichols, *Author and Audience in Vitruvius’ De architectura*, p. 57.

²⁸ See, for instance, Vitr. X, 11, 2.

²⁹ Hence his disclaimer in relation to water organs, for instance, which is clearly a matter of specialist knowledge: *Ibid.*, Book X, 8, 6.

³⁰ As Thorsten Fögen explained, when writing to me to agree that “it is an oversimplification to say that Vitruvius ‘identified *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas* [...] as the three chief goals or values in architecture’: “He is not just an architect—at least not in the modern sense. He makes it clear that his compendium has a socio-cultural, ethical and political agenda” (e-mail 12 December 2024). Thereby Fögen implies that most architects do not consider, discuss and write about such issues. But they should, and self-reflective architects, like Vitruvius, certainly do.

and poetry,³¹ and his discussions with Gaius Julius.³² Sometimes he has to make difficult decisions as to whether to follow his poetic hunch or concur with what is probably a more accurate technical explanation. He may have been aware of Aristarchus' heliocentric understanding of the universe, but common experience and everyday turns of phrase (seeing the sun "rise" and "set") would lead him to prefer Boesus' explanation of the phases of the moon in any case.³³

"Reflective practitioner" is a term that Donald Schön made popular.³⁴ Following Michael Polanyi and others, he saw various practices, including architecture as form of "knowing in action" which embraces tacit knowledge, and this is accompanied by "reflecting in action." To illustrate the former, he used the example of children, faced with the task of balancing differentially weighted but similarly sized blocks, being forced to abandon one theory and adopt a different one, making "on-the-spot hypotheses" to account for the behaviour they observed. To argue for the latter, he pointed out that practitioners develop a "repertoire of expectations, images and techniques" in the face of professional problems.³⁵ In an intriguing paper of 2016, Serafina Cuomo also saw Vitruvius as someone engaged in the difficult problem of conveying "tacit knowledge," the notion to which Schön refers that Michael Polanyi had described in 1967.³⁶ Architects trying to teach design in the last quarter of the twentieth century read Polanyi because they needed to find a way of countering a reductive 'scientistic' attitude to their discipline. Cuomo cites Polanyi's example, which was frequently quoted, of teaching children how to ride a bicycle. You cannot explain how to do this by writing a performance specification and set of instructions; you have to show them how to do it and eventually they learn by experience the complex process of balancing, steering, accelerating and braking. Cuomo writes: "it may be simply—objectively, cognitively—impossible, even today, let alone in the first century C.E., to produce a text that will give you perfect algorithmic

³¹ Ennius or Accius, for instance: *Vitr.* IX, Preface, 16.

³² *Ibid.*, VIII, 3, 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, IX, 2, 1-4.

³⁴ D. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Basic Books, New York, 1983.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁶ S. Cuomo, "Tacit Knowledge in Vitruvius" in *Arethusa*, 49, 2, 2016, pp.125–143. For a comprehensive description of Polanyi's position see M. Polanyi, H. Prosch, *Meaning*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1975. Cuomo points out that others have refined and expanded Polanyi's work more recently.

instructions for building anything.”³⁷ So, Vitruvius had no real need to apologise that his explanations are incomplete or that he has to resort to diagrams to show what he means. He has provided his reader with more than enough to ensure he would not be left floundering if he had to judge and evaluate one of these subjects and techniques.³⁸

A contemporary “reflective practitioner” in whose work I am interested is the Spanish architect Rafael Moneo.³⁹ In 2014 he delivered the Annual Architecture Lecture at London’s Royal Academy.⁴⁰ The many architects who attended expected him to describe his own buildings but he used the occasion to meditate on the education of architects: to be able to convey the “meanings” of the society they serve requires historical knowledge, along with a respect for the purposes of the buildings, their materials and technology. But Vitruvius turns out to be a more fruitful and inclusive teacher than the neo-Platonic Alberti, who, knowledgeable though he was, did not illustrate his treatise, because “he made the distinction between one who had the abstract idea of the building and one who had mastered the techniques of building.”⁴¹ In *On the Art of Building* Alberti tried to “say” what perhaps can only be “shown,” though fortunately in his case we have several of his masterpieces we can visit and therefore “see what he meant.”⁴²

4. DEVALUATIONS OF CONTEXT AND MEANING

I mentioned above that I have frequently asked students to identify goals that are specific to architecture (rather than applying to any fabricated artefact) and ought therefore to be considered in any conveniently shortened list than the several more extended categories Vitruvius mentions.

³⁷ S. Cuomo, “Tacit Knowledge in Vitruvius,” p.127.

³⁸ Vitr. I, 1, 16.

³⁹ For an account of Moneo’s theory and practice, see F. Gonzales de Canales, N. Ray, *Rafael Moneo: Building, Teaching, Writing*, Yale University Press, London/New Haven, 2015.

⁴⁰ R. Moneo, “Annual Architecture Lecture,” in *Royal Academy Journal*, London 2017.

⁴¹ Joseph Rykwert, the translator of Alberti, was in the audience and might have been discomforted. But Moneo praised Alberti’s stress on the importance of historical understanding. It is the *balance* of Vitruvius that impressed Moneo.

⁴² Architects, myself included, have sometimes tried to relate Wittgenstein’s distinction between ‘saying’ and ‘showing’ in his *Philosophical Investigations* to the practice of architecture (N. Ray, *Thinking Through Twentieth-Century Architecture*, Routledge, London, 2023, pp. 231–232). It may not be irrelevant that Wittgenstein refined his philosophical position after the completion of the house for his sister, where he had effectively taken over as architect from a pupil of Adolf Loos. He found architectural practice difficult, which is reassuring for architects.

Sometimes they remark that, except in the case of mobile homes (and even then their orientation on any particular site is relevant) the issue of context or location, in an urban or rural setting, is particular to architecture. Vitruvius would surely have agreed. Following his chapters on education, six “principles” and the three “divisions” of architecture (buildings, sundials and machines) he dives straight into the choice of sites, beginning with the local climate and the best orientation to take advantage of it.⁴³ Then, having described the architectural elements required to assemble buildings, and their origins, he looks at building types and here again the first requirement is to understand the context, whether for basilicas, theatres, baths, warehouses or dwellings.⁴⁴ Urging patrons or designers to “consult the genius of the place” was a literary trope from the eighteenth century onwards.⁴⁵ In the mid-twentieth century, architects started to describe ‘townscape’ on the analogy of landscape;⁴⁶ twenty-five years later, influential historians and critics rediscovered the primacy of regional context.⁴⁷ The first book by the Norwegian Christian Norberg-Schulz was effectively a reinterpretation of Alberti’s work with the benefit of Gestalt psychological understandings and translated the Vitruvian triad into ‘technics’, ‘function’, and ‘form’. He wrote that it would be “inexpedient to introduce the relationship to the environment as a new basic category.”⁴⁸ Having read some of Heidegger’s post-war essays, however, his emphasis changed: each chapter (dealing with discreet “epochs”) of his *Meaning in Western Architecture* begins with a section entitled “Landscape and Settlement.”⁴⁹ Schulz’s title suggests there is a cultural context to architecture that could be discussed as “meaning,”

⁴³ Vitr. I, 4–7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, V, 1, 4; V, 3, 1; V, 6I, 7; V, 10, 1; V, 11, 1.

⁴⁵ This well-worn phrase was Alexander Pope’s, in his *Epistle IV to Richard, Lord Burlington*; its ironic intention is mostly unnoticed.

⁴⁶ G. Cullen, *Townscape*, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, New York, 1961.

⁴⁷ The term “critical regionalism” first emerged in an article by A. Tzonis and L. Lefaivre, “The Grid and the Pathway: An Introduction to the Work of Dimitris and Susana Antonakakis,” *Architecture in Greece*, 15, 1981, p. 178. The most influential essay was K. Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance” reprinted in H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Port Townsend, Mass., 1983, pp. 16–30.

⁴⁸ C. Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*, Studio Vista, London, 1966, p. 103.

⁴⁹ C. Norberg-Schulz, *Meaning in Western Architecture*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1975, p. 103. See also: C. Norberg-Schulz *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York, 1980. I once asked Schulz whether he had changed his position, but he claimed (unconvincingly) that he was consistent: the earlier *Intentions* had laid the foundations for his later work.

which the architect would also consult. Architects' work necessarily contributes to illustrating the meanings of the societies they serve, in two broad ways: by an explicit iconography or by a less easily defined iconology—meanings which designers may or may not have been aware of but which those that experience their buildings discern, or claim to discern.⁵⁰

One way to think about how Vitruvius might have understood meanings might be to consider his basilica at Fano, a building we are unable to experience ourselves unfortunately.⁵¹ Vitruvius could have been involved in the siting of the building; he certainly would have studied the soil conditions and taken account of its orientation. Its general arrangement was inventive, compared to conventional basilicas. Though the building might have been used for relatively mundane purposes, such as a meeting house, perhaps it would also have served as a setting for particular rituals. People attending a meeting would no doubt admire its proportions and general disposition. They would experience its acoustic, see how light fell upon its surfaces and textures, perhaps be aware of how breezes wafted through the spaces—in other words, appreciate its atmosphere phenomenologically⁵². But, as participants in a ritual event, they might also have had other experiences (enjoyed the scents of votive offerings, for example) and felt the way in which the building offered itself through its very fabric as an embodiment of the deity to which it was dedicated—perhaps Fortuna, since Fano was known as Fanum Fortunae, or perhaps to Augustus, the Emperor to whom Vitruvius appeals in his text. He chose to employ the Corinthian order, which would be appropriate both to a female deity and to celebrate the magnificence of the Emperor. The meanings the building thereby conveyed would not seem to be adequately embraced in the term “beauty.”

Critics of twentieth-century modernism were critical of the way in which these two questions—“place” and “meaning”—had been

⁵⁰ I follow the distinction that Erwin Panofsky drew between these two terms: E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, Routledge, London, 2019. Others have used them somewhat differently.

⁵¹ It is the only significant building Vitruvius claims to have designed. There have been numerous attempts to make reconstructions of its plan and section based on his descriptions, from the Renaissance onwards.

⁵² The classic twentieth-century text on the multiple ways in which architecture is apprehended is S. Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1964. For later phenomenological descriptions, leaning on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, see, for instance, J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, John Wiley, New York, 2011.

forgotten as important issues that architects should address. I remember well the architectural critic of the *Financial Times*, Colin Amery, musing on what future generations would make of two recently completed buildings in London: the office building for Lloyds, by Richard Rogers, and a pumping station by John Outram. The former, he said, looked like an oil rig; the latter seemed to be modelled on a temple from some earlier era. His suggestion as to the meanings the buildings conveyed referred to one of Vitruvius's important principles: *decor*, or "propriety."⁵³ It was inappropriate of the architects to summon up those associations. The way they were suggested was undoubtedly aided by the style or manner of the buildings' designs. But 'manner' can be distinguished from 'meaning,' as Vitruvius does in talking about meanings conveyed by using orders with the appropriate stylistic precedents from meanings that are 'customary' when buildings are suitably scaled.⁵⁴ The stylistic precedents here were inappropriate, but Lloyds, though it happens to be dressed in a high-tech style, is suitably grand and the little pumping station is modest and correctly scaled to its context. A confusion between meaning and manner may also help to explain the vacuousness of much post-modern architecture.⁵⁵ In their efforts to recover meanings that had become lost (the "existential grounding," some might say) architects resorted to the importation of stylistic motifs, sometimes with serious intent, sometimes ironically, which usually resulted in caricature.⁵⁶

Anthropologists have always seen culture as a crucial driver of architectural form—perhaps the critical one. In his little book from the 1960's *House Form and Culture*, the cultural anthropologist Amos Rapoport set out the context for his subsequent writing and research, and summarised his thesis: the creation of house forms, rather than being determined, as some would claim, by climate, or the available technologies, or constraints of economy or topography, is primarily a socio-cultural question, which would include the political culture within which architects design.⁵⁷ Those other issues are important, but for him they are modifiers.

⁵³ Vitr. I, 1, 6–7.

⁵⁴ Vitr. I, 2, 5–7.

⁵⁵ The complaint that Gropius had omitted the separate nature of *venustas*, by pretending that *firmitas* + *utilitas* would automatically create it, maintains the problematic adequacy of the threesome. See R. Venturi, D Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1977.

⁵⁶ I enlarge on this suggestion with several examples in N. Ray, *Thinking Through Twentieth-Century Architecture*, Routledge, London, 2023, Chapter 8, "Irony and Inclusiveness."

⁵⁷ A. Rapoport, *House Form and Culture*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1969.

He regarded architects as fixated on abstract formal values—they needed to take a more rounded view. They used to do so: W.R. Lethaby, the architect founder of the London School of Arts and Crafts in 1896, had set out the importance of architectural meanings in 1891.⁵⁸ Arguably the removal of such concerns in modernism was far more damaging to the discipline than the prohibition of styles that imitated past precedent. It took until the late 1950s for architects to recover the iconology embedded in such everyday artefacts as chairs, and hence buildings.⁵⁹ They began to reconstruct a vocabulary to articulate the problems of meaning with which they had been wrestling: what would a “democratic” architecture look like, for instance?

5. VITRUVIUS’S TEMPERAMENT AND PRAGMATISM

I have suggested that issues of context and meaning have been shoe-horned into the tripartite Vitruvian paradigm but that, as a reflective architect whose position is revealed in his book when taken as a whole, Vitruvius himself acknowledges the complexity of the subject.⁶⁰ In 1907, William James, one of the founders of ‘Pragmatism’, suggested that philosophy is “the most sublime and the most trivial of human supports” and its history “is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments”—instancing Plato, Locke, Hegel and Spencer—as it is in writers or artists and politicians. We all try to balance rationalism (monistic, starting from “wholes and universals”) and empiricism (starting from the parts) according to our temperaments.⁶¹ Vitruvius’ temperament tends towards the empirical: he builds on his experience, as an architect, and as a reader of numerous texts, to construct a theory to explain the subject⁶².

⁵⁸ W. R. Lethaby, *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, Percival & Co., London, 1892.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, essays reprinted in J. Rykwert, *The Necessity of Artifice*, Rizzoli, New York, 1982.

⁶⁰ The ambiguous character of Vitruvius’s text is captured well by Rowland and Dewar: “The *Ten Books* may be read by some as a paean to order in architecture, by others as a paean to informed critical intelligence. The fundamental lessons of Vitruvius may in fact be rather simple: architecture is a very complex art and needs the control of rich tradition, but also must advance through innovative personal talent and intelligent application.” M. Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Introduction, p. 18.

⁶¹ W. James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking*, Longmans Green, London, 1907, p. 6. James acknowledged (as do I) that it is futile to try and change people’s approach at a fundamental, metaphysical, level—all that philosophy can do is point to the benefits and disadvantages of any given position.

⁶² See what he says in relation to his explanations of ballistics, for example: Book X, 10. 2. My sceptical friend Julian Roberts is suspicious of all generalisations that do not arise

He will reach towards such abstractions such as beauty, but can only do this on the basis of his own experience. We know that he believed his Fano basilica to be successful in its proportions and general appearance, although he surely must have regretted the budgetary constraints that prevented him enriching the entablature with decorations as he would have wanted – how this speaks to the experience of every architect, where it is always impossible to achieve everything you seek to do, but you try to persuade yourself that it is better to have achieved the building in a somewhat less than ideal form than not to have built it at all.⁶³

If architecture is by definition a “pragmatic” and useful discipline—doing what you can in the circumstances in which you find yourself—it is somewhat surprising that pragmatist philosophers have written so little about it. Philip Kitcher’s recent book *What’s the use of philosophy?* laments the specialisation of philosophy in the last half-century.⁶⁴ He’s scathing about the “trolley-problem” and its variations, endlessly rehearsed in management training sessions, because the scenarios depicted are so unrealistic as to make quite vapid the moral dilemmas apparently illustrated.⁶⁵ He doubts the value of formal mathematicising methods, employing Bayesian methods or Booleian algebra to describe “crossing a road.” There’s some scepticism in other disciplines about the adoption of ancient wisdom.⁶⁶ But, for Kitcher, beyond immediate questions of application (“was this punishment just?”) there are perennial problems (“what is justice?”) so that reverting to the ancient philosophers remains relevant, but the retreat into an over-specialised language within

from the particular: “Philosophical *a priori*s about how to build seem to me a bit futile. Philosophical reflections arising from particular buildings, or works of art, on the other hand, can well be fascinating.”

⁶³ Vitruv. V, 1, 6–10.

⁶⁴ P. Kitcher, *What’s the Use of Philosophy?*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2023.

⁶⁵ His principal target was Derek Parfit (1942–2017).

⁶⁶ Just as we saw with Melvin’s view that in architecture it can result in an “irresponsible nostalgia” (J. Melvin, “Making Too Much of Vitruvius,” p. 60). In a paper that is widely cited by political philosophers, Quentin Skinner wrote: “[...] any attempt to justify the study of the subject in terms of the “perennial problems” and “universal truths” to be learned from the classic texts must amount to the purchase of justification at the expense of making the subject itself foolishly and needlessly naive. Any statement, as I have sought to show, is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend.” Q. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory*, 8, 1, 1969, pp. 3–53. I am indebted to Melissa Lane for drawing my attention to this discussion: she is preparing a paper arguing the reverse for a forthcoming volume *Meaning and Understanding*.

the philosophical discipline is to be deplored. We had a conversation by e-mail in which I suggested that the nature of architectural practice was worth philosophical investigation from a pragmatist perspective, but our discussion is far from concluded.⁶⁷

6. CONCLUSION: A TENTATIVE RE-FRAMING

If an abbreviated set of terms is required, to order a text or to review architectural proposals, for what it is worth I have found five terms to be useful, in a pragmatic sense: *place*, *purpose*, *means*, *manner* and *meaning*.⁶⁸ Two of these terms ('purpose' and 'means') could be translations, suitably broadened, of *firmitas* and *utilitas* and I have made a case above for the inclusion of 'place' or context, and for 'meaning', but what has happened to *venustas*? Aspects of it may be incorporated in 'manner' or 'meaning'. But, as I suggested above, architects ought to be committed, in an ethical sense, to performing all of their task to the best level: the enhancement, rather than despoliation, of the context; the fulfilment of their briefs as well as they are able; the skilful exploitation of appropriate techniques to do so; the appropriate exercise of the 'vocabulary' (or 'repertoire') of forms they inherit and help to fashion anew; and (we may hope) the expression of those iconographic and deeper iconological meanings that only become evident in the most satisfying works. So far from de-valuing *venustas*, its omission from my tentative framework, gives it a wider ethical authority. In the same way we expect all who engage in professional work of any kind to behave ethically, balancing "obligations, rights, utility, perfectionist ends and private commitments."⁶⁹ Issues of professional behaviour certainly arise in Vitruvius's text: he is

⁶⁷ Kitcher wrote on 7 January 2023: "I agree completely with the idea that philosophy might be very useful in thinking about the environment (natural and built). I'm not sure how much work has been done on philosophy of architecture. It ought to be a serious sub-discipline, but I don't know of any card-carrying philosopher who has pursued it." I sent him a list of books and articles, to which he responded on 17 June 2024: "It looks as though there is much more work on philosophy of architecture than I had recognized." I have also corresponded with the Finnish pragmatist Sami Pihlström, but little, so far, has resulted.

⁶⁸ I began to use this framework in reviewing student work from about 1973 and first ventured these thoughts in print in a contribution to the "Winter Salon" in *RIBA Journal*, October 1977, p. 419. I structured monographs on Alvar Aalto and Rafael Moneo similarly: N. Ray, *Alvar Aalto*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2005; F. Gonzales de Canales, N. Ray, *Rafael Moneo: Building, Teaching, Writing*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2015.

⁶⁹ I borrow these terms from an essay by Thomas Nagel: T. Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value" in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979, pp.128–141. I

critical of architects who claim to have skills they do not possess⁷⁰ and says they should resist the temptation to pander to their clients' "depraved tastes" by sticking to those conventions that have earned respect.⁷¹ Ethical and aesthetic questions are endemic in relation to all architects' work,⁷² but for architects and those trying to teach architects the discussion of ethical responsibility and of beauty as essences (whether embedded in the objects, or arising from its contemplation) has little meaning until it can be applied to the specifics of site, brief, material, style and expression in any given architectural example.

My 'pragmatic' view of Vitruvius's *De Architectura* is that it is both useful and important as the precious first record we have of an architect attempting to describe a complex practice. He may be more relevant than Alberti because he's more 'rounded', as Moneo claimed. But simply adopting the truism he used to order his thoughts in the ten books—that every human artefact should be fit for its purpose, decently fabricated and fashioned so that it pleases us—is an over-simplification that does a disservice both to his thinking and to any contemporary understanding of the nature of architecture. We cannot blame Vitruvius for the fact that his attractive tri-partite "afterthought" (in Spector's words) was adopted by Alberti and continues to be used. But we can be permitted to think again whether there might be a more appropriate set of terms that takes better account of the full complexity of the practice and interpretation of architecture.

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⁷⁰ Vitruvius, Preface, 5–7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, VII, 5, 3–4.

⁷² "Beauty for whom?" is a reasonable question, for example. A quarter-mile long block of social housing can be "sublime" for visitors, but its qualities may be unappreciated by its inhabitants.

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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'édifier* [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 Chardes* [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. *Esthétique* 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 *esthétique*. 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 à 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 *esthétique* 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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Kurt Brandle*

BEAUTY AS OUTCOME OF REASON AND EMOTION IN ARCHITECTURE

ABSTRACT: Our capacity to think affords us to be conscious of what we experience, learn, remember and judge. The results are understanding caused by reason and emotion, the latter being reaction to the former. In turn, remembered emotion may be the cause for seeking additional understanding. This dual aspect relates to the processes in which beauty, defined in this essay as positive aesthetic feeling, plays a role in the perception and development of architecture.¹ Sensation and instinct are addressed in search of how they influence our understanding beyond knowledge toward meaning through creativity and judgment. Before we get to that, however, it is necessary to look at the very foundation from which experience and thinking evolves. It is what we call reality, defined here in short, as form-matter unity. Built examples are analyzed regarding properties which let feelings of beauty arise.

KEYWORDS: architecture, beauty, reason, emotion, form, matter

¹ This essay is an elaboration of subchapters 5.1 and 5.2 in my book *Emotion and Reason in Architecture* (2023).

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FORM AND MATTER

Matter determines form. They together determine what is observable by us. Aristotle claims “For my definition of matter is just this—the primary substratum of each thing, from which it comes to be without qualification, and which persists in the result.”² Immanuel Kant writes “The effect of an object on the capacity for representation, so far as we are affected by it, is sensation. That intuition which is related to the object is called empirical. The not yet conceptualized object of an empirical intuition is called appearance. I call that in the appearance which corresponds to sensation its matter, but that which allows the manifold of appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations I call the form of appearance.”³

When we think and talk about objects, we always refer to them as far as we know them through what we call their forms, that is, through their observable properties, even when we have them in mind only. The latter we may relate to had experiences or to having been told about them. Because form is the observable part of an object, it is what we look for in trying to understand existing objects or to propose future ones. The properties of form are made possible by the fundamental nature of matter: conceptual and material. Therefore, we think about the matter, the substance, to which the form belongs in two possible directions: from materiality to conceptuality in the perception of existing objects, from conceptuality to materiality in the proposition of future ones.

As a young architect, I designed in 1965 a residence with a dental practice (figure 1). The first task was to understand the site and the client’s need to relate residence and place of work. The second task was to conceptualize propositions toward future materialization as the new object. This process of understanding and conceptualization toward the final result, usually through several iterations, has many partial manifestations of form along its development. Here, the result was a covered entry to a common hall between residence and practice.

Already around 1670 Baruch Spinoza had the fundamental insight that “The human mind is capable of perceiving a great many things, and this capacity will vary in proportion to the variety of states which its body can assume.” And very pointedly, “The human mind does not perceive

² Aristotle, *Physics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes, Vol. 1, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, 192a31–33, p. 328.

³ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 155.



Figure 1. Clinic and Residence Wöhrle, Weil am Rhein, Germany, 1965. Photograph by Kurt Brandle.

any external body as actually existing except through the ideas of the affections of its own body.”⁴ In other words, our mind is impacted by external effects through the means our body has available to perceive them. In turn, these effects evoke reactions in us. They affect us. We think during perception in physical-to-mental direction which prompts us often to react in mental-to-physical direction. Likewise in design and building, which we refer to as creation in architecture.

The emotional and rational thinking underlies the process in two ways: (1) As mentioned, we are affected bodily by objects from outside via sensation. Nerve signals to the brain influence its present state. They prompt psychological influence, such as satisfaction, joy, enthusiasm, fondness, embarrassment, dissatisfaction, disgust, hate and fear, and often the occurrence of bodily responses, such as gesture, smile, outcry, fighting or fleeing. The etymology of the term *emotion* is derived from Latin: *ex* for out and *movere* for move. But here we need to associate more with emotion than this etymology indicates. Emotion is comprehensively engaged in activities of our body-mind unity. (2) We are influenced and guided by memories of concepts and feelings from earlier experiences, consciously and subconsciously. Emotion is rarely, if ever, experienced related to presently occurring sensation alone because memories, whether inherited from evolution or formed over our lifetime are always present and may play a role together with new information. In this category also belongs emotion aroused by dreaming alone, that is, without present external stimulation. A third aspect, not so much of interest for our concerns, is the fact that we are affected and react to internally caused bodily sensation, such as pain because of illness.

When a designer or a client asks for a stair to be made of wood or steel or concrete, he or she has forms with property characteristics in mind which these materials typically and advantageously provide. Not as raw material only but conceptually formed. So, matter includes purpose, synonymous in architecture with function, and materiality. In short, form represents function and materiality.

⁴ B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Propositions 14 and 26, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis, 1992, pp. 76, 82–83.

FEELINGS AND JUDGMENTS

From this position, the term ‘feeling’ refers to the psychological impact of emotional thinking, the activated state of mind, not the meaning of physical sensation from touch. When observing objects, we progress through neurological activity from sensation and perception to concepts and feelings, whereby the latter two are the mental products of which we humans and to a lesser extent other animals become aware. I consider feelings to be affects as initial, interim or final results on us in reaction to emotional and rational thinking. This view points to thinking as being the overall process of active understanding: the electrochemical motion in the network of the nerves in our body including the brain. What we call body and mind is more intertwined than we have traditionally assumed.

Antonio Damasio summarizes this understanding in 2003 in very accessible terms: “What do we gain considering the mind in the perspective of the body, as opposed to considering the mind in the perspective of just the brain? The answer is that we gain a rationale for the mind that we would not discover if we considered the mind only in the perspective of the brain. The mind exists for the body, is engaged in telling the story of the body’s multifarious events, and uses that story to optimize the life of the organism. [...] The brain’s body-furnished, body-minded mind is a servant of the whole body.”⁵ In order for our brain to process, our body as a whole is engaged. We think by emotion playing one part and reason playing another. How they relate to each other is of essence, including their sequencing of occurrence in particular situations. Earlier in his account, Damasio clearly differentiates emotion from feeling and gives emotion, not feeling, first place in the course of perception when he writes that “We have emotions first and feelings after because evolution came up with emotions first and feelings later. Emotions are built from simple reactions that easily promote the survival of an organism and thus could easily prevail in evolution.”⁶

This means that we are not starting with a blank slate as far as any of our present rational thinking and understanding is concerned. Emotion instinctively causes and influences how we reason. Feelings follow. Why? Because feelings respond to affects. They are part of our mind’s reactions to the bodily aspects of thinking. They are results of thinking

⁵ A. R. Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling*, Harcourt Books, Orlando, FL, 2003, p. 206.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30. In my view, emotion is the affect from which feelings develop.

by our body-mind unity. Damasio writes more recently “The immediate causes of feelings include (a) the background flow of life processes in our organisms, which are experienced as spontaneous or homeostatic feelings; (b) the emotive responses triggered by processing myriad sensory stimuli such as tastes, smells, [...] (c) the emotive responses resulting from engaging drives (such as hunger or thirst) or motivations (such as lust and play), or emotions, in the more conventional sense [...] examples of emotions include joy, sadness, fear, anger, envy”⁷. There is a problem with considering and naming emotions as feelings. He comments “Of note, the felt experiences of emotions are unfortunately known by exactly the same name as the emotions themselves. This has helped perpetuate the false notion that emotions and feelings are one and the same phenomenon, although they are quite distinct.”⁸ Example: “Joy” is used for the process of positive emotion and for the response to the emotion. This is not a problem in general but in detailed discourse, as much literature on emotions and feelings shows. I believe the problem can be avoided by explicitly distinguishing between the processes of emotional and rational thinking, and their results of emotional and rational feeling. We should use the names like “joy,” only to refer to feelings as results of emotional thinking; emotion being the part of thought influencing reason toward judgment. This terminological clarification should be kept in mind regarding any use of the term “emotion.”

Emotional and rational thinking and related feelings occur in response to chains of events and are caused by externally caused sensation. They are usually modified by internally caused sense. We have memories of short term, long term and extremely long term; the latter inborn from evolution. The emotional aspects are in large part aesthetic, the central issue of our discussion. Remembered experiences, especially those acquired from evolution, enable instinct, the capacity of inborn responsiveness and impulse. We arrive at it subconsciously.⁹

⁷ A. R. Damasio, *The Strange Order of Things: Life, Feeling, and The Making of Cultures*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2018, pp. 99–100.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁹ Part of this thinking goes back to the views of William James, “What Is an Emotion?” (1884), in *Collected Essays and Reviews*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1920, p. 247. See also Commentary on “What Is an Emotion?” in *Classics in the History of Psychology*, an internet resource developed by Christopher D. Green, <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/emotion.htm>. See also J. E. LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, pp. 42ff for a very helpful exposition of James’ view and theories which built on it.

Often, however, reason adjusts instinctive thinking. Richard and Bernice Lazarus emphasize in 1994 the crucial role of reason for emotion as twofold: “First, since emotions are aroused by an evaluative judgment—what we refer to as an appraisal—about the significance of what is happening for our well-being, we will never be able to understand how emotions come about without examining the reasoning behind them. Second, to view emotion as irrational is a way of denigrating emotions as not to be trusted when, in reality, emotion is an important resource that helps us survive and flourish. It is probably not going too far to say that reason may hold our emotions in check, but often in constructive ways the emotions hold reason in check. There is somewhat of a balance between them. If not, there lies madness.”¹⁰ I consider this to be true in general. What happens, however, is not symmetrical occurrence of the two. When we think about something, emotions from evolution or from other earlier experiences typically exist in our memory, come back into play and instinctively influence decision making on present reasoning. On the other hand, present reasoning often results in emotion which is strong enough to cancel this background emotion or modifies parts of it. Therefore, no simple either/or applies, but a kind of long or short term founded iteration with emotion and reason occurs and conditions our mind.

So, the emotion-and-reason process is a dual faceted convergence and is continuously interactive with what we call memory. Some of the great discoveries in neurological research over the past decades have determined what is called the plasticity of the brain. The brain’s maturation and renewal process is not only developmental early life, but reconstructive during the entirety of our lifetime. We learn by adjustment of neurons in the brain and through changes in their connections. Such changes also take place in relation to our sensorimotor activities, a crucial aspect when we consider that most of our goal-oriented mental activities find expression in activities with physical output, be they work or leisure related. Our brain structure is in constant flux and it is well understood that frequent exposure to variation enhances brain plasticity and, with it, creativity.¹¹

On this basis we can easily grasp that there is no “emotional mode” as such with which the brain engages. When the brain is active, it is

¹⁰ R. S. Lazarus, B. N. Lazarus, *Passion and Reason: Making Sense of Our Emotions*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p. 203.

¹¹ N. C. Andreasen, *The Creating Brain: The Neuroscience of Genius*, The Dana Press, New York, 2002.

reasoning influenced by emotion. Every change in mental state is a change of emotion and reason, and has mind-body consequences that may or may not be strong enough to be felt. In other words, much of this process is subconscious, especially so in the early stages of an episode and in quickly developing short episodes, many not remembered. Strong episodes, however, may leave strong feelings as remembrances, and can play a major role in living through and assessing later experiences.

Here is obviously not the space even to attempt discussion of the vast amount of research on the mind and the many positions taken contrasting emotion and reason.¹² Michel Cabana writes that “There is no consensus in the literature on a definition of emotion.”¹³ But because of our need to work with one, my own experience leads me to agree with his pragmatic view that “Emotion is any mental experience with [...] hedonic content (pleasure/displeasure).”¹⁴

How does emotional thinking and feeling relate to cognition, reason and understanding? There is no doubt that there are relations among the two kinds of thinking. But they are not just additive. The causes and processes of affect are too complex for this to happen. Further, I believe that present effects on us are more or less influenced by former ones we had. That implies that some emotions and feelings latently exist in us. Many emotions are instinctive and occur before conceptualization has completed its work. They include, for us of special interest, aesthetic feelings which arise as pleasure or displeasure while experiencing the evolving and final form of objects. The path to understanding is rarely, if ever, a single loop occurrence, although we are often led, because of its usually short duration, to assume this to be the case.

Figure 2 shows the chain of events in observation. It illustrates the path of thinking from sensation to overall comprehension and memory, the latter prompting consideration of instinctive and reflective comparisons as well as appraisals of earlier had experiences. The eventual results are understanding influenced by emotion, qualified in the sense of judged and selected understanding, that is, as meaning. We should also remember that we are, especially in the observation of physical objects, involved with many details of rather complicated wholes.

¹² For an extended annotated bibliography about discussions of emotion see L. Pessoa, “Cognition and emotion,” *Scholarpedia* 4.1. revision #91134, 2009, p. 4567.

¹³ M. Cabanac, “What is emotion?,” *Behavioural Processes*, 2002, 60, 2, 2001, p. 69 (in Abstract).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

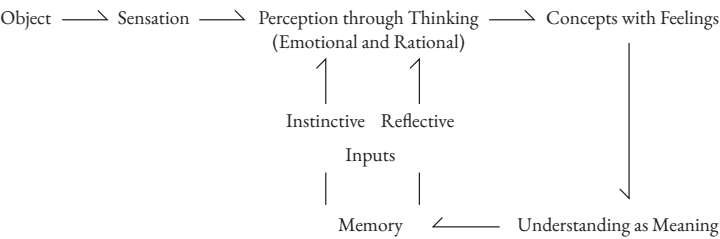


Figure 2. Emotional and rational thinking toward understanding as meaning.

The “through” of perception in figure 2 points to the constitutive nature of emotional and rational thinking during the entire process, although we may not be aware of this fact while it happens. Thinking about properties evokes affects from the process. There is no understanding without emotional affects: feelings. They influence the judgments about cognition and the motivation to seek further understanding, positively or negatively. Figure 2 agrees with what Jonathan Hale writes “The novelty of Merleau-Ponty’s approach was to propose a more primary form of awareness: a ‘bodily intentionality’ that provides our initial grasp or sense of a situation, allowing us to cope with the ongoing flow of experience.”¹⁵ The intentionality of our body-mind unity is ongoing as awareness through observation from initial sensations to judgments as meaning about the reality of the object.

When we are in the process of design (creation), rather than observation only, the object in figure 2 is the emerging design solution, that is, the result in successive stages of the design process. We observe while we create, then judge and make adjustments, then observe again and so on until we are satisfied, more or less. Based on an architectural program to be realized on a particular site with specific properties, inner sense from the memory of earlier experiences motivates rational and emotional thinking toward physical solutions. While we work on the design, we advance in understanding it. We make proposals, adjustments, judgments and decisions at many points along the path then stop at a final result. Many judgments emerge from rational demands and related emotional feelings while we contemplate the evolving concepts. Aesthetic feelings arise while we simulate and experience forms of their realization. As functions fundamentally determine forms, they inevitably influence feelings of beauty.

BEAUTY AS EMOTION

This is not the place to attempt a discussion of the wide-ranging issues about beauty and aesthetics in architecture. But I will provide my views regarding those I find most pertinent and I will feel free to quote sources without providing pro and counter argumentation, unless this seems relevant for the particular aspect at hand. I aim to provide sufficient background information, clarifying my key positions.

¹⁵ J. Hale, *Merleau-Ponty for Architects*, Routledge, Abington, 2017, p. 14.

In his views about taste, Anthony Cooper, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, emphasized in 1711 the concept of internal sense when he writes that “No sooner the Eye opens upon Figures, the Ear to Sounds, than straight the Beautiful results, and Grace and Harmony are known and acknowledg’d. No sooner are Actions view’d, no sooner the human Affections and Passions discern’d (and they are most of ‘em as soon discern’d as felt) than straight an inward Eye distinguishes, and sees the Fair and Shapely, the Amiable and Admirable, apart from the Deform’d, the Foul, the Odious, or the Despicable.”¹⁶ This “inward eye”, not further defined but supposedly developed, is the ability to concern ourselves with matters of beauty and associated judgment. Francis Hutcheson concurs in 1729 by “Let it be observ’d, [...], the Word Beauty is taken for the Idea rais’d in us, and a Sense of Beauty for our Power of receiving this Idea.”¹⁷ He, like Shaftesbury, clearly places beauty as a result of sensation in our mind. David Hume writes in 1757 that “a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object. It only marks a certain conformity or relation betwixt the object and the organs or faculties of the mind; and if that conformity did not really exist, the sentiment could never possibly have a being. Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.”¹⁸ I very much agree. Hume’s view implies a denying position in the questioning about whether there exist properties of beauty intrinsic to objects. Beauty and, more comprehensively, all aesthetic feelings we attribute because of pleasure or displeasure, are in our minds, not in objects. The folk wisdom “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” has it quite right, though we should adjust it and say *beauty and any other emotional thinking is in the mind of the beholder*. Our eyes are a sensory extension of the brain.

There are properties in the objects which are the ground for our aesthetic. But these properties are not aesthetic in any sense of intrinsic or permanent. This is why styles in architecture and sometimes whole cultures change based on changing desires of appearance. Hume writes that “The order and convenience of a palace are no less essential to its beauty, than its mere figure and appearance. [...] from considering that beauty

¹⁶ A. A. C. Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of men, manners, opinions, times*, John Darby, London, 1711, Vol. 2, pp. 414–415.

¹⁷ F. Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, Third Edition, J. and J. Knapton, J. Darby *et al.*, London, 1729, p. 7.

¹⁸ D. Hume, *Four Dissertations*, A. Millar, London, 1757, pp. 208–209.

like wit, cannot be defin'd, but is discern'd only by the taste or sensation, we may conclude, that beauty is nothing but a form, which produces pleasure"¹⁹. We must be very careful here: "form" is not whatever the physical realization of the object is which we at least in part can observe. He talks about the form of the felt experience during the sensory observation by our body-mind unity, being undefinable but occurring as subjective affect. It is here the influence of the object prompting pleasure, that is, beauty as feeling to arise where only it can, that is in our minded body.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe expresses this fact in 1789 with enlightening poetic nuance in conversation with an imagined person searching for answers: "'Can you tell me what beauty might be?' he [the person] called out. 'Maybe not!' I uttered, 'but I can show you.'"²⁰ One may add *as far as you will appreciate*, as the answer points to the subjectively arrived nature of what we call beauty. In other words, beauty is not a property which we observe but an impact of a property which we feel.

An unfortunate development occurred over the past two and a half centuries by the increasing use of the word *aesthetic* without clear differentiation to the word *beauty*. This led over the whole history of recent aesthetics to confusion. It is also in part to blame for the push to locate the aesthetic of experience in the confines of art as institution rather than to take it as natural occurrence in the realm of everyday understanding and communication. It was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten who proposed *aesthetics* as a discipline of philosophy in terms of "a science of sensuous cognition" with a narrow focus on beauty. In other words, he tried to embed beauty as part of scientific understanding.²¹ The modern use of the term aesthetic has its origin mainly in his efforts. His *Aesthetica*, published in the 1750s, tries to establish an autonomy of aesthetics as a discipline with verifiable findings in a world which was increasingly dominated by the rational aspects of the emerging scientific and industrial revolution. He writes: "Aesthetics (as theory of the free arts, as logic of the lower level [primitive] cognitive faculties, as art of the beautiful thought and as art of the intuitive cognition equivalent to that of rational

¹⁹ D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739], Book II, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 195.

²⁰ J. W. Goethe, „Der Sammler und die Seinigen," fünfter Brief, in *Schriften zu Kunst, Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 13, Artemis-Verlag, Zürich, 1948, p. 286.

²¹ I use the term "sensuous" in correspondence with Baumgarten's terminology of "*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*." It catches the meaning of pleasurable better than 'sensory' which points more generally to the senses.

thought) is the science of sensuous cognition.”²² And, “The aim of Aesthetics is the perfection (the bringing of perfection) of sensuous cognition as such. With this, however, beauty is meant. Correspondingly, the imperfection of sensuous cognition as such, that is the ugliness, is to be avoided.”²³ He published the book in Latin and gave this theory “scientia cognitionis sensitivae” the name *Aesthetica*. He viewed sensuous cognition as “equivalent” to rational thought and believed that it could be perfected “as such.” Although he did not say that the term *aesthetic* is synonymous with the term *beautiful*, his way of explaining their close association has often been taken in this way.

Baumgarten brings cognition and objects together by claiming: “The beauty of sensuous cognition and the fineness of objects represent composed perfections, that is, such which are generally valid”.²⁴ He makes a distinction here between the cognitions in the mind (beauty) and qualities in the objects (fineness). But he also points to their connection and interdependence as “composed [composite] perfections.” He does not clearly explain how the sensuous and the rational cognitions are interrelated, though he must have been aware that this is an important issue. He gives sensuousness and its result, aesthetic, a more direct role in cognition than most others who enlighten us on the process and who view sensation as the basis for cognition but not as cognition itself. I believe that aesthetic experience contributes to overall cognition by, psychologically and at times often physiologically, influencing rational cognition as process and as result through instinctive or conscious feelings and judgments.

Baumgarten is quite aware of limitations which a “science” of aesthetics faced. He writes that some of the perfections and imperfections of sensuous cognition are “so hidden that they remain for us in the dark altogether or we can view them only in our thoughts”²⁵. He qualifies this view by writing “The sensuous cognition is [...] the whole of representation below the threshold of strictly logical distinction.”²⁶ This claim points to the view that the aesthetic part of representation of objects is rather hidden sensuous cognition followed by rational cognition, whereas in

²² A. G. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, § 1, *Ästhetik als Philosophie der sinnlichen Erkenntnis*, Schwabe & Co., Basel, 1973, p. 107, my translation from Latin and German.

²³ *Ibid.*, § 14, p. 115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, § 24, p. 119.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, § 15, p. 115.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, § 17, p. 115.

my view it is the psychological effect on us from physiological sensation during the process of experiencing the form of objects.

Emotional thinking influences judgment and decision making all along the most often iterative process toward understanding. If at all, questions about form seem to play a minor role in his account. Still, Baumgarten has much to tell us. He runs into problems with his intention to develop for aesthetics a separate science of intuitive cognition, equivalent to that of rational thought, instead of clarifying the interdependence of the aesthetic and the conceptual as emotional and rational thinking followed by feelings.²⁷ While the emotional part of thinking is psychological and the rational part of thinking is conceptual, both are more or less influential through and influenced by feelings and judgments.

Robert Dixon blames Baumgarten for the supposedly poor state of discourse on aesthetics: "The Baumgarten corruption of aesthetic takes a matter-of-fact Greek descriptive label for an elemental distinction in human knowledge, and turns it into a buzz word for a system of belief that confuses the perception of beauty with the cultivation of art appreciation."²⁸ And, "When Baumgarten corrupted this Greek word he inadvertently un-named the elementary idea of sensible and obscured it with the sticky questions of What is art? and What is beauty?"²⁹ Baumgarten used the meaning of the Greek term *aesthetic*, which points to general perception, to become "sensuous cognition" with the connotation of "beautiful thought" (§ 1) and for "the foundation in studies of the free arts." (§ 3) Baumgarten's views succeeded on this "corrupted" basis, as Dixon says. Dixon aims to make the case "(1) that the sensible and the reasonable are inextricably linked, and (2) that the cognitive role of the sensible is primary."³⁰ There is no question in my mind that (1) is so and that in (2) sensation is primary, in the sense of being first, because it provides the foundation for all of perception. Sensuousness may result in more or less aesthetic feeling with likely influence on rational thinking. It is followed by judgment and perhaps decision making. Dixon's further interest is to show that the confusion of the terms eventually resulted in the present situation of art as an institutional enterprise in contrast to art as broadly based, everyday activity of creating things and communicating through them.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, § 1, p. 107.

²⁸ R. Dixon, *The Baumgarten Corruption: From Sense to Nonsense in Art and Philosophy*, Pluto Press, London, 1995, 80.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant associates the aesthetic clearly with the appearance of things when he writes in its First Introduction: “The expression *an aesthetic kind of representation* is entirely unambiguous if we understand by it the relation of the representation to an object, as an appearance, for the cognition of the object; for then the expression of the ‘aesthetic’ signifies only that the form of sensibility (how the subject is affected) necessarily adheres to such a representation and that this is unavoidably carried over to the object (but only as a phenomenon).”³¹ The carrying “over to the object (but only as a phenomenon)” shows Kant’s view of the distinction between the aesthetic as impact on our mind by the perceived properties in things and the states of affairs, that is, the processes which produce the impact. In the first paragraph he writes: “In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful, we do not relate the representation by means of understanding to the object for cognition, but rather relate it by means of the imagination (perhaps combined with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgment of taste is therefore not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective. Any relation of representations, however, even that of sensation, can be objective (in which it signifies what is real in an empirical representation); but not the relation to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, by means of which nothing at all in the object is designated, but in which the subject feels itself as it is affected by the representation.”³² I agree.

The following is an abridgment, which conveys what is important for us in perhaps somewhat easier comprehensible language: When we decide about whether something is beautiful or ugly, we make a judgment about whether it gives us pleasure or displeasure related not to what it is and does overall, but to how it appears to us, that is, its form. This part of the judgment is not by conceptualization but by sensation, not logical but aesthetic, and therefore subjective. Aesthetics relates only to the question whether we are pleased or displeased about the experiential

³¹ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, First Introduction, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 24. The “aesthetic kind of representation” is mental appearance with related feeling.

³² *Ibid.*, § 1, p. 89. Guyer and Matthews write that “The doctrine that the feeling of pleasure or displeasure reflects the relation of an object to the subject rather than the properties of the object by itself is one of Kant’s most entrenched views” (*ibid.*, note 5, p. 359).

appearance of something. It is the effect of the representation in the mind of the observer. In other words, the feeling of pleasure or displeasure which has its basis in the representation in our mind is not related directly to the object but to our feeling about it, that is, to us as subjects. The aesthetics of experience and judgment is not about anything aesthetic in objective properties, but about whether and how strongly feelings of pleasure and displeasure arise in us from the exposure to such properties. Therefore, we should avoid calling something “aesthetic properties.” There are only properties which affect our judgment aesthetically. This position may be called radically subjectivist.³³

An abundance of different positions, using the term *aesthetic*, have been taken since Kant. One thinker, central to our concerns, is John Dewey. As he put it in 1934, the aesthetics of experience is clearly within the context of all experiences: “the esthetic is no intruder in experience from without, whether by the way of idle luxury or transcendent ideality [...] it is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience. This fact I take to be the only secure basis upon which esthetic theory can build.”³⁴ Every experience is derived from an object that prompts us to react aesthetically, although we may, because of its everydayness not be particularly aware of it. This is best understood from the commonness of nature’s beauty that we experience but of which we are not always aware. Experience of the aesthetic, to be felt, requires perception of an object. It is a psychological aspect and happens as a matter of course. It becomes part of our judgment process through its influence during our step from understanding of an object to understanding of its meaning for us. This is so in the process of observation but even more noticeable in design where we *mean* usually our best understanding for the realization of a project. We mean through design. Dewey called his pragmatic book on aesthetics *Art as Experience*. He could as well have called it the *Aesthetics of Every Experience* as he is right in pointing out that everything we encounter triggers in us more or less what we call the *aesthetic of experience* or simply the *aesthetic*.

Our discussion does not address art explicitly to any extent. To do so would go way beyond our context and would not add much to what our

³³ For extensive discussions of objectivist versus subjectivist positions in aesthetics see, for example, F. J. Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1974, pp. 55–93, and F. Sibley, *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 71–87.

³⁴ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Capricorn Books, New York, 1958, p. 46.

immediate interest is regarding the aesthetic. Art today is in my view best understood as activities toward the creation of things which emphasize aesthetic experiences. In this sense art is implicitly addressed whenever we are involved with matters aesthetic. As aesthetic experiences are desirable regarding nearly everything we produce, art is part of our lives much more broadly than any institutionalization may show in museums, theaters, concert halls, educational settings, etc. Institutionalization often heightens our awareness for the aesthetic. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that what we feel as the aesthetic of institutionalized art is different from the aesthetic that we feel from anything else. Architecture is art in bringing about aesthetic experience of its forms while providing shelter for our being and activities.³⁵

In *The Aesthetic Understanding*, Roger Scruton writes with regard to Kant and Hegel that “Both philosophers were convinced, [...] that aesthetic judgment is no arbitrary addendum to human capacities, but a consequence of rationality, a bridge between the sensuous and the intellectual, and an indispensable means of access to the world of ideas.”³⁶ This passage echoes an earlier, also introductory one in his *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, where he writes “I shall try to demonstrate that the division between practical reason and aesthetic understanding is in fact untenable, and that until the relation between the two is reestablished they must both remain impoverished.”³⁷ I don’t know of anybody who doubts that there is a relation between the emotional and the rational. But this must not mean that aesthetic judgment is a “consequence of rationality,” although, like everything mental, it is a consequence of thinking; thinking also being emotional activity. In this regard, my understanding of Kant and Hegel is different from Scruton’s. Aesthetic judgments are a consequence of feelings which are based on our sensation of an object’s form. Other judgments arise as a consequence of feelings which are based on rationality. Although every perception of an object triggers an aesthetic affect, as small as it may be and as little it may be felt, I avoid the terminology of “aesthetic understanding” as it could be taken to imply that there is also something like non-aesthetic understanding of objects.

³⁵ For discussions on aesthetics in everyday experiences see for example K. Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007, and Y. Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.

³⁶ R. Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture*, St. Augustines’s Press, South Bend, In., 1998, p. 3.

³⁷ R. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013, p. 1.

To affirm, there is no aesthetic understanding in the sense of rationality. There is aesthetic feeling, emotional response, in the sense of pleasure or displeasure from the process of perception. And, there is rational feeling in the sense of pleasure or displeasure because of contemplation about the concept of an object and its consequences. They arise together, often incrementally in a kind of dialog regarding judgment with multiple iterations of aesthetic and conceptual thinking. Examples: (1) That a building has a pleasant set of windows is an aesthetically perceived, emotionally effective asset. That these windows provide lighting during the day is a conceptually perceived, rationally affective asset. (2) High level noise in a restaurant is a nuisance. It is negatively aesthetic, as it interferes with the enjoyment of meals and the conversation with company. That many restaurant owners and many designers, do not recognize that noise is an aesthetic and conceptual insensitivity to many guests is unfortunate. (3) For a tired person an elevator is beneficial in a particular way. The person's minded-body responds with a positive aesthetic feeling; somaesthetically as some observers may call it. Richard Shusterman, who introduced the term, writes that "somaesthetics is a framework to promote and integrate the diverse range of theorizing, empirical research, and meliorative practical disciplines concerned with bodily perception, and presentation." And again, "By and large, [...], the term is immediately understood as relating to the aesthetics of embodiment (including embodied perception)"³⁸. Regarding the first quote, I would agree with him if the term aesthetic were not understood to involve our body, but probably few thinkers doubt that. The wide field of aesthetics is today understood to include work in all the areas he mentions. Regarding the second quote, I believe that the term emphasizes the involvement of the body, which should not be necessary as there is no other way but to experience through the body. The term 'somaesthetics' can be somewhat misleading if taken to indicate that there are other aesthetics beyond somaesthetics. I believe that the "soma" is redundant.

As emphasized, aesthetic feelings are psychological effects on the mind from physiological effects of sensation when observing form based on experiencing reality or memory. Aesthetic feelings may be strong or weak in giving us pleasure or displeasure. There are many instances in which we are not aware of them because many feelings occur subconsciously.

³⁸ R. Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 8, 6.

Environmental circumstance of considered objects may be influential. A color of a wall, considered by itself, may have no or little influence on us aesthetically. But in contrast to other objects in the room, even a little influence may have an impact, whether we are aware of it or not.

Two further examples in visual detail confirm what we discussed and attest to how aesthetic issues contribute to the ongoing flux in architectural design and development: (1) A façade we look at has certain proportions because of its overall dimensions, the sizes of windows and the pieces of wall between them, etc. The proportions and the materials are physically existing properties and are part of objective experience. But whether we are pleased or displeased with the proportions is derived from subjective experience. Proportion, such as the Golden Section, has as such no aesthetic. An observer is required to experience and judge it to be so. Figure 3 shows the division of a window at left according to the Golden Ratio. The window at right has *a* increased by 15 percent within the same overall width. I prefer the proportion at right, *having more tension*, an aesthetically motivated experience, functionally, that is intentionally, realized by the change of *a* and *b*. The addition to the Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, designed by Heinz Mohl, shows great sensitivity in allocating proportion (figure 4). The windows in the older building have or are close to having Golden Ratio proportions in width. But this is not so in the new building. Still, a pleasant appearance of the whole is achieved in the new façade, not least also because of the full height enclosure in glass because of the full height enclosure in glass between the old and the new, helping to highlight the proportioning of the façades to appreciate on their own. (2) There is a recent development in the aesthetics of architecture with perhaps broader consequences than the movement away from the long tradition of emphasizing proportion. It is the formation of space and matter beyond orthogonality. Not that history is devoid of non-rectangular designs. Most have this feature in aesthetic rather than utilitarian motivation. But they have been, even during the time of the Baroque, rather exceptions within the large volume of building production. With good reason: accommodation, be it in the spatial organization or the choice of physical components, can be achieved usually more efficiently on the basis of orthogonality. The issue is brought up here not to advocate one way or the other, but to put the aesthetic firmly as a value into the mix of values; as a very important one among many even viewed in the direction of ‘beauty as function’, that is, properties chosen on the basis of knowledge that they produce a

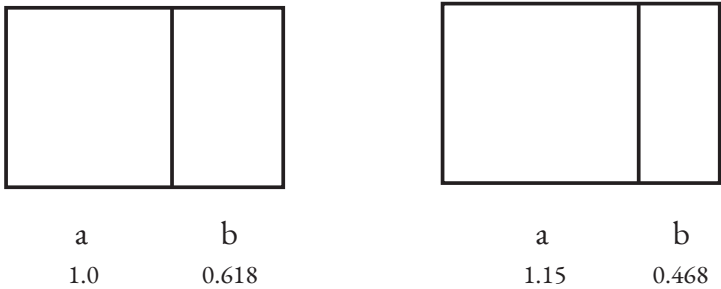


Figure 3. Golden ratio compared with other proportion.



Figure 4. Art Museum, Karlsruhe. Photograph by Kurt Brandle.



Figures 5 and 6. Philharmonic Hall, Berlin.
Photographs by Kurt Brandle.

desired aesthetic affect. A prominent building with non-rectangularity throughout is the Berlin Philharmonic Hall, designed by Hans Scharoun in 1955 (figures 5 and 6).

The kinds of aesthetically influential choices offered by aspects such as willed proportion and non-rectangularity, belong essentially to the category of design freedom. This freedom is in architecture not as free as in other arts. For most building types it is severely constrained by rational thinking arising from utilitarian requirements. Louis Sullivan's dictum "Form follows Function" expresses this in masterful compactness. It implies that *aesthetic follows function*. But this is not necessarily all. As mentioned, we may also enjoy influencing a presently developing form by remembered pleasantness of similar forms which come to mind and their use may be categorized as *aesthetics as function*. The non-rectangularity of whole buildings, we just discussed, belongs to this impetus. But there are many possibilities of more subtle influences of *willed* beauty, designed into the object to be felt as such. Again, depictions of built examples can *explain* the effects better than long verbal elaborations can.

One of the first 'postmodern' buildings, the chapel of Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France, designed by Le Corbusier, provides functionally required space for worship inside and outside. Although the walls, towers and roofs serve obviously rationally derived functional needs, their properties are what they are to a large extent also influenced by strong functional aesthetics. This is probably nowhere more easily grasped than from the symbolically based, overly large thickness of the walls. Symbolism, rationally thought, wills emotional thought, at least some of it being aesthetic. The exaggeration is perhaps also beyond symbolism purely aesthetic.

The roof over the entry of the Culture and Convention Center in Lucerne, designed by Jean Nouvel, is extremely extended because of reasoning toward aesthetic impact. While providing at the same time an inviting cover for sitting along the lake, it is a stunning sign for motivation to visit the building.

The Seagram Building in New York has arguably one of the most well-proportioned exteriors in architecture. At the entry level, the choice of marble as base cover contrasts marvelously with the rhythm of the curtain wall above. There is no question, and various comments by Mies van der Rohe point in this direction, that much of his rational thoughts functioned to evoke emotional thought for aesthetic feelings as outcome. This is seeking and confirming *functional beauty*.



Figure 7 (above). Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp.
Photograph by Kurt Brandle. Figure 8 (below). Culture and
Convention Center, Lucerne. Photograph by Kurt Brandle.



Figure 9. Seagram Building, New York.
Photograph by Kurt Brandle.

The concept of functional beauty and its history are addressed more broadly in Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* and in Kurt Brandle, *Emotion and Reason in Architecture*.

CONCLUSION

Thinking about observation and creation in design and building brings forward the relatedness of emotion and reason. Emotional thinking is a reaction to rational thinking. Its basis is reality, remembered or present. There is no emotion without reason. Part of emotion is aesthetic feeling. It arises in us psychologically while experiencing the properties of form in its unity with matter. If the feeling is positive, we call it “beauty” and associate it with objects. Immanuel Kant, from whom I learned more than from any other philosopher, described the foundations for this view already a quarter of a millennium ago. I can attest to its validity from innumerable encounters in research and practice.

But I cannot follow him, when he differentiates between *free* and *adherent* beauty.³⁹ There is only one kind of beauty: it is all adherent. We can describe it only with inadequate words. It is the positive feeling about properties of form, whether the form belongs to a natural or an artificial object and whether the object is purposive or not. Beauty is not by itself. It occurs in us in relation to something else. We cannot create it as such. We must observe the given form of an object or remember one in memory to feel beauty or ugliness, an aesthetic come into being.

In search of another example in architecture which makes the dependence of aesthetic and form abundantly clear, I remember the feelings of beauty and the sense of symbolism arising from many aspects at the Salk Institute, La Jolla, designed by Louis I. Kahn. One of them is from the glistening of water flowing through the court between the two building wings, then splashing down into basins and on toward the ocean. The other is the human scale of the cuboid offices arranged around the courtyard. Here, art meets science. The result is emotional and rational embodiment. More general, when we create something, be it in architecture, in poetry, in dance, in cooking, in singing, in painting—beyond rational understanding. If we are successful, it is, beyond being informative, also beautiful.

³⁹ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 16, pp. 114–115.



Figure 10. Salk Institute, La Jolla, at west end of court.
Photograph by Kurt Brandle.



Figure 11. Salk Institute, La Jolla, looking west into court towards the ocean. Photograph by Kurt Brandle.

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THE PROBLEM OF BEAUTY IN ARCHITECTURE: AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT: In this essay I examine the perennial problem posed by beauty as an architectural aim. I argue that as problematic as pursuing this aim may be, architects cannot ultimately avoid confronting it. I then focus on the most general question that this aim raises: can architectural beauty be pursued largely independently of function or should the two aims be integrated in some fashion? Following an approach outlined by Anthony Savile, I argue that the question can only be answered by considering the institutional context of the particular architectural work. The upshot is a pluralist view of architectural beauty, recognizing the validity of Functionalist, Formalist, and Ornamentalist approaches in different contexts.

KEYWORDS: architecture, beauty, Functionalism, Formalism, ornament, institution

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In this essay, I examine, from a philosophical perspective, the problem posed by beauty as an architectural aim. My discussion will focus on what is arguably the most general question raised by this aim: whether its pursuit should be carried out largely independently of the pursuit of function or whether the two aims ought to be integrated in some fashion. Both architects and philosophers have long been divided on this question. Drawing on some ideas from Anthony Savile, I will argue that the question can be addressed by considering the relationship between works of architecture and the social institutions they house.

My title echoes perhaps the best-known attempt to address questions in aesthetics in these terms, George Dickie's *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*.¹ In contrast with Dickie's approach, however, I will not attempt to define architecture or beauty in terms of institutions; rather, I will suggest that in pursuing architecture, and in particular in answering the problem of beauty as she faces it, the architect needs to understand the specific institutional context in which her building takes place.

I. THE INESCAPABLE PROBLEM

Since antiquity, it has been a commonplace of Western thinking about architecture that beauty is one of its central aims. Not its only aim, of course; the ancient authority Vitruvius also emphasized the importance of durability and convenience. Good architecture must serve its intended purpose well and it must last, withstanding natural forces and the stresses of use.² But it should also, Vitruvius emphasized, be beautiful. Our conception of what counts as beauty would certainly differ from his own, and today we might, at least in some contexts, prefer to use the broader term "aesthetic," rather than "beauty," in describing this dimension of architecture. Nonetheless, the general picture of architectural values articulated by Vitruvius' triad remains an immediately recognizable one.³

Creating beauty thus represents one of the perennial and fundamental problems faced by the architect. Achieving durability and usefulness (functionality, we might prefer to say) are difficult enough tasks, to be

¹ G. Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974.

² Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, Dover, New York, p. 17 (1, 3, 2).

³ P. Guyer, *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2021, pp. 1–14.

sure. But the problem of beauty has often seemed to pose difficulties of another order. Is beauty not hopelessly subjective, as a string of familiar aphorisms reminds us? Is beauty even a coherent notion? Tolstoy memorably dismissed it from theorizing about art as “the all-confusing concept.”⁴ While not all thinkers have given in to such despair, even contemporary philosophers who write entire books on the topic often balk at defining it.⁵

Bracketing these general reservations about the very concept, the more immediate worry for an architect must be this: what *kind* of beauty would be appropriate to a work of architecture? The other aims of architecture—function and durability—seem not to raise analogous questions, at least not to the same degree. It is often plain enough, for instance, what the function of a building is supposed to be.⁶ History has made this tension within the Vitruvian triad more acute, for today’s architects can apply technical methods and thinking to the pursuit of durability, and to a lesser extent, functionality. Not so with the pursuit of beauty: here the architect enters, it seems, an atavistic atmosphere no clearer now than in Vitruvius’s day.

Given that the problem of beauty exposes this schism in the architectural consciousness, so to speak, one can understand the inclination to simply deny this unruly side of human nature a role. Such a rejection certainly has precedent in other art forms: modern visual art and music have sometimes simply eschewed aesthetic aims (think of atonal music). But such stratagems, whatever their merits in these other artforms, seem hopeless in the case of architecture. For whatever architecture is, it is necessarily an environment for the humans and other organisms that live, work, or play inside it and using it. As such, it *will* be aesthetically appreciated and its aesthetic effects on those who inhabit/use it cannot but be a factor in its success *as architecture*. It would be an exaggeration to say that architects have no control over the way their works are evaluated, but the inescapably utilitarian nature of those works precludes any wholesale reform of the art that would simply eliminate beauty as a relevant aim or criterion of evaluation. Some have dreamed of a day when beauty ceases to matter to us: recall Loos’ sardonic musings that ornament may vanish,

⁴ L. Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, Penguin, New York, 1995, p. 36.

⁵ See, for example, A. Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007.

⁶ Though here, too, philosophical puzzlement can arise; see G. Parsons “Fact and Function in Architectural Criticism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 69, 2011, pp. 21–30.

“in some thousands of years.”⁷ But if, as some have argued, the urge to beautify ourselves and our surroundings is a part of our universal evolutionary heritage, these are forlorn hopes indeed.⁸

Granting this, the architect might simply choose not to worry about beauty and instead create the work with merely practical considerations in mind. Or, she may opt to follow her own personal aesthetic and hope for the best. Perhaps many architects have taken these approaches, even if they might be reluctant to admit it. And perhaps they have led, in some cases, to acceptable results. But in leaving aesthetic choices unsupported by any further reasoning or evidence, these approaches make aesthetic success or failure largely a hostage to fortune.

Supporting evidence for the choice of a particular aesthetic approach might be found, however, in social science. If the study of human nature shows the inevitability of aesthetic evaluation, as suggested above, perhaps it can also be our guide to success in confronting it. We could simply measure people’s aesthetic preferences and design in accord with them. Indeed, this has become practice has become the mainstream practice in many branches of landscape architecture and land management: comparative preference tests are used to determine public responses to various possible features, and landscape features are designed to match them.⁹ Similar preference assessments for architecture are readily at hand: why not adopt a similar strategy?

Perhaps a good deal of architecture practice actually follows this strategy to some degree, catering to extant public tastes, at least as a way of avoiding egregious errors. Certainly empirical data of this sort must be of interest to the architect, especially where highly negative aesthetic responses are concerned. A building that corporate workers find nauseating is unlikely to foster productivity. The appeal to empirical preference data is also appealing from a more theoretical perspective, as it

⁷ A. Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” in U. Conrads (ed.), *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1970, p.22.

⁸ See S. Davies, *Adornment: What Self-Decoration Tells Us About Who We Are*, Bloomsbury, London, 2020.

⁹ For an overview of empirical methodology used in the assessment of “scenic quality” in landscape, see T. Daniel, “Whither Beauty? Visual Landscape Quality Assessment in the 21st Century,” *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 54, 2001, pp. 267–281; for a defence of basing landscape management choices on popular preferences, see R. Parsons and T. Daniel, “Good Looking: In Defense of Scenic Landscape Aesthetics,” *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 60, 2002, pp. 43–56.

to some degree ameliorates the aforementioned schism in the architectural consciousness.

However, I suspect that few serious architects would find *merely* catering to established taste appealing as a principled solution to architecture's problem of beauty. For one thing, it appears to confuse the normative question "What is beautiful?" with the purely descriptive question "What do most people think is beautiful?"¹⁰ A further complication is that the site specificity of architecture can make extrapolating positive reception from past cases to new ones problematic. And in any event, simply repeating the successful aesthetic of past works invites its own form of aesthetic criticism.

Overall, I suggest that these various ways of evading the problem of beauty are ultimately unsatisfactory. If so, then the architect must try to find her way, murky as the philosophical waters may be, to an answer. I will by no means try to sketch anything like a complete story as to how an architect can realize the aim of beauty in an architectural work. What I want to focus on is the problem at its highest level of generality: at that level, the question is one concerning the relation of the aims of beauty and function. Should the pursuit of beauty be constrained, in some way, by considerations of function? Or can these two elements be treated as more or less independent aims, each to be pursued without essential reference to the other?¹¹ Whatever the architect's strategy for realizing beauty turns out to be, it must start with the choice of one of these options. Can we say anything useful, from a philosophical point of view, regarding how to make this choice?

I think we can, but before we consider that claim, I first explore the two options in some more detail, starting with those approaches to architecture that eschew a connection between beauty and function: Formalism and Ornamentation.

¹⁰ In the field of landscape management, this criticism was advanced by Allen Carlson, "On the Possibility of Quantifying Scenic Beauty," *Landscape Planning*, 4, 1977, pp. 131–172; for further discussion see R. Ribe "On the Possibility of Quantifying Scenic Beauty—A Response," *Landscape Planning*, 9, 1982, pp. 61–75 and A. Carlson, "On the Possibility of Quantifying Scenic Beauty – A Response to Ribe," *Landscape Planning*, 11, 1984, pp. 49–65, as well as P. Gobster, "An Ecological Aesthetic for Forest Landscape Management," *Landscape Journal*, 18, 1999, pp. 54–64.

¹¹ This way of posing the problem leaves the aim of durability out of the picture, but one might also consider the relation between it and the other aims, especially in light of contemporary concerns about sustainability. In my discussion here, however, I will set such issues aside.

2. FORMALISM AND ORNAMENTATION

In critical or theoretical discussions within architecture, “Formalism” may refer to a number of different ideas, but here I will understand it in the usual philosophical sense in which “formal properties are those related to shape, line, colour, and three dimensional space.”¹² Saul Fisher defines architectural Formalism this way: “the sum total of aesthetic properties of an architectural object are or arise from formal properties, such that our aesthetic judgments are warranted based on experience and assessment of just those properties.”¹³ In other words, the aesthetics of architecture consists in the exploration and enjoyment of form itself. Formalism does not entail that the exploration of form is the *only* aim of architecture: we should insist that architecture is also functional and recognize that there cannot be a purely formal architecture, in the sense that there might be purely formal painting. Architectural works that ignore everything except exploration of form stand accused of crossing the boundary separating architecture from sculpture (some of Peter Eisenman’s work may fit this description).

The formalist, therefore, should concede that successful architectural works meet criteria of both aesthetic and functional success. However, she claims that the criteria for *aesthetic* success are primarily a matter of the interesting presentation of form. Put another way, the view is that the aesthetic dimensions of architecture and its other dimensions, including the functional, can be pursued independently of one another without compromising overall architectural value.

It may be objected that this view is a straw man. As Larry Shiner points out, we can hardly say that these two aims can be pursued independently, given that the functional or practical aims of an architectural work will always constrain the architect’s choice of aesthetic forms in many ways (except perhaps in the case of purely non-functional

¹² The classic philosophical presentation of Formalism is given, in relation to painting, in C. Bell, *Art*, Frederick A. Stokes, New York, 1913. Bell equated the formal properties of painting with its non-representational properties, but did so inconsistently since he also included, as part of “form,” the depiction of three-dimensional space on the painted surface (so-called “plastic form”). A more principled basis for identifying formal properties is their immediate perceptibility, though this issue does not affect the application of Formalism to architecture, where properties of three-dimensional space are actual, not represented.

¹³ S. Fisher, “Philosophy of Architecture,” in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/architecture/> sec 5.1 (accessed 5 April 2025).

façades).¹⁴ But while the formalist can acknowledge this causal interdependence of function and form, she will insist that our *experience* of the aesthetic dimension of a building may remain disconnected from functional and other architectural considerations. So, although the formal aspect of an architectural work is partially constrained, if not determined, by functional decisions, our aesthetic experience of that work might still involve form alone.

Still, one may doubt whether any architects hold even this qualified conception of formalism. If we consider architects noted for their exploration of bold formal design—Zaha Hadid, for example, or Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, or Greg Lynn—it seems wrong to see them as entirely excluding context, site, style, and function from the aesthetic dimension of their works. Of his Bilbao Guggenheim, Gehry said: “I spent a lot of time making the building relate to the nineteenth-century street module and then it was on the river, with the history of the river, the sea, the boats coming up the channel. It was a boat.”¹⁵

So even the architects we may be most inclined to describe as “formalists” do not see the enjoyment of form as the only element in the aesthetics of architecture. Therefore, it would be best to understand Formalism as according of *priority* to the purely formal in the experience of architecture. In the case of Hadid’s Guangzhou Opera House, for example, there is more going on aesthetically than pure exploration of geometry: resemblance of Hadid’s buildings to pebbles eroded by water establishes some connection to the local landscape of the Pearl River, for example. Nonetheless, it seems fair to say that this reference to the site is not a central element of the work, aesthetically speaking (indeed, Hadid uses the same trope in other buildings, such as the Salerno Port Authority).¹⁶ We can contrast these cases with buildings that make a connection to site, context, or function much more prominent and central, through the use of an established architectural style, for example. Collegiate Gothic

¹⁴ See L. Shiner, “On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture: The Case of the ‘Spectacle’ Art Museum,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 69, 2011, pp. 32–34.

¹⁵ R. Moore, “The Bilbao Effect: How Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Started a Global Craze,” *Guardian*, October 1, 2017.

¹⁶ The formalist might even allow that, in some cases, our understanding of a building’s function plays a role in our grasp of its formal properties; e.g., knowing that a building is church allows us to understand certain positions in it as central and as hence privileged focal points for the perception of its formal features (see A. Sauchelli, “On Architecture as a Spatial Art,” *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 43, 2012, p. 60). Nonetheless, the focus of appreciation remains directed at form alone.

architecture, for instance, aims to provide an aesthetic that is connected to the traditional educational mission of the university. So let us henceforth call “formalist” that approach that puts the experience of form at the center of our aesthetic experience of architectural works.

This approach goes by other names: Anthony Savile, whose views I discuss below, calls it the “sculptural conception of architecture” and indeed works by the architects I listed are commonly described as “monumental sculpture.”¹⁷ This is sometimes done in a pejorative spirit, equating the sculptural approach with flash, glitz, and spectacle, not to say an abdication of architectural duty. But I bracket these negative connotations here, for our project is to determine whether there *is* anything wrong with this approach, as its critics have asserted.

One final clarification: Formalism may be understood as an approach employed in creating architecture (as I have done) or as a general approach employed by appreciators of architecture. In the latter sense, the appreciator regards whatever work she is experiencing in such a way that formal elements are central. In this sense, Formalism has been widely and justly criticized: many existing buildings do not lend themselves to formalist analysis, having been created in such a manner that factors such as materials, site, context, style and function are crucial to them as the architectural works they are. Here, however, I consider Formalism as an approach to creating particular works of architecture. If architects decided to create buildings that made “pure form,” rather than these other factors, central to the building’s aesthetic dimension, would there be anything wrong with this?

So far, we have articulated one possible response to the problem of beauty that takes beauty and function to be more or less independent aims, each to be pursued without essential reference to the other. Another response pursues the same approach, but in a different way, realizing beauty not through pure form, but rather through the use of ornament, adornment, or decoration that refers to functions, though not the *actual function* of the building being adorned. This is exemplified in the use of past styles as a means of beautification, applying the visual style of, say, the Renaissance palace to a modern theater or that of the Greek temple to a bank. To be precise we ought to refer to this as “pseudo-functional ornament,” to flag the disconnection of the ornamental element from the

¹⁷ A. Savile, “Architecture and Sculpture,” in *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1993, p. 164. Closely related is the view, associated with Bruno Zevi, that architecture is an “art of space”: for critical discussion of this view, see A. Sauchelli, “On Architecture as a Spatial Art,” *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 43, 2012.

building's actual function. But in what follows I will refer simply to "Ornamentation," it being understood that this excludes cases where decorative styles are used to express or embody the structure's actual function, as in the case of Collegiate Gothic architecture mentioned above.

From a number of perspectives Formalism and Ornamentation are odd bedfellows, even opposing attitudes: historically, Formalism has often been endorsed as a reaction against excessive ornamentation, and vice versa. However, for our purposes what is more salient is their shared insistence that the aesthetic aspect of a building need have no substantive connection with its actual purpose.

3. FUNCTIONALISM

Against advocates of these two positions, there are many who argue that beauty in a building must be pursued in a more substantial relation to considerations of that building's function. I will refer to this position as "Functionalism," again acknowledging a range of different uses of that term in architectural theory.

The weakest version of Functionalism would claim that the aesthetic dimension of the work should not conflict with its function. This is the usual interpretation of Kant's well-known conception of "dependent" or "adherent" beauty, an idea that he (uncharacteristically) illustrated with examples, including architectural ones. Kant writes:

[...] the beauty [...] of a building (such as a church, a palace, an arsenal, or a garden-house) presuppose[s] a concept of the end that determine what the thing should be, hence a concept of its perfection, and is thus merely adherent beauty[...]. One would be able to add much to a building that would be pleasing in the intuition of it only if it were not supposed to be a church.¹⁸

On the usual interpretation, the thought is that the object's end (in other words its function) merely constrains the type of beauty it can possess, ruling out certain forms of decoration that conflict with the object's function.¹⁹

¹⁸ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 115 (5: 230).

¹⁹ On other interpretations of Kant's notion of adherent beauty, see P. Guyer, "Free and Adherent Beauty: A Modest Proposal," in *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics*,

Depending on how narrowly we define “conflict,” in this context, the formalist or ornamentalist may have little problem accepting this constraint. Applying a nightclub aesthetic to a funeral home is surely an architectural blunder of the first order, regardless of your theoretical principles. Beyond acknowledging this plain fact, it’s not clear that recognition of architectural beauty as “adherent,” in this sense, establishes a substantial connection between a building’s beauty and its function, instead leaving the architect largely free to beautify through the exploration of form or pseudo-functional ornamentation.

For Functionalism to represent a genuine alternative to the problem of beauty, we need it to demand a stronger connection between beauty and function. This demand is nicely captured by Gordon Graham in the following principle: “Ideally form and function in architecture must complement each other.”²⁰ He further explains: “a style of architecture which satisfies both functional and aesthetic considerations and has a greater unity is intelligible as an ideal, and one to which many generations of architects have aspired.”²¹ As an example of this unity, Graham offers medieval Gothic cathedrals, in which the form is not used to explore geometry, or as a canvas for free ornamentation, but to express ideas and thoughts that correspond to the religious function of the structure.

Thus construed, Functionalism has found many adherents among architects and philosophers. Here are some endorsements from recent philosophy of architecture:

- “It seems only natural to expect aesthetics and function to complement each other in architecture”²²
- “In the minds of those who fix what architecture today is and what it is capable of in the future, this art is thought of as fundamentally sculptural in nature [... but] such a conception of their art is dangerously confused [...]”²³

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 357–366. Rachel Zuckert extracts from Kant’s discussion a more substantive conception of the function-beauty connection; see R. Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty and Biology: An Interpretation of the “Critique of Judgment,”* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007. Her conception is also endorsed by L. Shiner, “On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture,” pp. 35–37.

²⁰ G. Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*, Routledge, London, 2005, p. 256.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

²² L. Shiner, “On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture,” p. 31.

²³ A. Savile, “Architecture and Sculpture,” p. 159.

- “It is a hallmark of great design [...] that the qualities making a chair practically usable are at the same time the source of its elegance, grace and beauty [...] When exceptional craftworks and pieces with an explicit religious, ethical or other extrinsic purpose seem to qualify as artworks, they do so usually because of the success with which they *integrate* their practical and aesthetic functions.”²⁴
- “Given the importance of functional fit, buildings must be appreciated in terms of the functions they perform”²⁵

As these quotations show, these writers differ as to how exactly form and function are to “complement” each other; some see form as expressing function, others see form as serving function, and so on. Much of the discussion around Functionalism concerns this question, but here I will simply assume that some way, or more likely ways, of resolving it will be forthcoming. Instead, I want to pursue the logically prior question: What justification might be offered for the Functionalist approach, as it is understood in Graham’s principle? Why, after all, should the ideal it posits for the pursuit of architectural beauty be accepted? Or, to put it differently, is it true that buildings like Hadid’s opera house, or Gehry’s museum, are defective in foregoing the integration of function and form for something closer to a pure exploration of geometry? Functionalism does not imply, of course, that these are bad buildings. But it does imply that they have a flaw, at least from the aesthetic point of view, and moreover that the kind of architecture they represent involves, as Savile puts it, a confusion. Should we accept these claims?

In his discussion, Graham concedes that the Functionalist ideal can, in certain cases, appear highly problematic. He writes:

How could St Pancras railway station, though undoubtedly impressive, sensibly be thought to express the idea of travelling by train? And besides this there is a further question about what exactly the idea to be conveyed *is*. Should St Pancras say “travelling by train” to the spectator, or just “travelling,” or even more abstractly “movement”?²⁶

²⁴ S. Davies, “Aesthetic Judgements, Artworks and Functional Beauty,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 56, 2006, pp. 236. Davies refers specifically to furniture design in this passage, but his idea seems clearly applicable to the case of architecture as well; I return to the relation between the two domains below.

²⁵ A. Carlson, “Reconsidering the Aesthetics of Architecture,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 20, 1986, p. 24.

²⁶ G. Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, p.179.

Graham sums up the problem by insightfully remarking that “it is not so much that we find it difficult to answer these questions but that they seem inappropriate questions to raise.” He suggests that, since the realization of the ideal seems obscure in such cases, and architectural works are expensive and hard to replace, it may be more prudent to aim for something more manageable.²⁷ But although Graham qualifies the Functionalist ideal in this way, he nonetheless recognizes it as an ideal. The aesthetic cultivation of form in its own right, independently of function, therefore represents, in general, something of a defect in a work of architecture, a falling away from the ideal for the artform.

We can add a deeper note of skepticism to Graham’s worries, however: when posed as an ideal for the art of architecture, as by the authors mentioned above for example, Functionalism usually appears to stand as an *a priori* critical principle. As such, one may wonder whether *any* philosophical defense of it, beyond appeals to intuition, can be forthcoming, for it would be unusual these days to hear a philosopher positing “ideals” for artistic success in painting, literature, or music. Even if one accepts the existence of general criteria for artistic success, or aesthetic value in a given artform (itself a contentious issue), it may be thought that the hashing out of such criteria should be left to qualified critics. Granted, architecture is an unusual art-form. But suspicion lingers as to whether Functionalism presents a genuine ideal or whether it merely articulates a particular stylistic preference.²⁸

4. ARGUMENTS FOR FUNCTIONALISM

In light of this skepticism, let me turn now to possible justifications for Functionalism. In the description quoted above, Graham refers to the functionalist ideal as “one to which many generations of architects have aspired.” While this might be true as an historical fact, it would not offer us a theoretical reason for continuing to endorse the ideal. One such

²⁷ Elsewhere he writes: “There will always be building in which equal but independent attention is given to form and function, and which results in buildings that are pleasant to use and which enhance the built environment. Perhaps the most we should hope for, in fact, is that most architecture is of this sort, for it is precisely aspirations, such as Le Corbusier’s, to an architecture which is more than mere building, which has led very often to inconvenient and unattractive buildings” (see G. Graham, “Art and Architecture,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 29, 1989, p. 257).

²⁸ This is, all said, perhaps the most common criticism of so-called “Functionalist” views of architecture and design.

reason might be that architectural works that integrate form and function achieve the aims of architecture in a more economical way. The architect kills two birds with one structure (so to speak), while the formalist has to create, in effect, two separate but overlapping elements in her works: a functional structure, and then a formally pleasing one. But why should such economy matter: if a formalist approach produces the “same effect” in terms of functional and aesthetic value, why is it inferior? It’s hard to answer this question because it is not clear where exactly the supposed economy would lie. It’s not clear, for example, that the functionalist approach would use less materials, or take less time. On the contrary, it is plausible to think that employing a well-established ornamental style would take considerably less time and effort than coming up with a strategy for integrating form and function.

This last idea might be taken as the basis for a different defence of Functionalism. Perhaps such works are superior in virtue of displaying an admirable skill on the part of the architect: given the difficulty of integrating form and function successfully, we must admire the “difficult trick” that the architect has pulled off. However, it remains unclear why such displays of skill should take precedence as an aesthetic ideal for the art-form. Every art-form has its “difficult tricks,” requiring admirable artistic virtuosity, but these hardly constitute aesthetic ideals for works and artists in that artform. The poet Christian Bok wrote an entire volume of poetry in which each chapter employs only a single vowel, a feat of no mean literary skill.²⁹ But surely it would be absurd to elevate such occasions for the display of skill into critical principles for poetry.

One might appeal instead to a kind of aesthetic appeal in the very integration of form and function: a building might display elegance in *how* it brings the two together. Doubtless some buildings have this sort of aesthetic appeal. But the relevant comparison is with such a building and a formalist alternative that has an equal amount of aesthetic appeal, achieved through the arrangement of formal qualities or pseudo-functional ornament. Why, in comparing such cases with the overall “same effect,” should we say that the former is better?

We might consider the relevance of a building’s wider context. If buildings, by their very nature, are not to be appreciated in splendid isolation, but in relation to their surroundings, then Formalist architecture, one might argue, will typically result in an aesthetic loss. This would be

²⁹ C. Bok, *Euonia*, Coach House Books, Toronto, 2009.

due to a loss of harmony between a building and its surroundings, if a collection of abstract forms has less cohesion than a set of structures whose form reflects, in some way, their particular functions. In taking an environmental approach to the appreciation of architecture, Allen Carlson has emphasized the way in which buildings have a “functional fit” with surrounding structures.³⁰ Such a fit might be obscured by a detachment of a building’s aesthetic aspect from its function.

While this might be so, it is unfortunately not clear that this necessarily results in an aesthetic loss. Why not also recognize the possibility of a “formal fit” between buildings that emphasize more abstract geometrical forms? Ornamentation, notoriously, can produce a jumble when different styles are employed in adjacent buildings, but uniformity of the applied style avoids this problem. In short, there seems no *a priori* reason why harmony between a building and its location should be compromised by the rejection of Functionalism.

Other ways of supporting our principle might be considered but let me turn now to what seems to me the most promising one, which I extract from Anthony Savile. In his essay “Architecture and Sculpture,” Savile emphasizes the power of architecture to not only facilitate human activity but to also shape the attitudes of its users toward those activities, through their experience of, and in, the work. Given this, a building whose beauty is in some way integrated with its function has the potential to foster positive attitudes toward that function:

[T]he truly architectural masterpiece has to exercise its power over us through the way in which it fashions those thoughts and emotional responses of ours which impinge on the sort of activity that the particular building houses. That is, the beautiful building is beautiful through becoming an embodiment of a constellation of mental states related to the activity that the building serves, be it worship, or military endeavour, or our relation to the past, or family life, or whatever.³¹

However, one may grant that buildings with a functional aesthetic have the causal power Savile describes, but yet wonder why *they* should

³⁰ See A. Carlson, “Existence, Location, and Function: The Appreciation of Architecture,” in *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, Routledge, New York, 2000, and also A. Carlson, “On Aesthetically Appreciating Human Environments,” *Philosophy & Geography*, 4, 2001.

³¹ A. Savile, “Architecture and Sculpture,” p. 176.

be considered the “architectural masterpieces.” Why should the architect be required to deploy his aesthetic resources to the end of shoring up social sentiment about the building’s function, after all?

Savile’s reply is that the architect’s role is “not simply as the builder of buildings, but also as the builder of institutions.”³² He writes:

The activities for which building is constructed, be they devotional, memorial, civil, military or domestic, are activities by which our lives for the most part are formed. We live our lives through the institutions that cater for these activities, and, like it or not, the people who we become are in some significant part fashioned by the ways in which we manage to think of the institutions through which we live. So it seems to me that in one line of procedure, the architect helps to fashion the institutions in which we live our lives, and does so not in the merely banausic sense that he makes the places in which they are housed—courts, houses, banks, universities and museums—but, more interestingly, he fashions them for us in getting us to construct a largely unconscious way of thinking about and responding to them, one which sets actual limits to the way in which we are liable to change them in practice.³³

Savile describes the architect as “a builder of institutions” but perhaps it is more accurate to say that the architect is a collaborator in their construction. This is reinforced by the fact that the materials for architecture are provided to the architect by someone else, either a private or state patron. Given this collaborative role, it may well seem an indulgence for the architect to simply ignore the activity that a building is meant to foster when thinking about the aesthetic dimension of the work.

The conclusion of this argument is that there is something defective, or at least sub-optimal, about architecture that spurns the functionalist ideal, in the sense that it foregoes this opportunity to contribute to the cultivation of the relevant institution. This leads Savile to conclude that Formalism is “dangerously confused” and represents a conceptual wrong turn for architecture.

In response, the formalist or ornamentalist might simply dismiss supposed obligations to contribute to the relevant institution, through

³² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 177–178.

aesthetic design of the work, as a bourgeois imposition on artistic freedom of the kind that the other arts have rightly thrown off.³⁴ However, the public, collaborative nature of architecture makes this response quite implausible. Savile's argument does seem to provide a legitimate rationale for attempting an integration of function and aesthetics. Granted, this rationale will not be decisive in every particular case: if the architect has no idea how to achieve such an integration, or doing so in an effective way would be prohibitively expensive, then the architect may not have good reason, overall, for attempting the integration. Still, the cogency of the general rationale, it seems to me, can hardly be denied.

Despite all that, however, I think the formalist and the ornamentalist should deny that Savile functionalism as the correct philosophical response to the problem of architectural beauty. What I want to suggest, on their behalf, is that despite its general cogency, the applicability of Savile's rationale depends critically on the *type* of institution that the architect is building.

5. BUILDING INSTITUTIONS

To see this, we must give closer scrutiny to Savile's central idea that architectural works house, and affect, the institutions "by which our lives for the most part are formed." I shall refer to these as "life-shaping institutions." The idea is vague, but perhaps intuitively clear enough for us to recognize some of Savile's examples as plausible instances: the law courts, schools, and branches of government. These examples pick out organizations, but in the most general sense, institutions should not be confused with organizations: rather institutions are stable, self-perpetuating patterns of social interaction. Marriage, parenthood, the use of money in economic exchange: these are all institutions in this basic sense, though not themselves organizations.³⁵

³⁴ For a discussion exploring this theme, see David Goldblatt's discussion of Eisenman's architecture in "The Dislocation of the Architectural Self," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49, 1991, pp. 337–348.

³⁵ In Western countries, there are many organizations associated with these institutions, but the use of the Canadian dollar, for example, is not identical with the Bank of Canada, or any other organization. And in many traditional cultures, these institutions exist without anything that could reasonably be called an "organization." The distinction I draw below between "life-shaping" and "enabling" institutions cuts across competing theories on the nature of institutions, but for an overview of recent debates in this area see F. Guala, *Understanding Institutions: The Science and Philosophy of Living Together*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016.

The fact that Savile's examples of life-shaping institutions do correspond to formal social organizations, however, lends support to the claim that these are deeply meaningful ones that shape our identity, and that of our society, in clear ways. One need not restrict "life-shaping" to such lofty concerns, however: consider pastimes such as baseball in the USA or hockey in Canada. These are pursued with such dedication, depth, and seriousness that they can plausibly be said to "shape lives." Just as a courthouse houses the life-shaping institution of the law, an American ball park could be said to house the life-shaping institution of baseball. Further, in both cases one could argue that the institution in question needs social reinforcement, mandating an integrationist approach to beautification by the architect. Savile says that the activities carried out in these buildings are "catered for" by these institutions, but it is also true that the activities themselves serve to sustain and perpetuate the institution. As such, the building not only houses the institution but is its site of maintenance and operation. Thus, the reinforcement of function by the architect's aesthetic seems all the more pertinent.

However, this conclusion about the architect's role does *not* obviously carry over to buildings that do not house anything recognizable as a life-shaping institution. Factories, warehouses, power stations, multi-purpose stadiums—there are all manner of structures that do not house life-shaping institutions, or arguably any institution at all. Here there seems no reason for the architect to employ the attitude-shaping power of architecture to cultivate positive attitudes towards the activities that the building "caters for." In a different sort of case, domestic architecture, Savile's argument fails to apply in a different way. The family, by any measure, must be counted as a life shaping institution, and it is certainly housed in the domestic home. But in this case, the architect's reinforcement of positive attitudes to those activities seems not so much pointless as simply unnecessary. The institution of the family needs no help from architects, and if it was subject to threat from shifting social forces, such symbolic reinforcement as architecture could lend would seem unlikely to have any significant effect.

From these cases we might conclude that Savile's functionalist argument applies to public buildings, though not other types. For, we might think, in the public sphere we find the kinds of institutions Savile has in mind: meaningful, life-shaping institutions, typically corresponding to organizations—the law, government, education—that need constant reinforcement. That would be a significant restriction itself, but the

restriction is wider still, for there are many public buildings that likewise fail to house a significant, life-shaping institution. Consider train stations and airports, for example. Air travel, I submit, is not a life-shaping institution. If it is a social institution, it is one that enables the pursuit of a wide range of various valuable activities (tourism, international work, immigration). It is not an institution that shapes our lives, but an institution that *allows* us to shape our lives. As such, it is again unclear what institutional values, in the case of an airport, call for reinforcement through a building's aesthetic design.

The failure of Savile's argument to carry over to this case explains Graham's puzzlement over the apparent inapplicability of the functionalist ideal to St Pancras station, it being difficult not only to see *how* to integrate form and function, but the very point of doing so. Tying the building's aesthetic to the function of travel—by echoing bird wings in the structure of an airport, for example—is not wrong but it seems little more than an indulgence of a stylistic preference. The architect's role in such cases appears to be creating a useful and beautiful space for the activities associated with air travel, rather than helping to "build an institution."

Just as this failure of applicability of Savile's argument illuminates the case Graham found problematic for functionalism, so its applicability illuminates the case Graham identifies as its paradigm: the Gothic cathedral. For the medieval church provides the *ne plus ultra* of a building that houses life-shaping institutions in need of reinforcement. To the medieval world, it was the site not only of worship, but of marriage, baptism, and funerary rites—in short, a very nexus of life-shaping activities under constant threat from worldly temptations and the frailties of human nature. Despite loose talk of airports and stadiums as the "cathedrals of the modern world," the institutions of modern life are vastly more diffused across the structures we build. Furthermore, in line with more complex and liberal forms of social interaction, many of our important institutions are not life-shaping, but rather enabling in the sense in which air travel is.³⁶

Thus far I have qualified Savile's functionalist argument to apply only to a certain sort of work: one housing a life-shaping institution in need of reinforcement. A second qualification is in order regarding a special case: the art gallery or museum. These structures certainly meet our criteria,

³⁶ In relation to this point, consider structures such as the convention center and the general-purpose stadium. It is also worth noting that modern institutional structures are also relatively fluid: what counts as a significant, life-shaping institution, and which of these needs protecting/fostering, may shift significantly from generation to generation.

but given that the institution in question is one dedicated to aesthetic ends, it can be argued that a *formalist* approach could, in this case, be said to cultivate the required kind of attitudes toward the institution. The use of this approach in gallery and museum design has received much attention in recent years.³⁷ But Savile's line of thought shows this trend in a different light. Architects such as Gehry and Hadid have sometimes been criticized on the grounds that their structures compete, aesthetically, with the artworks they house. But rather than an illegitimate form of "competition," this can also be seen as the architect fulfilling a broader civic role in cultivating the right sorts of attitude toward the larger institution. In other words, Formalism "works," functionally, if you will, in this context. But, again, the context is critical: Gehry's wild exploration of form works in the Bilbao gallery, which houses an aesthetic institution, but sits awkwardly in the Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, which houses the professional institution of medical research.³⁸

This example points to a third qualification involving structures housing institutions of a peculiar sort, where attention to the actual aims of the institution—the building's function—actually *interferes with* the building's actual functioning. Here I have in mind certain hospitals, rehab facilities, and psychological treatment centers where users benefit from *not* focusing on the reason they are there. Children's hospitals are an obvious example: although they are the sites for a very important social institution, medicine, the cultivation of an attitude to *that institution* must take on secondary importance relative to the needs of the people to whom it ministers (perhaps prisons also fall into this category, although that seems a more complex case). To return to the example of Gehry's Lou Ruvo Center: if it had been a patient facility, Gehry's formalism may have been more successful (though one could question the appropriateness of distorted and unfamiliar shapes in a facility for neurological patients).³⁹

³⁷ See L. Shiner, "On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture."

³⁸ Though the main drift of Savile's discussion is that Formalism is "a confusion," at least one passage in his essay suggests that different aesthetic approaches might be called for in different circumstances ("Architecture and Sculpture," pp. 177–178).

³⁹ Given what I have said, why does the functionalist ideal seem, if anything, more pronounced in the context of artifact design, as opposed to architecture? This may seem puzzling, since in case of artifacts there is typically no institution to reinforce: do kitchen knives need to reinforce positive attitudes toward cutting and chopping? Perhaps the explanation of the functional ideal, in the case of tools, lies in the intimacy of form and function: in a cutting implement, ornamentation and the exploration of form are highly likely to compromise function. In the case of architecture, a kind of detachment of form from functional activities is possible: as Carlson puts it, there is room for form to "go its own way" without

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have tried to clarify the problem of beauty as faced by the architect, identifying as the main choice one between developing the building's aesthetic and functional aspects in isolation or in dialogue with one another. I have also argued that, to make this choice, the architect need not engage in philosophical debate or simply assert their own stylistic preference. Rather, the choice may be made in light of an analysis of the institutional context of the architect's task. The upshot is a pluralist view: while Functionalism is appropriate in some cases, there is also a wide range of cases where Formalism or Ornamentation can be a valid approach.⁴⁰

It may be said that, in the end, I have offered a rather pedestrian solution to a profound and deeply philosophical question: the proper role of beauty in the pursuit of architecture. And it may be so. I suspect that many architects intuitively grasp the context sensitivity of decisions about integrating function and form in more or less the ways that I have tried to spell out. But in this case, I think that an intuitively familiar, not to say pedestrian, solution should be welcomed. As I have pointed out, the choice between Formalism, Functionalism and Ornamentation is only the start of beauty's challenge: the architect then faces the task of actually *creating* a beautiful structure! Given this, philosophers do best in steering architects away from the mists of metaphysical speculation, and helping them to get on with the job.

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directly compromising functionality ("Existence, Location, and Function," p. 208). Other instances of design, furniture, for example, perhaps represent an intermediate sort of case.

⁴⁰ My view thus aligns with the pluralist attitude of Guyer ("Free and Adherent Beauty," p. 139), though his discussion focuses on design rather than architecture (see previous note). My view differs from that of Shiner, who writes, regarding architecture, that "in no case [...] can an appropriate aesthetic judgement justifiably ignore practical functions as irrelevant in assessing [...] total aesthetic effect" ("On Aesthetics and Function in Architecture," p. 39).

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David Leatherbarrow*

ARCHITECTURE'S APPROXIMATE BEAUTY

ABSTRACT: Contested in this study is the assumption that beauty in architecture has a simple and single definition. Not one, but three kinds of beauty are introduced and distinguished. They are not ranked, despite the long history of one or another being given superior standing. The three, the built work's beauty, that of its many and varied representations (drawings, models, simulations), and that of its motivating idea are shown to both complement and conflict with one another in judgments about quality. Both spatial and temporal dimensions of architectural order come into the question, as do the composition and operation of a building's parts or elements—what appears and what occurs in a work of architecture. Against the tendency to link concepts of beauty with notions of order and permanence, attention is given to the concrete conditions of projects which are always imperfect and continually changing. This focus, in turn, leads to recognition of the importance of notions of disproportionality, fragmentation, and decay. Projects plus writings in and outside architecture from antiquity to the present are adduced to argue for the reality of approximation in architectural beauty.

KEYWORDS: beautifying, proportion/disproportion, fragmentation, negotiation, ingenuity

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One is more certain of being outside Prato when he sees it at arm's length, than when ten miles distant, unable to see it at all. So, whoever is nearer the truth when he sees it, more knows himself not to be at the truth than does he who is far from it [. . .] and [he who is nearer the truth] is more unhappy in all his works.

Michelangelo, *The Road to Prato*.

Poets make poems, musicians music, and painters paintings. Architects, whose work is similarly creative, do not make buildings, builders do that; instead, they make representations of them that describe how they should be built and depict the way they will look. Furthermore, the beauty that we appreciate in poetry, music, and painting exists in the things that have been made, the verses, songs, or images themselves. In architecture, however, it is not *only* the built work that can be beautiful, the same can be said for the representations. The two are not the same, neither in the ways they present themselves nor in the ways they are received.

A constructed building's beauty is available to the full spectrum of perceptual experience, sight, touch, smell, and so on, thanks to its palpable concreteness, together with that of its immediate surroundings, no matter whether one appreciates its qualities all at once, from a single vantage, or in time, when passing through it, one step and glance then the next.

An architectural representation's beauty is apprehended differently. It can be appreciated visually, of course, in drawings, models, or simulations that may be two- or three-dimensional, but because they are more abstract than the built work, greatly reduced in size, and typically shown in scale (1:100, 200, 500, etc.) the corresponding sense of beauty is rather more remote. Verbal representations can also be beautiful. I have in mind the ekphrastic praise and promises offered by architects themselves, also the beautifully insightful accounts of discerning critics or historians, and the compelling narratives of residents, observers, and writers who render spaces as stories.

Despite the abbreviations of perceptual fullness and attendant remoteness of representations, they can be nevertheless judged even more beautiful than the built works to which they refer. Since the time of the Renaissance, architectural drawings that were thought to have intrinsic beauty have been collected, sold, exhibited, and archived. Considering

three moderns, Frank Lloyd Wright's drawings are commonly thought to be wonderfully elegant and expressive, those of Charles Rennie Mackintosh are often said to show great refinement and subtlety, while the sketches of Adolf Loos—sketches are mostly what we have—are generally understood to be very crude, despite their historical and disciplinary importance. Few appreciate Giovanni Battista Piranesi's built work—it is neither well-known nor much discussed—but his prints are much loved for their emotive power and pathos. Famous works aside, only a tiny percentage of people who experience the beauty of a constructed work are also given the opportunity to see and appreciate its representations. Patrons or clients are always shown them, sometimes also critics, historians, archivists, and students. The comparatively limited audience for construction's preliminaries explains the common assumption that architectural beauty is to be found in the built work.

But to the complications that arise from the existence of these two kinds of beauty in architecture must be added a third set of problems, those that arise in consideration of the beauty of the *idea* that designers, builders, or patrons have in their minds at the outset of projects. Ideas of this kind are often called *mental images*, as if something seen in the mind's eye were akin to a notion or thought. Yet, comparisons between mental images and drawings or buildings are impossible for anyone other than the person with the idea, for the former are always and only one's own, while showing and sharing require visualization or articulation. Mental images, like memories are sometimes clear and distinct, but frequently incomplete and vague, even dream-like, manifestations of desire as much as reason, design's prompt rather than its accomplishment. Terms used to describe them are often metaphoric, beautifully so. Partiality and ambiguity do not make them unattractive, just the reverse, suggestive, which is to say invitations to wonder, admiration, or longing. An architect's need to clarify and communicate mental images in the development of projects, however, prompts the work of visualization, also, after that, the fairly common sense of shortcoming or disappointment that results from imperfect realization, as Michelangelo suggests in the epigraph above.

BEAUTIFYING, NOT THE BEAUTIF'D

Architects, critics, and historians often assume and argue that the first beauty approximates the second, and those two the third. As such, the attractions of the three—the *built work*, the *representation*, and the *mental*

image—have been variously ranked over time. From the ancient period to the decades of the Enlightenment, the mental image or abstract idea of a work was commonly thought to exist *prior* to its realization and be *primary* in importance, for without an idea of what should be built there would be nothing to guide the hands and machines that accomplish the construction. Modern writers, by contrast, have often given greater weight to the process of visualization, allowing development, therefore incompleteness in each of its several stages, even at the end of the construction phase. In architecture, finishing and furnishing are without end. No one would think of modifying a poem or painting once it is finished, but everyone feels entitled to make changes to their house or apartment, one resident after another. Earlier in the life span of a project, before construction, an architect's sketches are beautiful in the way that they show an idea's emergence, just as it comes into being on the page, under the designer's eyes, in the spontaneous but skilled movements of a pencil-fisted-hand, not in the mind prior to that process. In the study of architectural beauty that follows the matter of ranking will be postponed so that the differences, relationships, conflicts, and mutuality among these kinds of beauty can be explained.

Although we tend to think that the many and varied aspects of a building's spatial articulation are decisive in architectural order, it will become clear in what follows that a work's temporality is no less important. The times at play in architecture are several, the periods of conceptualization, visualization, construction, inhabitation, maintenance, and ruination. Although I have listed these phases separately and in sequence, the steps of conceptualization, visualization, and construction often leap ahead and turn back on themselves, difficulties and doubts lead back to basic premises and their revision or reaffirmation, as if at various times the work could advance only by retreating. Because the clock and calendar of these phases are perforce caught up in the times of the world, its daily and seasonal cycles as well as unforeseen events, the beauty of an architectural work is always somewhat less than what was envisaged in design and approximated in its construction. As we stand before the work or make use of its rooms and furnishings, it is not as attractive as it might yet be with a little more work, or is no longer as beautiful as it once was, thanks to ill-conceived additions or accidental alterations. Yet, modifications are not always unattractive. Weathered works and ruins can be more attractive than newly finished, ostensibly complete works. Prominent architects such as Auguste Perret and Louis I. Kahn wrote in praise of

ruins, implying that a work's demise is in some ways its fulfilment.¹ Since the time of the Renaissance, fragments have had great appeal. In many modern works improbable and unresolved juxtapositions of previously unrelated elements have been understood to excite interest, even wonder. In collage, montage, and fragmentation both development and deterioration were discovered to be no less attractive than completion. But that observation had pre- 20th century antecedents. A line from an early 18th century English philosopher, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, can be used to concisely state the importance of *approximation* in the life of buildings in time: "the Beautifying, not the Beautify'd, is the really Beautiful."²

Thinking of buildings changing over time runs against the grain of common conceptions, for we tend to see architectural works as permanent. An observation made by the late 19th century German theorist August Schmarsow summarizes this view nicely: "Architecture prepares a place for all that is lasting and established in the beliefs of a people and of an age; often, in a period of forceful change, when everything else threatens to sway, will the solemn language of its stones speak of support."³ But common conceptions are commonly unconsidered. When pressed for precision, one would probably admit that buildings are mostly permanent, not exactly the same day- after-day and week-after-week, but largely so. When I return home from work tonight or after several days on holiday my house will be basically the same as it was when I left it, far less changed than the weather, the traffic, or the stock market are likely to be, especially in what Schmarsow called periods of forceful change, today's much discussed challenges of climate change, regime change, technological change, and so on.

That a building's permanence can be associated with its beauty is evident in the centrality many architecture writers have given to the concept of *completeness* or *unity*. Works are beautiful as long as their coherence, internal order, or self-sameness persists. Leon Battista Alberti, for example, famously defined beauty as follows: "Beauty is that reasoned harmony of all the parts within a body, so that nothing may be added, taken

¹ For a study of key historical texts and images from antiquity to the present that address ruins see John Dixon Hunt and David Leatherbarrow, *Book of Ruins*, Lund Humphries, London, 2023.

² Shaftesbury, "The Moralists; A Philosophical Rhapsody" [1709], *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, vol. 2, Liberty Fund Indianapolis, 2001, p. 226.

³ A. Schmarsow, "The Essence of Architectural Creation" [1893], cited in H. Mallgrave, E. Ikonomou (eds.), *Empathy, Form, Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Santa Monica, 1994, p. 294.

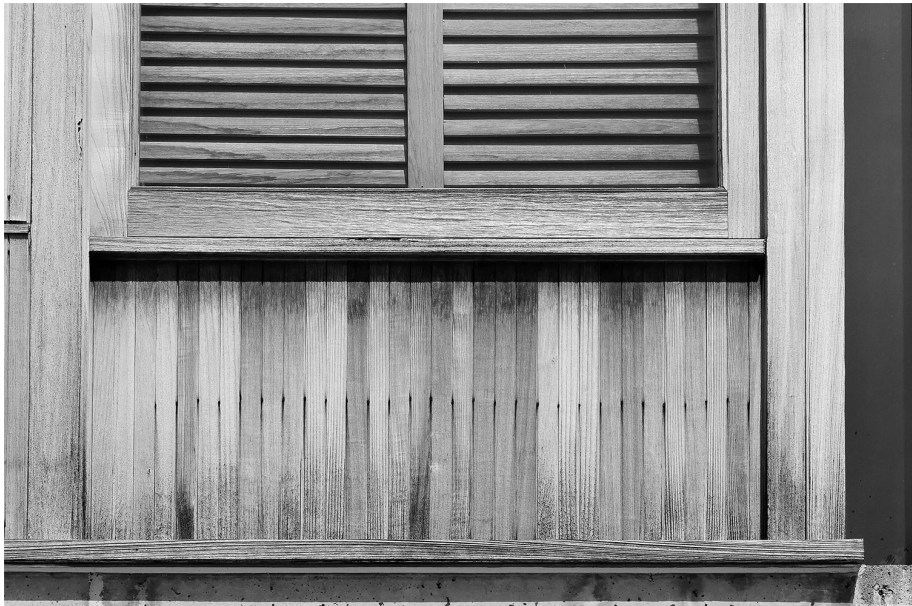


Figure 1. Louis I. Kahn, Salk Institute for Biological Studies,
La Jolla California, 1963, weathered timbered cladding.
Photograph by D. Leatherbarrow.

away, or altered, but for the worse.”⁴ As long as that harmony remains, beauty will be apparent. The conditional character of the proviso is instructive, for what seems true in principle is rarely, if ever, in fact. Once constructed, works of architecture incessantly suffer the effects of their surroundings and use, often slight and nearly imperceptible, such as surface abrasions and color changes, but at other times more dramatic and obvious, re-fenestration, added rooms, and so on. The warm color of a building's wooden surfaces—the teak cladding on the façades of Louis I. Kahn's famous Salk Institute (figure 1), for example—will lighten on the side facing the sun and darken on the sides turned away from it. Kahn anticipated this—he seems to have liked grey—but not the blackening that also occurred.⁵ The stone treads that climb to the entry of an ancient monument will become cupped under the abrasive press of countless footsteps. Likewise, over time large rooms will be subdivided, balconies enclosed, and decks added to roofs. In all these cases, settings that are apparently the same, in one's house or apartment, the office building at the end of the street, or the school a few blocks away, are always only *similar* to what they had been. When positive, the changes a work of architecture undergoes can be said to result from the “beautifying” that Shaftesbury defined as the “really beautiful.”

A few more words about his ideas on permanence and change can be used to pose the problem that will be central in the arguments about architectural beauty I shall develop.

CONFIGURATION AND OPERATION

Shaftesbury, like Alberti two and a half centuries earlier, coupled beauty with completeness. Beautiful things, he observed, possess unity of design or complete concurrence among constituent parts. The unity of a beautiful painting, for example, is comprised of the setting, figures, and

⁴ L. B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, VI, 2, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., 1988), p. 156. See also the key study of the directly pertinent but difficult notion of “*concinnitas*” also by Tavernor: R. Tavernor, *Concinnitas in the Architectural Theory and Practice of Leon Battista Alberti*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.

⁵ On this topic and specific case see K. Moe, D. S. Friedman, “Tending Building: An Ethic of Repair in Architecture,” *Places Journal*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.22269/240207>. On the matter of surface transformations more broadly, see M. Mostafavi and D. Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering the Life of Buildings in Time*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1993, and D. Leatherbarrow, *Building Time: Architecture, Event, and Experience*, Bloomsbury, London, 2021, particularly the section on “The Time of the World.”

minute articulations that jointly contribute to an intelligible story, start to finish.⁶ He explained that a beautiful thing “constitutes a real Whole, by a mutual and necessary Relation of its Parts.”⁷ In other words, beautiful things, including buildings, are “Whole, coherent and proportion’d in [themselves].” Wholeness, he stressed, is apparent in both composition and action, which is to say the make-up of a thing, or the component parts that have position, shape, number, and measure, and that thing’s way of being or manner of behaving, as shown in the actions and expressions of people and objects.⁸ The judgment of works, therefore, must assess both configuration and operation. Similarly, their proportions must be seen as both quantitative and qualitative. The mutuality that characterizes beautiful objects is thus evident in both the *commensurate configuration* of their parts and the *corresponding operations* of their elements.

This means another common conception about buildings must be reconsidered when thinking about their kinds of beauty. If beauty is to be seen not only in the arrangement parts but also in their behaviors, buildings must be understood to operate or perform in ways that are analogous to the movements and deeds of actors on a theatrical stage.⁹ A built work’s permanence must allow its parts to behave as they should, not only the parts that move, doors and windows, also those that don’t, columns and beams. These operations should also be made apparent through the building’s stance, bearing, and inclination, as well as its various forms of resistance and allowance—allowing fresh air when it is wanted, resisting the cold when it is not, likewise views out and in. Posture, for Shaftesbury, and many theorists before and after him, expresses

⁶ Shaftesbury, “Miscellaneous Reflections,” *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, vol. 3, pp. 229, 214.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁸ He lamented the scarcity of good examples of “history” painting in England, as did his near contemporary, William Algonby. See the latter’s complaint in “The Preface,” *Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues*, John Gain, London, 1685.

⁹ Although he doesn’t mention Aristotle in the passages I’ve just cited, Shaftesbury no doubt had in mind a basic principle of mimetic art, as set out in *Poetics*; in short, tragic art imitates *what people do*, particularly their highest and most despicable acts. For architecture to conform to this principle it, too, must be seen as ‘performative.’ Helpful in this connection are the increasing number of studies that elaborate the consequences of the “performative turn” in language. The seminal text here is J. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1962. The extension of the term beyond language into other forms of expression has been usefully studied in E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Routledge, London, 2008. For its pertinence to architecture, see D. Leatherbarrow, “Architecture’s Unscripted Performance,” *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2009, pp. 43–68.

character. Movement, while typical for gesture, is not required for expression, only restraint or force, the force required for support of loads or resistance against the elements, for example.¹⁰ Stance shows disposition, no matter whether the figure is engaged or distracted. The same is true for sculptural works. Each of the figures that pace across the platform of Alberto Giacometti's *Four Men and a Woman* could not care less for the others who pass by or seem to converge, given their evident concern for what they see in the distance. The concentrated concentricity of August Rodin's *Thinker*, by contrast, indicates complete indifference to his surroundings. The postural inclinations of buildings perform similarly. Seemingly at rest, they are both oriented and at work. Each is inclined one way or another, toward attractive and away from unpleasant aspects of its vicinity, while maintaining its stance, which is to say holding itself up with more or less strain and defining its boundaries—all done expressively. No actor on stage ever suffered their surroundings more than buildings do. Like most of us, they work for a living. The ways that they hold their ground give them character on the stages we call streets and squares.

As I have done in a preliminary way above, Shaftesbury distinguished *kinds of beauty*. It can be seen in “dead forms,” he said, also “forms which form,” and “the supreme and sovereign” formative power, basically Nature. Terms that he used in place of my word *kinds* were “degrees” or “orders” of beauty.¹¹ With respect to the first order, the word “dead” probably overstates the case. He had in mind physical but lifeless things, a carved statue for example. While it may express vitality, it is incapable of the growth and movements that characterize plants, animals, and people. Some dead things are, nevertheless, beautiful, others not, as a result of more or less proportionality or congruence of parts.

The second kind of beauty is a little harder to grasp because it is neither artifactual nor directly perceptible, though traces of its effects can sometimes be seen. He had in mind the beauty of human minds, the “forms that form,” even form themselves, through self-discipline,

¹⁰ Within the long history and ample literature on gesture and inclination, recent studies that are pertinent here include two texts by G. Agamben, *Karman: A Brief Treatise on Action, Guilt, and Gesture*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2018, and *Means Without End*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000, and a marvelous study on the communicative sense of posture, A. Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2016.

¹¹ Shaftesbury, “The Moralists,” p. 228.

self-converse, self-education, and so on. Shaftesbury repeatedly stressed the intellectual capacity at work in form-making of this kind, the cognitive power that beautifies things. When referring to architecture, he generally used the word design for this intelligence. Earlier I included an artist's eyes and hands in design work, embodied intelligence. He did not. Yet, in 17th century English usage and still today design can mean either (a) drawing, including the process of drawing and the outcome of that process, or it can indicate a conception, scheme, plan, or plot.¹²

The third and last of Shaftesbury's beauties, ranked highest, was that of still another kind of mind, the Deity's. His honorific titles for this form-making power included "Empowering Creatress" and "Sovereign Genius." It was the power that endowed a location with its beauty, the "genius of a place," as well as that of the rhapsodic genius or master artist whose words, paintings, or buildings show that same well-proportioned completeness, especially in their behaviors.¹³ These orders or degrees of beauty were then coupled with corresponding dimensions of a thing, artifact, or person's character, its physical, moral, and divine qualities. There was, I've noted, a clear hierarchy among these forms and the beauties they possess, lowest to highest as I've listed them. Just as proportionality or harmony comes in degrees, so do mind, reason, and design.

THE ABJECT STATE

The surprising aspect of Shaftesbury's account on which I would like to focus is what he had to say about the beauty of *disproportionate* figures, things that are incompletely formed or in decay. In his philosophical rhapsody he explained that things that lack completeness and congruence among their parts nevertheless enable understanding the formative power of the higher kinds of order, despite their "abject state." For the penetrating mind, waste lands and decayed figures are not without beauty. Incomplete things please and instruct when they are seen to play their part in the workings of a more comprehensive order, that of the natural world, over time.

¹² See M. Baxandall, "English *Disegno*," in *Words for Pictures: Seven Papers on Renaissance Art and Criticism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2003, pp. 83–97.

¹³ The differences between natural figures, forms, and forces in Shaftesbury's thinking and landscape design is set out in D. Leatherbarrow, "Character, Geometry, and Perspective, or How Topography Conceals Itself," *Topographical Stories: Studies in Landscape and Architecture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004, pp. 131–168.

New Forms arise: and when the old dissolve, the Matter whence they were compos'd is not left useless but wrought with equal Management and Art, even in *Corruption*, Nature's seeming Waste and vile Abhorrence. The abject State appears merely as the Way or Passage to some better [...] even *the Way it-self*[is] equal to the *End*.¹⁴

The thought is remarkable insofar as it gives equal value to things that change and those that remain the same, meaning, as he says, *the end* is equal to *the way*. The thesis restates his beautifying principle: the beautifying (a process, passage, or movement) not the beautified (the completed, finished, or finalized) is what is really beautiful. Shaftesbury's accent here is on the movement toward or retreat from the harmonious state, a path that is not only inevitable for concretely existing things but indicative of the malformed part's role in the order of the whole. Each part participates in something greater than itself, a system, whose workings unfold over time according to laws of growth and decline, "incessant & Eternal Chang & Conversion of things one into another."¹⁵ There is, then, beauty in growth and ruin insofar as they reveal the operations of the widely comprehensive "Divine Economy." For both living things and artifacts—my concern is with architecture—form is both condemned to the time of the whole and saved by it, redeemed, so to speak, by the diurnal and seasonal cycles that follow one another in years, decades, and centuries, as well as the sequences of (re)birth, growth, decay, and death. The beauty that is apparent in things beautified by human or divine power is always only apparent for a while and to a limited degree. But beauty of this kind, fugitive and fragmentary though it must be, is beauty nonetheless.

ADJUSTING STANDARDS

Although Shaftesbury had a very large personal library, he possessed only a few texts devoted specifically to architecture. As one would expect of a 17th-18th century thinker who addressed architecture in his writings, he had a copy of the oldest treatise we have on the subject, Vitruvius' *On Architecture*. In fact, he had two.¹⁶ He would have studied other writers

¹⁴ Shaftesbury, "The Moralists," pp. 205–206.

¹⁵ B. Rand (ed.), "Self," in *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen of Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury*, Swan and Sonnenschein, London, 1900, p. 122.

¹⁶ He had two copies in Latin: Vitruvius, *De architectura libri decem*, ed. J. de Laet, Amsterdam, 1649, and Vitruvius, *De architectura libri decem*, ed. G. Philander, Lyon, 1586.

on the concepts of order, proportion, symmetry, and harmony, of course, but I will focus on the Vitruvian account because it is sufficient for grasping the implications of his appreciation of decay, fragmentation, and disproportionality, as they relate to the beauty of approximations.

The key concepts of architectural order in Vitruvius' text are set out in Book 1, chapter 2, which Frank Granger, the translator of the standard bi-lingual translation titled "Of What Things Architecture Consists."¹⁷ Two are directly pertinent here, *symmetry* and *eurythmy*. Shelves of commentaries on these terms exist, mainly because the Vitruvian text shifts between Latin and Greek and is both repetitive and indefinite. I will be as brief as possible.

Concerning symmetry, the clearest and simplest definition is *commensurability of parts*. Today's most common conception of symmetry, one side of a body mirroring the other, is not central in the Vitruvian account. That idea began to play an outsized role in architectural theory in late 17th and 18th century French writings.¹⁸ The Latin rendering of the Greek term was *proportio* (proportion), a term that in the ancient period and now indicates a regular relationship among the parts that make up a whole, portions as they are due, like servings that are shared in a meal among friends. Measure is indicated by Greek term symmetry (*symmetros*: *syn* + *metron*). It can be rendered as 'of like measure.' A third term that has been used just as often in both ancient and subsequent writings on architecture and other arts, especially music, is harmony. Shaftesbury, for example, used the terms symmetry, proportionality, and harmony synonymously. Vitruvius wrote: "symmetry also is the appropriate harmony arising out of the details of the work itself; the correspondence of each given detail among the separate details to the form of the design as a whole."¹⁹ He explained that commensurability, correspondence, or harmony can be seen in relationships among the parts of the human body (fingers, palms, arms, etc.) and among the notes and phrases heard in a musical composition. Concordance also exists among the celestial bodies, later called the harmony of the spheres. More abstractly, proportionality

Thanks to the conscientious efforts of John Locke, who had put in charge of his education, he was able to read both Latin and Greek from his early years.

¹⁷ Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1970, pp. 25ff. Another English language translator, Morris Hickey Morgan, titles this chapter "The Fundamental Principles of Architecture."

¹⁸ One historian described the concern as obsessive; see Robin Middleton, "Symmetry: A French Obsession," *Daedalus*, 15, 1985, pp. 71–81.

¹⁹ Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, I, 2, 4, p. 27.

can exist in geometric figures and among numbers. These would often be implicit or latent in architecture, neither seen nor directly apprehended, but *formative* in the design. Further, but more concretely, such correspondence could be discovered at different scales in architectural elements and their relationships to one another, the parts and spacings of columns, temples, building sites, and towns. And finally, the parts that correspond can be both physical objects and functions. We have seen that this thesis was repeated in Shaftesbury. Vitruvius acknowledged his dependence on earlier sources, writers on architecture, art, and philosophy, for example, among whom were many that had drawn upon authors who addressed health and disease. In ancient medicine, good health resulted from the right balance or proportionality of a body's constituent elements, typically the four humors. Ill-health, by contrast, resulted from an imbalance of elements. Sickness could be seen in a person's demeanor just as clearly as good health. Adjustments to diet for the sake of a cure were determined on a case-by-case basis.²⁰ In each of these arts, medicine, music, and architecture, the purpose of symmetrical ordering was to achieve outcomes that are healthy, good, and beautiful in their kind.

The perfection of a symmetrical composition, however, is most vivid in design, much more so than in concrete fact, given the compromises that all projects suffer. But even when apparent in a built work, the beauty that results from the completeness of composition and finality of construction will exist for a limited time only. Changes in neighboring conditions will alter and eventually eclipse it, as will changes that may seem less dramatic but are no less important, variations in perceptual vantage. Hence the corresponding concept of *eurhythmy*, whose two-part Greek stem means roughly *good rhythm*. One critic has suggested that no term in ancient art criticism has received more discussion than this one.²¹ The Greek term *rhythmos* is especially difficult. For our purposes, however, the Vitruvian explanation is largely sufficient. This quality of a work results from "a suitable display of details in their context."²² Though one might assume that such a display would result from the symmetries of a design,

²⁰ For a recent elaboration of the Hippocratic understanding of medical treatment (diagnosis and therapy) that stresses the particularity of cases, as opposed to general norms of good health, see H.-G. Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996.

²¹ This claim was made by a very reliable source: J. J. Pollitt, *An Ancient View of Greek Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1974, p. 173.

²² Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, I, 2, 3, p. 27.



Figure 2. Parthenon, Athens. Photograph by S. Mavrommatis.
Optical refinements shown in the upwardly curving base
platform, *crepidoma*, at all three levels.

typically that was not the case. A “graceful semblance” was achieved by adjustment, alteration, or variation of well-balanced measures. Because the idea is decisive for what follows, Vitruvius can be quoted at length:

The architect's greatest care must be that his buildings should have the design determined by the proportions of a fixed unit. When therefore account has been taken of the symmetries of the design and the dimensions have been worked out by calculation, it is then the business of his skill to have regard to the nature of the site, either for use or beauty, to produce a proper balance by adjustment, adding or subtracting from the symmetry of the design, so that it may seem to be rightly planned and the elevation may lack nothing.²³

Following this passage, Vitruvius explained how appearances change when vantages change, as when the approach and resulting view happen to be downward or upward, or oblique rather than frontal. His recommendation for alteration was compensatory. The designer was to adjust the symmetries in lieu the work's particular location, its levels, intrusions, vacancies, shadow casting, and so on. Eurhythmy rendered abstract symmetry concrete, concretely perceptible. For the sake of a symmetrical appearance, what might be called *optical symmetry*, the work's parts had to be made disproportionate, for only then would the whole composition *seem* to be well-proportioned. Ingenuity was required for this, not reliance on established norms.

Numbers alone were ineffective because “what is real [symmetrical order] seems false,” and what is false [eurythmic adjustments] seems true. A work's perceptible beauty, on this account, is both contingent and approximate, incomplete in its proportionality, less than ideal, only an approximation, or, rendered positively, *an ideal in those circumstances*. The prejudice in favor of appearance over essence was hardly new during the years of Vitruvius' authorship. Early examples of curvature in the base of temples (figure 2) occur in the mid-sixth century BCE, five centuries before the lines on eurythmy I've cited were written.

Roughly a century after Vitruvius, Heron of Alexandria argued similarly. Usefully, he named the instruments of approximation: “the final goal of an architect is to make the work well-proportioned for the perception and, as far as possible, to find counter-devices, *alexemata*, against the

²³ Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, VI, 2, 1, p. 2.

deceptions of the eye, aiming at equal dimensions and harmonic inter-relations not in truth but for the appearance to the eye.”²⁴ Among these counter-devices were the thickening of columns near the middle so that they wouldn’t appear to be too narrow, or, as Vitruvius recommended, adding an upward curve to the base platform so that it wouldn’t appear to dip downward. An early 20th century scholar referred to these adjustments as “temperamental refinements.”²⁵ The aim of the swellings and contractions was to breathe life²⁶ into the work by dispelling conceptual rigidity. These adjustments would give it the “pulsation of a living organism.”²⁷ Here beauty is at once non-metric and animated, which is to say both disproportionate and seemingly endowed with life.

FRAGMENTS GIVEN AND DESIGNED

Alberti, we have seen, gave a particularly clear and forceful definition of architectural beauty resulting from the congruence of a work’s component parts. In his attempt to overcome the ambiguities of Vitruvius’ Latin-Greek terminology, he avoided discussion of symmetry and focused on proportionality.²⁸ Proportionate relationships among parts could be seen in elements of construction, the dimensions of rooms, the geometrical configuration of types, and the programmatic organization of urban areas, even entire cities. When a column is to be fifteen feet tall, the diameter at the base must be divided into sixths, five of which give the diameter at the top. The length of an atrium must never be more than twice its width. The width of drawing rooms should be no less than two thirds their length. At a larger scale, each of the arches that support a long bridge should take up no more than one fifteenth of the total opening. As with ancient writers, harmony should also be seen in operation, by analogy with health in the human body: “What is good health but

²⁴ Heron of Alexandria, *Definitiones* (135.13), cited in L. Haselberger (ed.), *Appearance and Essence Refinements of Classical Architecture: Curvature*, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1999, pp. 58–59.

²⁵ W. H. Goodyear, *Greek Refinements: Studies in Temperamental Architecture*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1912.

²⁶ Here Goodyear, p. 87, is citing F. Kugler, *Geschichte der Baukunst*, vol. 1, Ebner & Seubert, Stuttgart, 1867, p. 199.

²⁷ This term, cited by Goodyear, p. 87, is from C. Schnaase, *Geschichte der bildenden Künste*, Julius Budaus, Düsseldorf, 1866, pp. 51–52.

²⁸ The word symmetry, in its Latin form, does not appear in the lemmatized concordance of his treatise. See *Leon Battista Alberti, De re aedificatoria: A Lemmatized Concordance*, compiler J. Fresnillo Núñez, Olms/Weidmann, Hildesheim, 1966.

a moderation composed of a fabric of different extremes? The mean is always pleasing.”²⁹ Although lapidary, his statement of principle in his book on painting posits the premise clearly: “Bodies ought to harmonize together in the *istoria* in both size and function.”³⁰ Compositions, thus, were to be copious and coherent in arrangement and animation. Beauty results not from the perfection of symmetry or vitality but their combination, conflictual though that combination will be.

Alberti was under no illusions about an architect's ability to achieve the unity envisaged in conception with what could be accomplished in built fact. With respect to the desired outline of a town, for example, he acknowledged that “it is understandable that the outline of a town and the distribution of its parts will need to vary according to location: in the mountains, for example, it is clearly impossible to lay out the walls in a circle, rectangle, or whatever shape you choose, as you might on a level and open plain.”³¹ And what was true for natural terrain was also true for urban areas in which new projects were to be located, for buildings that pre-dated a fresh design also prevented the full realization of its ideal beauty, as envisaged in a mental image or rendered apparent in a drawing or model. Like so many of his time, in architecture and other fields, Alberti's preoccupation with the ancient world, his longing for its rebirth, led to unending work with fragments, for that is all that survived from antiquity. Wholeness may have been imagined in the past and desired for the future, but partiality was what was given. A line from three centuries later, Friedrich Schlegel's famous observation on fragments in *Athenaeum Fragments* (1798) seems to have been anticipated by Renaissance designers and authors: “many works of the ancients have become fragments,” and are known only in the form of ruins, and “many works of the moderns are fragments at the time of their origin.”³² Alberti's projects make the inevitability of approximation perfectly clear, also its particular kind of beauty.

Like most of his built works, Alberti's project for the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini (figure 3) involved working with a pre-existing building.³³

²⁹ L.B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, V, 8, p. 130.

³⁰ L. B. Alberti, *On Painting*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1956, p. 75.

³¹ L. B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, IV, 3, p. 100.

³² F. Schlegel, “Athenaeum Fragments,” in *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1968, p. 134.

³³ Among the many accounts of Alberti's built work, the text I've found to be most useful is R. Tavernor, *On Alberti and the Art of Building*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998.



Figure 3. Leon Battista Alberti, Tempio Malatestiano, Rimini, c. 1450, side elevation arches. Photograph by D. eatherbarrow.

In this case it was the Church of San Francesco, which had already been modified by a series of additions, starting from early years of the 14th century. His work began in the 1440's. It, too, was phased. Remodeling the inside came first. This was followed by the construction of an external shell, rather like a new building encasing an old one.

Within the interior there is much ornamentation that resulted from his specifications, largely classical in character. The most significant alterations, however, occurred in the structuring of the bays that flank the central nave on both sides. Alberti rebuilt the groin vaults and pointed-arch windows. They were not patterned after the geometries he preferred (ancient Roman), but regional forms, both Lombardic and Venetian. His aim, one can reasonably infer, was to give the interior space unity of style, incomplete though that unity had to be. Complete coherence was also sought but only approximated in the shell he added. Here, again, there were precedents for the new elements, but in this part of the project they were ancient and Roman not recent and regional. The side walls are less articulated than the façade, but more indicative of his double-wall solution: regularly spaced arches rested on a high base that surrounded the entire building. Because daylight was obviously necessary for the interior, the arches gave the 'gothic' windows ample wall space where possible. Still, they were often misaligned with the arches and set back within the rather deeply recessed plane of the older fabric, hidden in shadow from most angles, given the depth of the arches.

Where possible he used classical elements and spacings to reform the existing building, bringing it closer to the order and coherence of an ancient temple, as expressed in both the elements and the proportional relationships that were apparent in their dimensions and geometries, as well as the intervals between the elements. Approximations on the inside were largely surficial, on the outside far more substantial and more regular, but far from ideal. The same is true for his work on Santa Maria Novella in Florence (figures 4 and 5). But in that case the two approximations were compressed into one layered or thickened surface.

The main body of the church dates from the late 13th century. During these same years the lower part of the main façade was under construction, notably the tombs that were installed at the base of the façade and the long wall on the right side. Each tomb was set into a pointed arch niche that was clad with marble in two colors, white and green, the same colors and material that were used in some of the city's major monuments, the Baptistry of San Giovanni and the Duomo at the city center,



Figure 4. Leon Battista Alberti, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1470, entry portal. Photograph by D. Leatherbarrow.

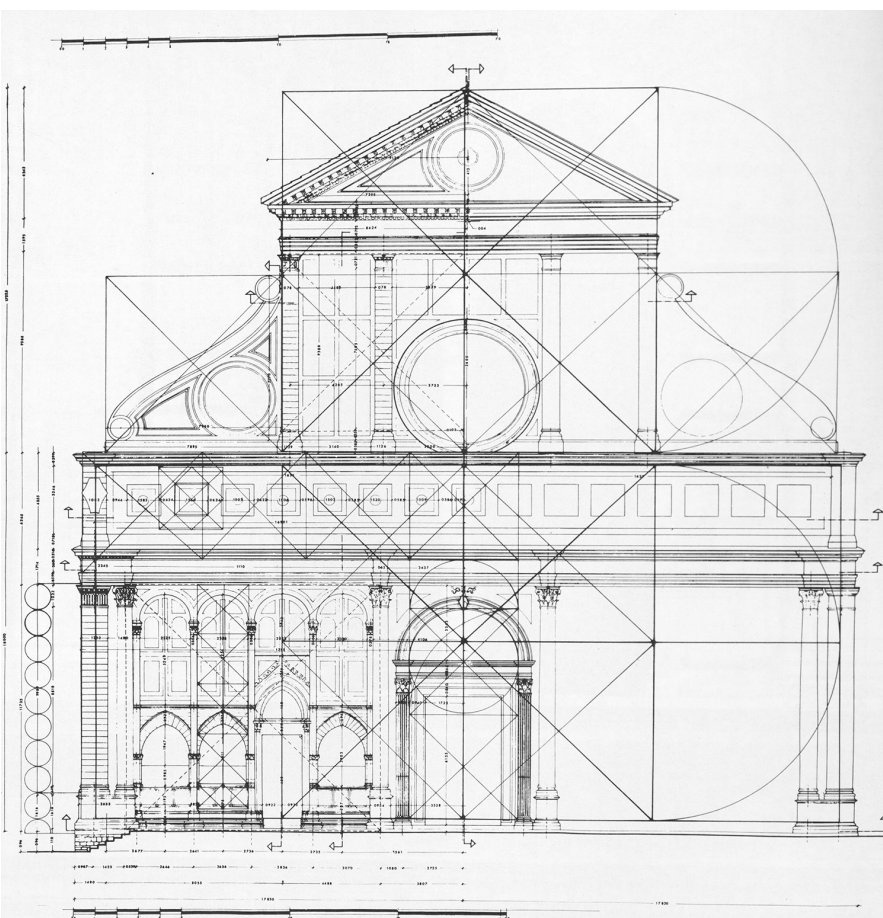


Figure 5. Leon Battista Alberti, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1470, proportional scheme drawn over pre-existing conditions. Courtesy of Robert Tavernor.

for example, and San Miniato al Monte (12th century) on a hill nearby. Thanks to the wealth and power of his client, the task of completing the façade was taken from the architect who had started the work and given to Alberti, though the work that had been partially completed was to be preserved, as was the placement, geometry, and dimension of the second level circular window. In short, Alberti had no choice but to reckon with an inheritance, torn fabric and rags once again. His task was to beautify what he was given as much as possible, despite the disproportionate character of the medieval elements. This meant altering and adapting the size, position, and relationships of his forms, resulting in a double incompleteness. Norms could not be followed throughout, nor could he abandon them. Because perfect unity, the defining characteristic of architectural beauty that can be envisaged and represented in drawings and models, was impossible in these circumstances he approximated it.

In Florence, as in Rimini, simple geometric forms and whole number lengths set the outer limits or definition of the composition, a square and its regular subdivisions in the first case, sixty Florentine feet in the second. To achieve the desired width, the new marble surface had to extend slightly beyond the outer edges of the existing brick building. That same dimension set the overall height, rendered visible by the apex of the pediment, limiting the entire composition to the shape of a perfect square. Next, he used that square's half-height line as the upper limit of the tall side-to-side string course. Its height seems excessively high but was determined by the line I have just mentioned and the upper edge of the entablature above the ground level pilasters. Four smaller, equally sized and commensurate squares were then formed by subdividing the initial larger one. The width of the raised temple front, beneath its pediment, was then given the same dimension as the smaller half squares. This process of subdivision, guaranteeing congruency, was then followed further, setting limits and finding places for smaller and smaller parts.

Yet, some odd placements and details resulted from the inevitable negotiation between preferred and pre-existing forms and relationships. The large central window, for example, could not be moved but was too low in the upper "temple's" arrangement of elements. A slightly higher, more central position would have been much better. From a normal vantage point along the route toward the front door the lower part of its frame disappears behind the protruding edge of the high string course. Less of it is seen the closer one gets to the front door. Similarly conflicted are the proportions of the lower-level pilasters and engaged columns at the far

left and right. They are much too slender for their height. The columns are about half the width of the pilasters to their sides, despite the fact that they are just as tall. The disproportionality is obvious. The pilasters look flat and wide, the columns too tall. Further, the lower-level arches do not reach their points of support and surrounding frames are incomplete.

If this façade can be said to have beauty, it would not be that of a temple one could envisage in the mind's eye, nor even one that could be drawn or represented in a scale model. Rather it would have to be a beauty that resulted from the getting good results in unpropitious circumstances. His sense of the fallibility of mental images was beautifully expressed in a somewhat confessional line in the part of his treatise that addressed faults and failures: "I have often conceived of projects in the mind that seemed quite commendable at the time; but when I translated them into drawings, I found several errors in the very parts that pleased me the most, and quite serious ones"³⁴

DISPROPORTIONATE PROPORTIONS

Alberti was not the only Renaissance architect whose work demonstrates the victory of actual over envisaged beauties. Andrea Palladio's Basilica in Vicenza (figures 6, 8, and 9) is another instructive case in point. Like Alberti's church in Rimini, the task was to design and build a new shell for an entire building, though only three of its four sides were exposed. The core of the existing construction had to remain more or less untouched, despite the fact that part of it had recently collapsed. But its geometries were far from regular and the dimensions of the bays that formed the outer perimeter were unequal. In response, Palladio developed a fascinating strategy for coupling the old and new, not by covering one with the other, as in the Tempio Malatestiano, nor by changing the dimension and shape of properly proportioned elements, as in Santa Maria Novella, but by adjusting the spacing between the parts that differed in kind, basically columns and arches. The disproportions of what pre-dated his project were thus creatively incorporated into the correct proportions of his new façades (figure 7). The result could be called a work of architecture that is *disproportionately proportionate*.

In his treatise, Palladio set out the preferred proportions of a town hall. He argued that the modern type should be modeled on an ancient

³⁴ L. B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, IX, 10, p. 317.

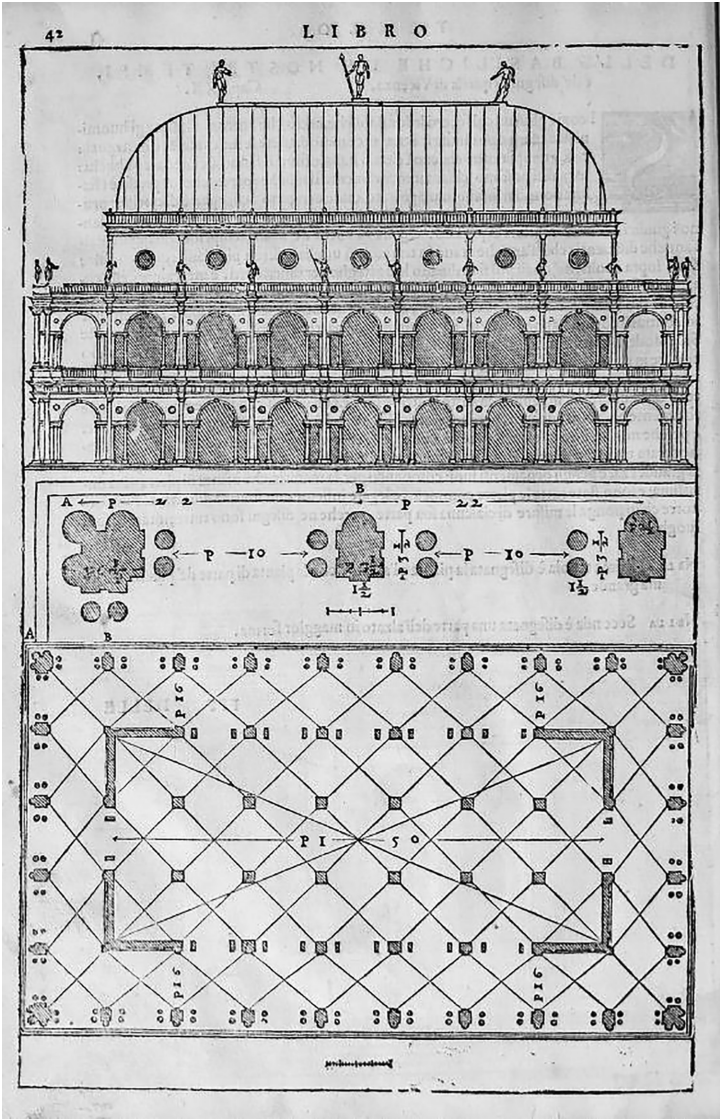


Figure 6. Andrea Palladio, Basilica, Vicenza, published in his treatise, 1570. Asian Architectural Archive Center.

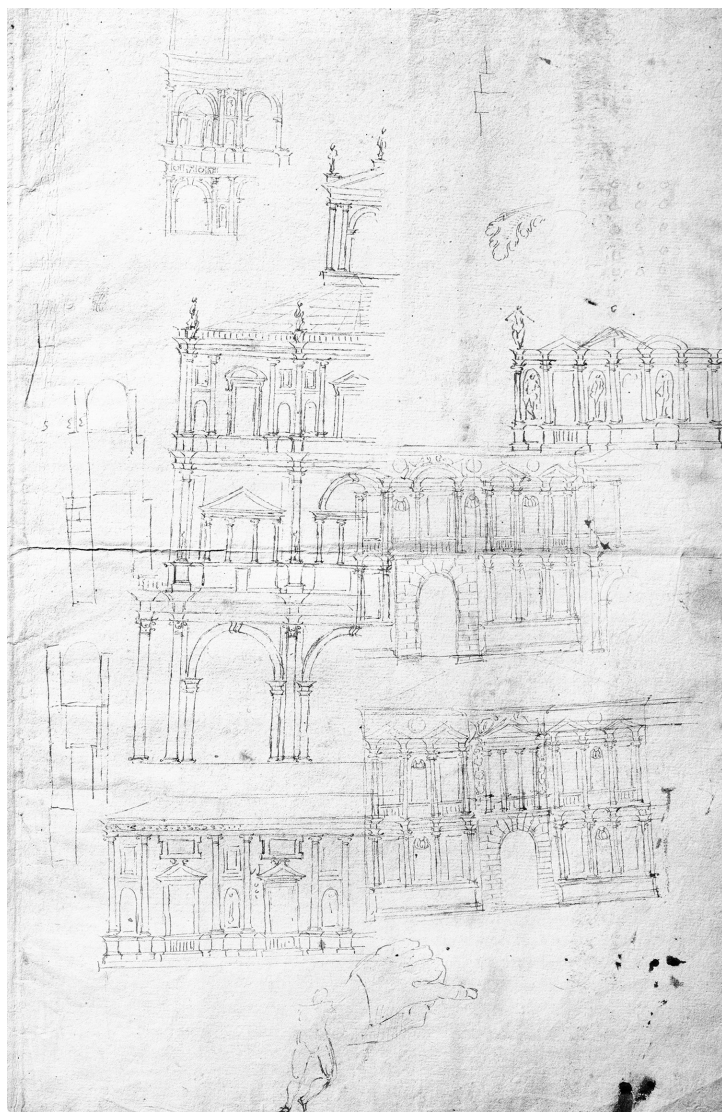


Figure 7. Andrea Palladio, sketches for façades and porticos, 1554. RIBA Library.

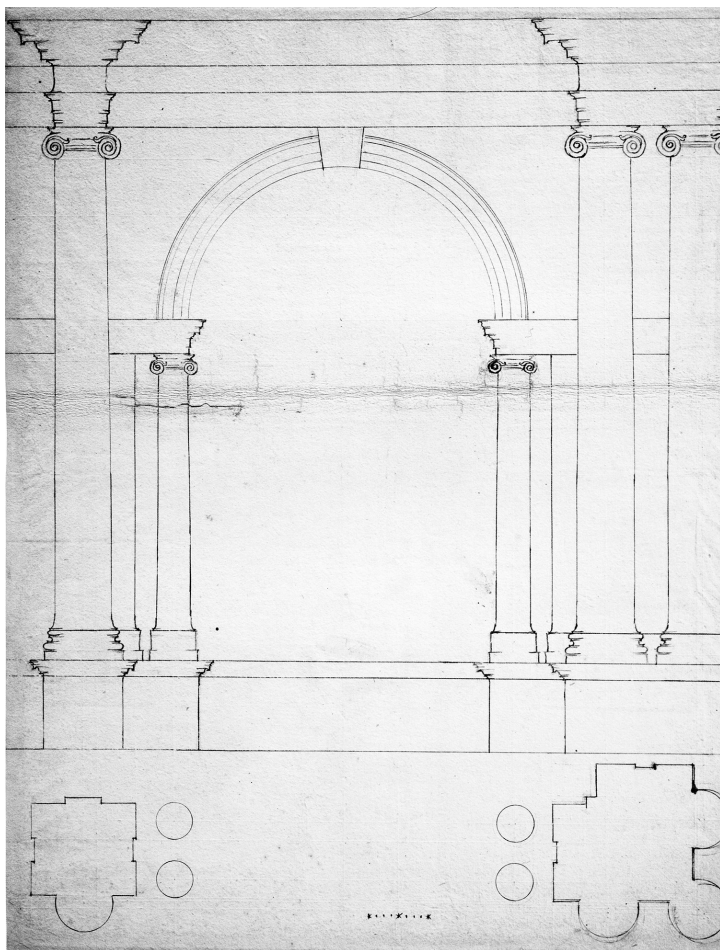


Figure 8. Andrea Palladio, Basilica, Vicenza, preliminary drawing, 1546. RIBA Library.



Figure 9. Andrea Palladio, Basilica, Vicenza, 1549, columns, arches, and spacing on front façade. Photograph by D. Leatherbarrow.

Roman precedent, the basilica, because of comparable functions and similar standing in the ancient and modern cultures. On his account, guided by Vitruvius, he observed that the ancient model typically had a width that was no less than a third its length, nor more than a half, provided the site did not force a change to these preferred relationships.³⁵ There were, however, differences between the old and new types: the ancient ones had “their feet firmly on the ground” (the main space at ground level), and the modern ones raised the main room up a level, making room for commercial shops below. The porticoes he designed gave access to these shops and enclosed a long balcony outside the council room above.

The architecture of the enclosing shell is composite, trabeated configuration above arcuated below. With respect to the first, the pre-existing piers were encased in a framework of half columns attached to piers and entablatures. At both levels these elements were designed and built according to defined rules for proportioning the orders, Doric columns below, Ionic above. As for the second composition, he designed an arrangement of arches and smaller columns that would span between the piers. In this case, too, the elements were correctly proportioned.

The key issue is the variation—disproportionality—of the spaces between the column-arch arrangement and the half-column-pier framework. Bay-by-bay he altered the distances between the two arrangements as a way of compensating for the irregular spacing of the pre-existing piers. In some cases, the gap on one side is only a third of the width of the gap on the other side, resulting in intercolumniation that was clearly disproportionate. Yet, from a distance the whole composition looks regular because of the repetition and proportionality of the major elements. Against their prominent unity, the discordant spacings recede into the background. The building seems to be beautifully congruent but is not. Neither the old core nor the new shell is complete and well-proportioned in its entirety, but the work is magnificent nonetheless—maybe because of its coupling of desired and given kinds of order, abstract *and* concrete, invariant *and* timely.

Two examples from more recent times (17th and 20th centuries) can be used to show the continuity of this understanding of architectural beauty into the modern period, an understanding that manifests itself in different ways and suggests, I think, that the complementarity of architecture’s kinds of beauty is more important than their rank.

³⁵ A. Palladio, *The Four Books on Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997, III, 19, p. 200.

DESIGN AS NEGOTIATION

The 17th century case I have in mind was built just before Shaftesbury developed his arguments about the three orders or degrees of beauty, Antoine Le Pautre's Hôtel de Beauvias in Paris.³⁶ Here, the adjustments of prescribed norms and approximations to what one can imagine was Le Pautre's mental image appear in plan, not elevation, and the irregularities generated by pre-existing conditions are located at the edges of the layout, not its core (figure 10). The nearly perfect regularities that were built are found in the geometry of the central court, a geometry that is rather complex when compared to the designs and recommendations for similar spaces by Palladio, Alberti, and Vitruvius, closer to the plan arrangements of Baroque architects like Cortona or Bernini, Neumann or Santini.

The plan of Hôtel de Beauvias has been described as an "ingenious adaptation to the irregularities and constraints of the difficult site [...] [a] brilliant adjustment of rooms to the site."³⁷ Le Pautre's treatise³⁸ shows a number of projects that did not have to contend with these kinds of constraints, projects that expressed desired proportionality throughout, designs that were wonderfully "beautified" is Shaftesbury's terminology. Yet, if one has in mind ancient arguments about the lifeless and somewhat mechanical character of normative solutions, one might find the "beautifying" character of Le Pautre's constrained project the one that is "really beautiful."

When the pre-existing buildings on the Hôtel de Beauvias site had been cleared and digging for the foundation walls begun still deeper remnants of earlier buildings were discovered. Faced with the choice of further excavations for their removal, surely time consuming and costly work, Le Pautre decided to incorporate what remained into the substructure of his new building, not only for support, as if it were bedrock, but also for the outline of a few of the key elements in the plan's geometry: the depth of the front set of rooms, the circular configuration of the entry vestibule, the overall width of the central court, the angle of the mid-block passage to a neighboring street, and the semi-circular shape of the court's end wall,

³⁶ An excellent study of Le Pautre's built work, including this project is R. W. Berger, *Antoine Le Pautre: A French Architect of the Era of Louis XIV*, New York University Press, New York, 1969.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁸ A. Le Pautre, *Les oeuvres d'architecture d'Antoine Le Pautre*, Paris, 1652.

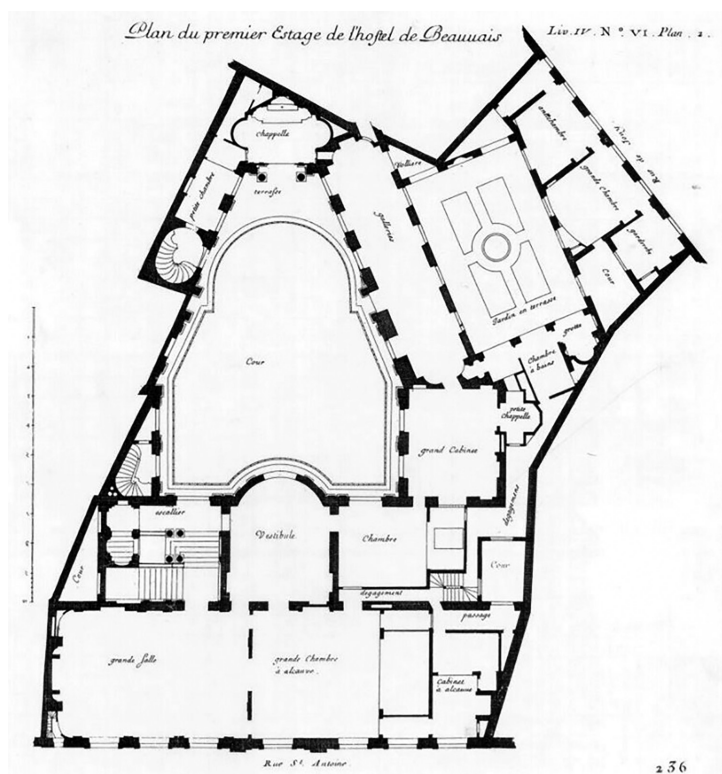


Figure 10. Antoine Le Pautre, Hôtel de Beauvias, Paris, 1657, ground plan. Asian Architectural Archive Center.



Figure 11. Antoine Le Pautre, Hôtel de Beauvias, Paris, 1657, central court. Photograph by J. Bitard.

which supports the façade of a small chapel on the second floor. Although a desire for multi-scenic, theatrical visibility of elements within the court played an important role in Le Pautre's design of this part of the plan, there can be no doubt that he was similarly committed to configurations and (dis)proportions that obeyed other rules, less visual than functional, designed not for show but support. The challenge, of course, was that the outlines of the subsurface supports were fragmentary and irregular.

The reasoning at work here is at once economic and aesthetic. Le Pautre was just as concerned with making use of pre-existing conditions, despite their irregularity, as he was with the proportions, harmonies, and complexities of the elements he would compose. Thus far, I have stressed his concern with the central court. The front façade occupied his attention no less, its elements, the spacings between them, and overall congruence of the composition. The wide rusticated pilasters that frame the entry, for example, give proper emphasis to the entry point and axis of passage, but also coordinate the three levels through changes in their size and proportions (base, cap, and blocks) as they rise through the four levels. In point of fact, the street's narrowness prevents a view that could appreciate the façade's compositional beauty.

Because of the way Le Pautre interpreted the site, there is no similar obstruction to one's view of the central court (figure 11). Its coherence becomes increasingly apparent as one passes from the façade threshold toward the vestibule and stair, which is to say its beauty is obvious before one reaches the court itself—the first steps initiate what I referred to as multi-scenic and theatrical configuration. The court is a four-part arrangement that consists of the protruding back arc of the vestibule, a double-square rectangular space that gives the outdoor room its wide amplitude, the symmetrical diagonal walls that narrow that space and accelerate the view toward a half-circle drum at the rear that both fronts the stables and supports the little chapel above, itself surmounted by a covered balcony (no longer visible today, once it was fully enclosed).

Negotiation with pre-existing conditions was part of the process of both design and construction. Its result is, I think, a design that is more animated, lively, and articulate than those in the treatise, whose ideal beauty did not face the challenges of dense urban conditions and historically structured and sedimented sites. Beautifying can be said to be the process whereby desires and constraints jointly contribute to works that discover the possibilities of beauty within the conflicted worlds that design is often given.

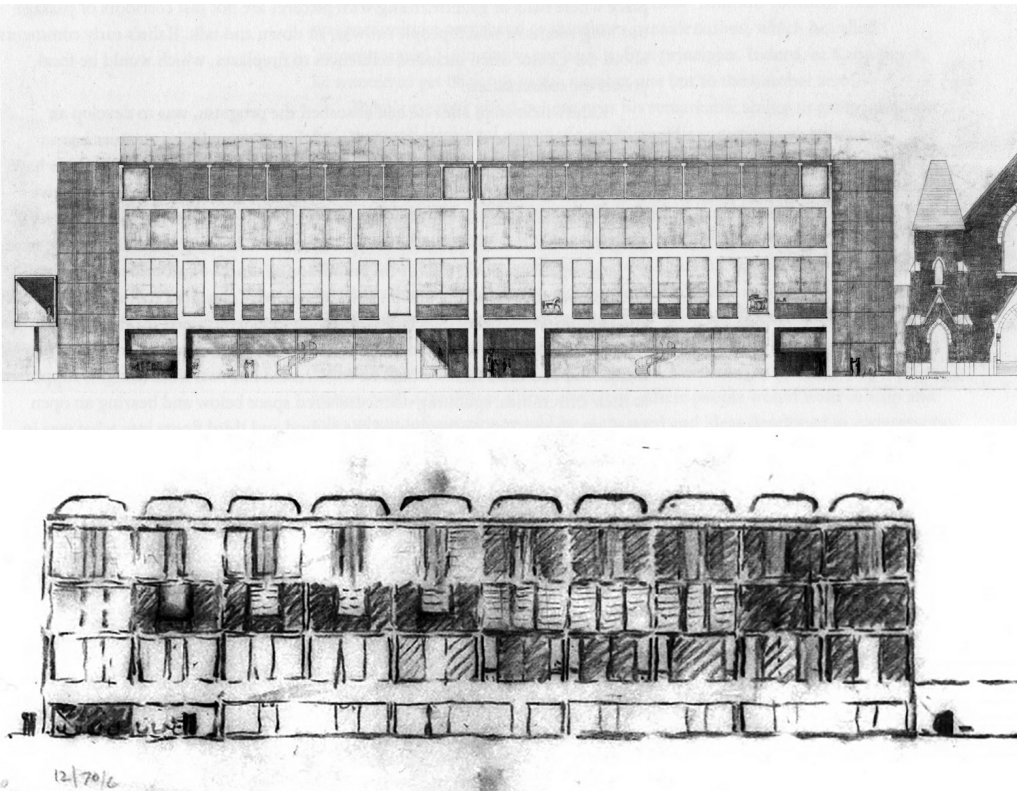


Figure 12 (above). Louis I. Kahn, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, 1974, preliminary façade design. Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. Figure 13 (below). Louis I. Kahn, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, 1974, later stage façade design. Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

ORDER IS AND IS NOT

Louis Kahn's initial design for the Yale Center for British Art was doubly symmetrical in both plan and elevation; that is to say symmetrical in both the modern, bi-lateral sense of the term, and in the ancient sense of congruent elements and intervals forming a complete configuration. The regularity of the composition partly resulted from Kahn's choice of a reinforced concrete frame as the structural system. The distribution of spaces followed the distribution of structural elements. Enclosed within the bays of the framework were commercial shops at street level—one-bay-one-shop—with a large open court behind, together with an auditorium, museum workshops, and main stair. The early plans show a struggle to preserve this regularity, given the many and varied elements of the program.

Also adding to the struggle was the fact that the building was sited on a street corner within the regular grid of this part of New Haven. The early elevation and plans show that Kahn first proposed entrances on both streets, with the main one occupying the center of the long façade (figure 12). The bi-lateral and axial configuration thus seems rather indifferent to the asymmetrical character of the site, a building on one side, sidewalk and street on the other, the second obviously more public than the first. For several reasons, this initial design was rejected and a number of alternatives followed (see figure 13). The approximations on which I will focus made their appearance when he negotiated with the site more directly.

In the final project the structural system and the intervals it defined largely remained, but the corner bay was left unenclosed, creating an ample, if unexpectedly open entry forecourt. The relocation of the entry from the center to the corner seems to have come as a result of a suggestion by the Center's director. He thought it would serve as a wide and encouraging invitation to university students.

Another consequence of the reconfiguration was that the otherwise orthogonal composition of walls and voids, parallel and perpendicular to the streets and grid, was interrupted by an implied diagonal, passing from the corner column (figure 14), standing on its own where the sidewalks meet, to another free-standing support at the forecourt's center (figure 15), and terminating to the right of the entry doors that are cut into the forecourt's back wall. Light from the interior court attracts passage through an otherwise rather dark space. The prevailing orthogonality of the plan reorients passage once the threshold has been passed,

bay-by-bay, open court to open court, with cylindrical stair volumes placed along the central axis.

Apart from its suitability in an urban project, the corner entry and void, framed and figured most vividly by the stand-alone column, interrupts the plan's primary order. That interruption, together with the marginalized corner support can be understood as either a shortcoming of the solution, an incomplete realization of thorough-going congruence, or it can be understood as a beautiful coordination of incongruities: a repetitive order of structure and bays mated to an asymmetrical urban location, a perimeter of planar surfaces harboring a shadowed void, and a largely orthogonal configuration that welcomes a diagonal, off-the-grid approach (figure 16). Other parts of the final design show a similar willingness to coordinate the order of the building with that of its surroundings, particularly at the other end of the long façade, where the sidewalk level gives way to steps that lead down to another open forecourt. Kahn's sense of "order" is thus not of a mental image, beautifully commensurate though it may be, nor of an initial design, doubly symmetrical as this one was, but of an approximation to those two, limited by but coordinated with the sizes, geometries, and operations of an arrangement that predated and would include anything inserted into them.

Vitruvius' recognition of the insufficiency of symmetry, like Shaftesbury's critique of "the beautified," suggests there is something inadequate about objects and figures that are perfectly and finally composed and constructed, they are likely to lack purpose, pertinence, and vitality, making them too good to be good enough when the structures, involvements, and freedoms of concrete existence are allowed to serve as their proper framework of judgment, less-than-ideal though they always are. The "order" about which Kahn spoke is not, I think, so much *in the work*, but *in and of the world* in which the building plays its part. In architecture, inflexible allegiance to norms leads to lifelessness. Almost always, perfect unity is a dream dreamt out in the course of project realization, despite the fact that it may have been needed to 'push the boat off the dock.' Another kind of beauty strikes me as more sensible, not because its realization is within the reach of design and construction, but because it is more fully integrative, which is to say it results in the coordination of works and worlds, the imagined permanence of the first in tension with the incessant change of the second.



Figure 14. Louis I. Kahn, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, 1974, free standing corner column. Photograph by D. Leatherbarrow.



Figure 15. Louis I. Kahn, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, 1974, entry column. Photograph by D. Leatherbarrow.

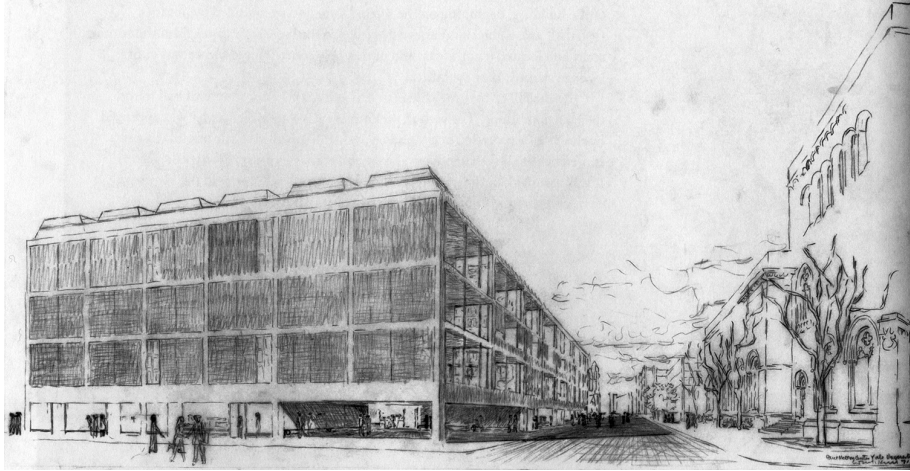


Figure 16. Louis I. Kahn, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, 1974, perspective of entry corner. Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

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Gordon Graham*

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 spaciouly 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.

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.

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.

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 stroke of wit?

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

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.

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.

[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

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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REQUIEM FOR A RELIC: THE CASE OF THE GREAT NORTHERN GRAIN ELEVATOR

ABSTRACT: Works of architecture are frequently valued for the distinctive profiles they lend to a cityscape, and when beautiful buildings fall into disrepair, reference to their aesthetic merit can support efforts for preservation and restoration. However, many historically important structures, such as industrial buildings, do not possess obvious aesthetic virtues, in the sense that their appearance is not immediately appealing. Consider an object such as the gigantic Great Northern grain elevator, which was built in 1897 and stood near the western terminus of the Erie Canal. This last of the “brick box” elevators was demolished in 2023 after preservation efforts mobilized on its behalf failed. It was not obviously beautiful, but its historical position conferred significant aesthetic merits.

KEYWORDS: historical preservation, architectural preservation, grain elevators, irreplaceability, relics

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INTRODUCTION

A “relic” is an artifact from the past that no longer performs its original function. Although it may be worn out or even fragmentary, it is more than trash. As an emblem of history, it merits preservation, pondering, admiration, even veneration. If a relic is small enough, it can be dispatched to a museum or historical collection. But if it is as large as a building, it is likely to be inconvenient and in the way, its shabby state a blight to the eye.

In addition to diminished practical function, an old building might have deteriorated to a point that there is risk to those who want to explore its remains. It might have been constructed with materials that no longer meet safety standards, and its size, shape, and interior may resist repurposing for contemporary use. As a consequence, old buildings often become marked for demolition, sometimes too quickly to assess their value with sufficient care. The promised gains of demolishing the old to make way for the new are immediate and obvious: productive development for neighborhoods, cities, regions. What is lost may be harder to detect. Hence the continuing, and often losing, battles for historic preservation.

Considering buildings no longer in use addresses aesthetic concerns of architecture from a backward-looking direction, assessing what valuable features remain that demand protection. If a building represents a period of innovative design or technology, arguments for its preservation can invoke its historical importance. Works of architecture frequently provide distinctive aesthetic attributes to a cityscape, and when especially beautiful buildings fall into disrepair, reference to their aesthetic merit can support efforts for their retention and maintenance. Historical and aesthetic values, unfortunately, provide relatively weak grounds for preservation, because potential (or promised) economic benefits for demolition and redevelopment are apt to command loud voices and financial muscle. Thus ethical, political, and economic matters are also in play, along with questions of responsibility to communities and to future generations.¹

This already weak position is magnified by the fact that many historically important buildings do not possess obvious aesthetic virtues,

¹ For a review of the ethical, political, and economic factors that over-determined the fate of the Great Northern, see D. A. Gerber and C. Korsmeyer, “When Memory Fades and Resources Run Dry,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Architectural Reconstruction*, Z. Somhegyi and L. Giombini, (eds.), Routledge, London/New York, 2024, pp. 345–359.

in the sense that their appearance is not immediately appealing. To put it bluntly, they are not “beautiful.” This essay concerns one such structure, the Great Northern grain elevator that once stood along the Buffalo River. After the failure of legal attempts to block its demolition, this last of the brick box elevators was destroyed in 2023, a clear loss of an object with historical importance. Its aesthetic significance was equally deep although less evident to the eye.

GRAIN ELEVATORS

First, what is a grain elevator? Farm silos are tiny versions, those tall cylinders adjacent to barns that hold feed for cattle and horses. Commercial grain elevators are mammoth structures containing numerous silos as well as mechanisms for raising and lowering (“elevating”) shipments of grain for storage and further transporting by serial conveyances. Large numbers were constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries along the waterways connecting cities on the American Great Lakes. Wheat, corn, and rye from the highly productive farms of the midwestern states were loaded onto ships heading east. Those shipments landed at the eastern end of Lake Erie, where a man-made waterway, the Erie Canal, carried them further east, eventually to Atlantic ports. The construction of the canal in 1825 brought about an explosion of commerce, population shifts, and sudden expansion of cities, including Buffalo, New York, which at one point had over thirty of the immense structures clustered along its waterways.

The grain elevators were planned for efficiency and represent impressive engineering inventiveness. Their aesthetic impact was hardly at the forefront of their fabrication. Nonetheless, their immensity and unusual shapes played a role in the history of architectural design, as modernist architects, including Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, were inspired by their relative simplicity of appearance and by the curving outlines that trace the cylindrical silos housed within (figure 1). Their grand size is awe-inspiring. After a visit to Buffalo in 1924, Erich Mendelsohn wrote a letter home to Berlin exclaiming at his first encounter with these structures amid the bustle of their operation:

Mountainous silos, incredibly space-conscious, but creating space. A random confusion amidst the chaos of loading and unloading of corn ships, of railways and bridges, crane monsters with live gestures,



Figure 1. Buffalo, New York. Grain boats and grain elevators on the Erie Canal. Photograph by Marjory Collins, 1943. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USW3-029164-C.

hordes of silo cells in concrete, stone and glazed brick. Then suddenly a silo with administrative buildings, closed horizontal fronts against the stupendous verticals of fifty to a hundred cylinders, and all this in the sharp evening light. I took photographs like mad. Everything else so far now seemed to have been shaped interim to my silo dreams. Everything else was merely a beginning.²

So marvelous did these behemoths appear to architects pursuing the idiom of modernism, that many saw in the grain elevators a symbol of America itself. Much as the gothic cathedral defined the European Middle Ages, they enthused, so did the equally enormous silos emblemize the youth and progressive vigor of the United States. The sheer size of the elevators additionally inspired Gropius to compare them to ancient Egyptian architecture—presumably the pyramids and giant temples.³ While these somewhat gushing reactions may seem overwrought, they persist to this day, as we shall see shortly.

By 1900, Buffalo had claims to be the largest grain port in the world, and it remained a major milling center into the nineteen forties. However, shifts in modes of distribution that began in the nineteenth century diminished the boom that had prompted rapid development along the Erie Canal, and economic decline in the mid-twentieth century removed many industries from the city. The architectural legacy of this short-lived prosperity remains in clusters of immense concrete and steel buildings that now stand looming and largely empty. A few continue to serve their original function, a few more have been repurposed as arts and entertainment venues, but most are shuttered. Their removal is costly, which probably accounts for the fact that so many are left. They are not easy to redesign for other uses such as apartment buildings or shops, although making the best of their distinctive profiles, the city of Buffalo now casts dramatic lights on them to decorate the night.

Most of the elevators have regular, repeated curves, which trace the shapes of the silos within. These especially have claims for a mammoth grace and splendor, even beauty. Le Corbusier, indeed, praised their “beautiful forms, the most beautiful forms.”⁴ But there was one kind of

² Quoted in R. Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Building and European Modern Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1986, p. 6. Much of my discussion of grain elevators, including the Great Northern, is indebted to Banham’s study.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 136.

elevator that presented an exterior that was simply an immense cube. The so-called “brick box” elevator was a marvel of engineering, but it lacked the intriguing exterior weirdness of other designs, as the silos stood by themselves inside, the blank brick walls merely shielding the immense machinery within. Such was the Great Northern.

THE GREAT NORTHERN

The story in brief: the Great Northern grain elevator was built in 1897 in Buffalo for the transshipment of grain on the Erie Canal from ships working the Great Lakes (figure 2).⁵ By the 1970s, its role in shipping had lapsed, and the Pillsbury Company used it only for flour storage. It was finally shuttered in 1982, and for forty years it stood empty between a railroad track and the Buffalo River, across the street from another industrial building that has been repurposed for sports and arts events. It could not be entered safely and was admired from afar, but it stood as an emblem of a vigorous economic past. And so it might still, but for a violent windstorm in December of 2021, which blew some of the bricks off the end of the building (figure 3). The owners, Archer-Daniels-Midland Company (based in Chicago), immediately applied for permission to demolish the whole thing, arguing that it posed a danger to the public. It seems likely that the owners were waiting for an opportunity to repurpose or sell the site.

The Great Northern immediately became a topic of intense public debate. Preservation groups rose up in protest, arguing—correctly—that since the exterior brick did not comprise supporting walls but was merely a protective shell surrounding the interior silos, there was no danger, and the hole could be easily repaired. Moreover, echoing the admiration expressed a century earlier, at least one architect compared the Great Northern to a medieval cathedral: “It’s a building that is at the same scale as a great medieval cathedral, with a similar kind of monumental power.”⁶ Despite public outcry and assiduous efforts in the courts to protect the building, preservation efforts failed. The Great Northern was razed in

⁵ Grain elevators and silos sometimes took their names from the companies that manufactured cereals (Cargill, Pillsbury) and sometimes from the shipping lines that transported grains. “Great Northern” was a major railroad company, and several of their elevators along the Great Lakes bore the same name.

⁶ G. Delaney, quoted in J. McKinley, “Flighting to Preserve Towering Testament to Buffalo’s History,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 2022, p. 21.

2023. The losses that this destruction brought about are many-faceted, and among them one can discern aesthetic attributes that, in a sense, bind those losses together.

When considering an artifact's aesthetic features, the most obvious place to begin is appearance. Consider the claim that grain elevators are aesthetically akin to European medieval cathedrals. Except for their monumentality, the appearance of cathedrals and grain elevators is hardly similar, a fact dramatized when they fall prey to disaster and their loss is imminent. In 2019, the world stood aghast as Notre Dame Cathedral burned, and there was a global sigh of relief when the fire was extinguished. When restoration was underway, workers labored hard to restore its beauty. Philippe Jost, head of the restoration task force, granted that there were many difficulties involved in this undertaking, adding: "But it's different when you work on a building that has a soul. Beauty makes everything easier."⁷

Unlike Notre Dame, the Great Northern had few claims to beauty—at least to the non-expert eye. And this represents a real problem for buildings that were constructed for the practical needs of industry: appreciating their design is likely to require a good deal of knowledge, including technical understanding of how they functioned. Nonetheless, even to the non-expert, the size of a structure like the Great Northern is impressive. Here are a few of Banham's descriptions in the years after it ceased to function but well before the damage that precipitated its destruction:

Externally it is a huge brown brick box, the equivalent of ten regular stories high and long to match, at just over three hundred feet. [...] The landward side of the Great Northern [...] still demonstrates the sheer artistry of the industrial brickwork of the former tradition at its late best—a pure wall, almost uninterrupted by openings and barely modeled by the necessities of buttressing and corbelling [...] completed by a low-pitched roof whose central part suddenly rises in a steep clerestory that must, one realizes from counting the superimposed ranges of regular industrial windows, be as tall as a four-story building.⁸

⁷ Quoted in M. Kimmelman, "Making the Heart of Paris Beat Anew," *New York Times*, December 29, 2024, p. 11.

⁸ R. Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis*, pp. 118–119.



Figure 2. The Great Northern elevator, Buffalo, New York. Photograph taken c. 1900. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Detroit Publishing Company Collection, LC-DIG-det-4a08420.



Figure 3. The Great Northern grain elevator. Photograph taken by C. Korsmeyer, December 2021. The interior silos can be seen through the hole caused by wind damage.

His description continues of the inside of the building, where again he compares the Great Northern to a cathedral.

Weird as this may sound, it is a highly impressive space, monumental in scale and in the quality of the work, and that is a rare experience in the world of grain elevators, which are not usually, nor need be, provided with anything like public spaces. The head-house too is almost cathedral-like: long, lit by ranks of industrial windows in the corrugated roofing on either side, filled with a golden-gray atmosphere of flying grain dust sliced by low shafts of sunlight[...]⁹

Is sheer size of aesthetic significance? Of all the familiar terms that indicate aesthetic value (beautiful, sublime, picturesque) the one that the Great Northern has the most claim to is monumentality. Sandra Shapshay argues that monumental size is an aesthetic characteristic that is akin to but distinct from the sublime. The kinship has to do with both the size of the object of attention (“size is a very important element of the monumental aesthetic response”) and its ability to inspire a kind of awe.¹⁰ She has in mind edifices such as the Washington Monument that are deliberately designed for a social or political purpose and that enjoin shared values and respect, so the concept requires adjusting to include the monumentality of grain elevators. It is doubtful that builders had any particular political message in mind, being far more occupied with engineering matters. Still, the presence of gargantuan structures in the service of production and transportation has a social context with implicit political values: progress, development, power. Standing in the shadow of a grain elevator is indeed awe-inspiring.¹¹ The aesthetic power of its size thus matches and highlights the historical significance of grain elevators in the development of the American economy and the national standing that ensued.

The Great Northern was also clearly an object of historical and cultural importance. Grain elevators represent, indeed embody, periods of stunning economic vigor that came to identify their places, situating cities and regions—and their inhabitants—in history in ways that perhaps

⁹ R. Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis*, p. 121.

¹⁰ S. Shapshay, “What Is the Monumental?,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 79, 1, 2021, p. 153.

¹¹ R. R. Clewes, “Why the Sublime is Aesthetic Awe,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 79, 3, 2021, pp. 301–314.

only buildings can achieve. Robert Hopkins observes that architecture in general is a vehicle of cultural memory, so that when we lose significant buildings,

we will also lose the experiences [...] that capture the past for us. [...] [T]he durability of buildings, and their central place in the self-conception of many a culture, mean that they will often be the only repositories of cultural memory ... To lose the buildings is thus to lose our cultural memory for the tenor of previous forms of life. To the extent that we lack other sources of information [...] it will be lost to us altogether. To the extent that we do have such sources, we may retain knowledge of it. But while knowledge may survive, memory will not. We will have suffered a distinctive kind of loss.¹²

Of course, there are still photographs of the Great Northern, as well as detailed descriptions and contemporary documents that trace its design and its fate. So historically important *information* about grain elevators of its type remains available. What is lost, however, is the *immediate experience* of such a building, the sense of overwhelming size and energy—an aesthetic apprehension, a direct affective experience. (Indeed, visitors celebrating the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Erie Canal in 2025 floated past a vast empty lot instead of the towering Great Northern.)

Hopkins also notes that “The seriousness of the loss depends in part on what other vehicles for memory are available.”¹³ That is, if there are other buildings of a similar sort, the loss is somewhat less than if there are none such. The Great Northern was the last brick box elevator left standing in the world, making it *irreplaceable*. The adjective “irreplaceable” is not merely descriptive; if it were, almost anything, if described with sufficiently granular detail, would also be irreplaceable. Designating something “irreplaceable” implies importance—in this case clearly historical and technological importance. The notion of irreplaceability is complicated and challengeable, but in this case I think what is meant is pretty straightforward: a historical object that was constructed for a purpose that once was significant and that is the only one left of its kind cannot be substituted with anything else. If there were other brick box

¹² R. Hopkins, “Architecture and Cultural Memory,” in W. Bülow *et al.* (eds.) *Heritage and War: Ethical Issues*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2023, p. 171.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

elevators still in existence, one could at least find some comfort in the fact that there would be others to visit and appreciate. But that is not the case here. The decision to demolish ignored the “reasons to preserve, honor, and cherish objects that have irreplaceable value.”¹⁴ Even if one resists calling irreplaceability an aesthetic quality in itself, the fact that a significant object is irreplaceable clearly has the capacity to deliver understanding made vivid with affective valence. Saving the Great Northern was a last chance, and it was lost.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Although far from beautiful in any obvious or conventional sense, the aesthetic value of the Great Northern is amply supported by its expressive meaning as an emblem of productive vitality and by its monumentality. Those traits described the building since its first construction. However, note the backward direction we have taken when considering its preservation, for many of the most important aspects of this building only accrued with age and were not part of its original features. The Great Northern’s historical significance increased over time, and it became irreplaceable when others of its kind fell to the wrecking ball. The latter are the chief grounds for its preservation.

Efforts to preserve historic structures often make their case based on repurposing a building no longer in use, but defense of the Great Northern could not have adopted that strategy. Or rather, that strategy would have been self-defeating. Repurposing this particular building would destroy the very reasons it should have been preserved.

Conceivably, the exterior brick wall of the Great Northern could have been salvaged, the interior silos and machinery removed, and apartment dwellings and shops inserted in their place. (If, that is, there were enough people who wanted to live mere feet from a railroad track along a polluted ship canal and without a trace of greenery in sight.) However, that kind of change violates the preservation of something unique and irreplaceable. What gave the Great Northern that status was its entirety—inside, outside, situation in place. If irreplaceability, uniqueness, being the last of its kind, and so forth are to be valued as reasons for preservation of a building, then they also foreclose repurposing of any kind. Therefore,

¹⁴ G. Bradford, “Irreplaceable Value,” in R. Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* vol. 19, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2024, p. 155.

if my position here is persuasive, it has an impractical consequence that must be accepted if we truly value buildings both for what they were in the past and what they continue to offer us today.

So, what could have been done with the Great Northern? Beyond necessary repair and stabilization: Nothing. It could—and I believe it should—have been preserved intact as a relic of its past. A gargantuan relic, to be sure; but its awesome size was part of its enduring aesthetic merit.

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Fred Rush*

THE TERROR END OF BEAUTY

ABSTRACT: Notwithstanding well-known difficulties of fitting the concept of beauty to architectural form, beauty has been a mainstay when it comes to talking about classical and neoclassical buildings. The classical conception of beauty in the West is closely allied to ideas of moral goodness, imparting to classical and neoclassical architecture a positive ethical accent. This paper investigates another strand of ancient conceptions of beauty that has been impactful in architecture, archaic beauty. I argue that something like archaic beauty surreptitiously reenters twentieth-century architectural theory and practice and adapts classicism to it. That is, some forms of neoclassical architecture take a hybrid of archaic and classical beauty as their principle. This provides a worthwhile lens through which to consider German fascist architecture. The ideal of the good that fascist beauty expresses involves personal submissiveness to charismatic leadership and a deindividualized experience of awe. Fascist architecture, then, exists at the “terror end of beauty,” neoclassicism at the threshold of the archaic.

KEYWORDS: architecture, beauty, classicism, fascism, neoclassicism, Nuremberg, terror

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Gods in Color is an exhibition of reproductions of Classical Greek statuary, painted according to the best indications as to how they appeared in antiquity.¹ It opened in Munich in 2003, the home base for research in Greek polychromatic art, and has travelled the world ever since.² The show initially proved to be controversial. That statues were painted in ancient Greece was no news, but what they looked like “in the flesh” was another matter.³

The Peloponnese was part of a Mediterranean-Near Eastern family of cultures that had existed for upwards of two millennia by the time that Attic Greece joined them. The sculpture and architecture that the Greeks took as models—Assyrian, Babylonian, Cretan, and Egyptian—were all richly painted and, often enough, clad in precious metals and gems. That an Attic statue might be comfortably placed in terms of its color scheme with the Ishtar Gate shouldn’t have shocked anyone. Dogging the exhibition, however, was tradition. The reception of Greek art from the Renaissance on had treated the bare-stone whiteness of ancient statues and buildings as emblematic of aesthetic purity; that was a large part of what made them “Classical.”⁴ To paint them was, in effect, to colorize them.⁵

I.

Another way of understanding the stir that *Gods in Color* caused is that its sculpture was found *unbeautiful* and, to that extent, *unmade*, i.e., not just lacking beauty, but deprived of it. The works, that is, were no longer *Classically* beautiful.

Plato is representative of the philosophical treatment of the Classical conception of beauty. He divides beings into two main sorts: those

¹ I use “Classical,” “Neoclassical,” “Archaic,” and their cognates to designate aesthetic styles or historical periods in which those styles were or still are predominant. I use initial capitals in the spelling of these terms in order to distinguish them as names of styles or stylistic periods from their more everyday uses.

² The catalogue for the initial exhibition is available as Brinkmann and R. Wünsche (eds.), *Bunte Götter: Die Farbigkeit antiker Skulptur*, Glyptothek München, München, 2004.

³ See, for example, G. Kramer, *Über den Styl und die Herkunft der bemalten griechischen Throngefäße*, Nicolaische Buchhandlung, Berlin, 1837. Kramer coined the term “severe style” (*der strenge Styl*) to describe the transitional form of sculpture between the Archaic and Classical periods.

⁴ When the first excavations of the Acropolis were underway the statuary came out of the ground with its color largely intact. Once the works were exposed to air, however, the color was lost due to the disintegration of the epoxy used to bind paint to stone.

⁵ Colorization is a process that applies color frame-by-frame to film shot in black and white. The result is unrealistic and vulgar.

that exist in the world of sense and those that inhabit a supersensible domain. Sensible beings are subject to space and time and, crucially, to spatial and temporal alteration. It is proper to speak of the *becoming* of such beings—of their coming to exist, existing in mutability, and going out of existence.⁶ Supersensible entities are not so conditioned; they are nonspatial, eternal, and immutable—in a word, divine. They “always” exist or—better put—simply *are*. There are several sorts of such entities for Plato—numbers, what he calls “forms,” and souls—all three of which have roles in his account of the beautiful.⁷ Take, first, mathematical objects as he conceived them—arithmetic and plane geometric entities. You can’t see the number two (although you can represent it by the numeral “2”). Likewise, there are no visible figures that are circles, although figures can represent circles. The receptive conditions under which mathematical entities are present to one is a matter of pure intellection, not sensory intake. Plato conceives intellect itself as intuitive and, accordingly, as unmediated. But it is not as a practical matter immediate; coming to be in a position to have intuitive intellectual grasp is a laborious undertaking that involves paring down the effect of sense experience on mind.

On this ontological picture, it may seem problematic that the realms of the sensible and supersensible meet: forms are absolutely nonsensible and the world of sense absolutely informal. Plato holds, however, that the unchanging and the changing interact and that the result of this interaction is the *structured change* one observes in nature. Change is never completely random, and the regularity of change results from sensuous things “participating” (*metechō*) in the forms—the second sort of abstract object set out above. Only then are there concrete individuals *qua* individuals.

Beauty is a form, and the beauty of individual things originates from it.⁸ Sensuous beauties are beautiful in virtue of the structure that is present in them thanks to their participation in the form. The question then becomes: what sort of structure does participation in beauty yield? Beauty, the form, is eternal and unchanging, and its presence in sensuous things is reflected in those things as their *integral harmonious regularity*. Sense objects are beautiful in case their formal structures *show through* sense in a striking way. The accent here is firmly on form. Plato holds that contemplating the beauty of sensuous things will, with time and effort,

⁶ Not all philosophers equate being and existing. Examples of those who do not are Meining, Heidegger, and Deleuze. I cannot pursue the point here.

⁷ *Phaedo* 78c–80b.

⁸ See, e.g., *ibid.*, 65d, 75d, 100b, *Phaedrus* 254b, *Republic* 476b.

reveal the participation between the form and its instances, thereby giving one the sense that the instances are being elevated beyond the sensuous.⁹ This implicates, in turn, the third sort of supersensible entity set out above, the soul. Contemplating beauties, thereby being led from hedonic to intellectual experience, elevates one because the harmonizing part of the soul is reason. It is endemic to reason to seek out its own kind, i.e., the supersensible forms, the final truths. Because the stakes with beauty are high—the recruiting of sense to intellect—Plato is exceedingly wary of the way artists handle form. In his estimation, they tend to make works that stir up passion with little hope of its rational conversion. They injure beauty by stripping it of its transcendent vocation. He is particularly circumspect about tragic drama on this score, but his caution extends as well to other arts that were central to Greek life.¹⁰ A slightly different, but related, dimension of the soul's importance for beauty has to do with what sort of sensuous object is ideally fitted to reveal beauty's connection to truth. Plato holds that human beauty—specifically, male human beauty—is optimal in this regard. Hegel is the modern philosopher who most clearly sees the implications of this for the plastic arts.

Let's bring the threads together, in advance of connecting them to Classical and Neoclassical ideals of architectural beauty. Beautiful things are sensuous representations of the eternal and divine form, Beauty. Their beauty is due to their formal structure, which integrates otherwise transient qualities of things into discrete, internally complex individuals: line, proportion, harmony of parts—in short, *structural figuration* along mathematical lines. Objects crafted to make perceptually vivid the interactivity of their sensuous and non-sensuous components are beautiful and will appeal to the soul in the right way, permitting it to enter the domain of the otherworldly through the gates of the worldly. The difference between beautiful and ordinary objects in this regard is that the former do not need analysis (viz. dialectic) to travel that distance. They

⁹ *Phaedo* 100d. There is debate concerning whether Plato extends his account of the forms to artifacts. The guiding idea that the forms correspond to abstract ideas, i.e., to what can be predicated without equivocation, hinges on just how abstract a properly abstract idea need be. The typical thing to say here is that no empirical object, artifact or not, would have even its essential properties unequivocally, bound as they are to manifestation in sense.

¹⁰ Aristotle is usually taken to be more lenient on both issues, but that is an oversimplification. He is a revanchist Platonist in my book, and one might well argue that his philosophical allowance to tragedy either sells short tragedy's erotic potential, compartmentalizes its ritual punch, or both. I have not been able to shake the conviction that Aristotle is Plato *réchauffé* ever since I read Cherniss as an undergraduate, no matter how often my friends have tried to dissuade me.

do so erotically, i.e., in virtue of the inherent draw of the sensuous beyond itself. Beauty appeals to sense at the behest of reason, but the appeal is issued from within the sensuous itself. This schema—not necessarily in the precise form Plato’s gave to it—dominates Renaissance visual art and architecture, as well as subsequent forays into Classicism. At issue is always the presence of otherworldly form in worldly matter. Structure, evinced in a balance between the abstract and concrete that is struck in favor of the former, is paramount. The generative formal, mathematical properties of the resulting objects are crucial.

Against this background, the apparent colorlessness of Greek sculpture and architecture was no deficiency; it was a power. For, color is the visual hallmark of transience, without apparent formal structure and, therefore, impossible to parse into increments—as this-worldly as this-worldly can be.¹¹ Line, contour, geometrical balance, proportionality of volumes, etc., better manifest the everlasting. Loosen them enough and the object disintegrates.

The stone that ancient sculptors chose to work did *happen* to have surface properties that lend themselves to abstraction, smooth and uniform. The unwelcome reality, however, is that the choice of specimen was aimed at ease of carving and adherence of paint.

2.

Although one may not be readily put in mind of it, given the stranglehold the Renaissance has exercised on the reception of Greek art, the Classical mind did not have a monopoly on ancient Greek conceptions of beauty. In the Archaic context, beauty is not principally due to structural character. What counted was *spectacle*, things appearing in all their vaulting materiality. Radiance, the sheer magnificence of the sight or sound of a thing was cardinal; what is beautiful is what is brightly alive, not what is immutable and at rest.¹² The matter/form dichotomy simply does not control here; if

¹¹ It is important not to be anachronistic. Plato did not hold that colors are merely phenomenal in the sense that they are secondary qualities dependent for their reality on being perceived. Colors are real enough, but they are transitory, not *ultimately* real. This seems true, at least, for what Plato would have considered primary colors. They have essences—see *Cratylus* 223e–224a—although it is unclear if each primary has a form or if they are phenomenal modifications of one form, Color. The point remains that on the Classical conception of beauty colors are not where you are going to hang your hat, for they come and go too readily.

¹² R. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, University of Chicago, Chicago, 2010 is excellent on all these points.

pertinent at all, the balance is reversed in favor of materiality. That is, the operative experience is of matter surmounting form, not the other way around. If one wanted to drive home the point with maximum force, one would say that, to the extent that the meanings of the concepts “form” and “content” depend for their determinacy on the contrast between them, in the Archaic conception of beauty neither concept played a role. In any case, this understanding of beauty much more easily accommodates positive valuation of something as lustrous and irreducibly worldly as color.¹³

The Classical pivot away from the idea that sensuousness in and of itself can be beautiful to the idea that only formal structuration fits that bill may leave the impression that there was a hard break between the Archaic and Classical conceptions of beauty. But that is not quite accurate. A borderline is real enough, but it gets established incrementally and, even when fully in place, is not impervious. Consider the word in ancient Greek adjective traditionally rendered as “beautiful”: *kalos*. It is common to allow that the translation is approximate and to flag that its imperfect fit results from the separation in modernity of two forms of value that were inseparable for the Greeks: ethical and aesthetic. The typical thing to say in order to bridge the difference is that *kalos* means “noble in appearance.”¹⁴ To Greeks from the eighth to fourth centuries BCE, the idea that one and the same person or thing might be *both* beautiful *and* evil (or ugly and good) required special treatment. In the Archaic context magic usually was involved. Someone who is evil is only as a matter of illusion beautiful; consequently, given the necessary copresence of beauty and good, that being was also as a matter of illusion good. There were grey areas of course. Circe is *deinē*, but that is far from being simply evil or even, as the English translations often have it, “treacherous.”¹⁵ To shift to the Classical context and to flip terms, Plato’s Socrates may be physically ugly, but he is in fact beautiful. His formal nature, his mind, is so beautiful that even dishy Alcibiades (physically the most beautiful, but morally pliant) lusts after him. One might well push the point to insist that it is *precisely* Socrates’ manifest ugliness that signifies his inner beauty.

¹³ Consider the noun *kosmos*, which in Homeric Greek means “adornment” or “what is well-appointed” and only much later acquires the sense “ordered world”—etymological travel from the cosmetic to the cosmological.

¹⁴ This proximity of ethical to aesthetic regard can be captured to a degree nowadays by thinking of physical bearing. The way one holds oneself is not just posturing concocted for public consumption; bearing manifests character or, one might say, *stature*.

¹⁵ *Odyssey* X, 136.

So, a continuity in ancient Greek aesthetics to keep in mind is that what is (really) beautiful is (really) good and vice-versa. What changes between the Archaic and Classical periods is the specification of what makes something beautiful and, hence, makes it good: luminosity or structure. Evil beauty—*the terror end of beauty*—will have to be handled with care either way.

3.

Architecture developed in concert with painting, which in time came to establish canons of visual beauty.

Quattro- and Cinquecento painting saw rapid advances in the technique of representing three-dimensional scenes in a pictorial plane, which increased hand-in-glove with developments in optics and invention of various devices that enhance observational accuracy. What makes a picture beautiful is a result of what makes it pleasing to contemplate as a representational field, carrying the eye over and deep into the scene depicted: compositional balance, accurate rendering of spatial dimension, placement and modeling of figure, handling of represented light, etc., all of this gathered together for viewing from a single, optimal standpoint that allows the scene to unfold in full. Paintings became, in short, ways to organize and reorganize perception and, in turn, aesthetic contemplation.¹⁶ A premium here is placed on the power to bend reality to the plane image, i.e., on how the painting achieves the reduction of this-worldly space and time to the other-than-worldly canvas—a fictional, formal space in which figures do not, in fact, have volume or move.¹⁷

Painting could thank architectural practice and theory for first delivering ideas of linear perspective (Brunelleschi, Alberti). Like painting of the period, Renaissance architecture existed in an atmosphere of Neo-Platonism, which placed a premium on form that not only was governed by mathematical optics but displayed that it was so governed.¹⁸ Built and painted form both were realizations of abstract orders. In time, the two arts were crosspollinating, and there occurred a kind of synopsis.

¹⁶ E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1962, esp. Lecture III. One does not have to assent to Gombrich's specific doctrine of "making and matching" in order to agree to the more general point.

¹⁷ Technically speaking, of course, any painted surface has volume, if for no other reason than that any surface has some physical depth. But that is not the point.

¹⁸ See P. O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980, pp. 89–101.

One and the same regimen of looking governed the experience of both arts. Increasingly painting was to take a lead. By the Enlightenment painting often took the upper hand, and the results could be decisive.

Buildings will become all the more beautiful thanks to their elevation profiles, specifically, in terms of how properties like linearity, regularity, and balance strike the eye “frontally” from a relatively fixed point. Architecture cannot dictate such looking to the degree that a perspectival painting can. You can change the point of view from which you take in Raphael’s *Lo spasmimo*, but that cannot alter the point of view that controls the organization of the painting. Your adjustment does not make it adjust. There is a point from which you are *supposed* to view the work, which is enforced by the manner in which Raphael painted it. Architecture, except under extreme conditions that would not have occurred to anyone working then, cannot hope to control perception this way. There is a way to approximate a degree of control that perspectival painting has to organize visual experience by presenting multiple well-organized prospects from which the building might be seen, and the site of the building will take this into account.

In any case, that one is meant to move *in and around* architecture—even more that one does in pursuit of everyday, non-meditative ends—seemed increasingly to assign buildings a low station in modern philosophical taxonomies of the arts. By the end of the eighteenth century, when taxonomies of the arts become fixed in ways that lead philosophical debate, this position at the bottom or near-bottom of the register of the “fine arts” is held in place by the idea that buildings are simply too material to be formal enough to count as beautiful. Their mathematical-Platonist credentials are intact, but second (or third) to those of paintings. The presupposition here is the usual Platonist-Rationalist-Idealist one: that thought is immaterial and art all the finer to the extent that it expresses the power of thought, especially its power over material.¹⁹

4.

The Renaissance was Neoclassical *sensu stricto*; it was a reclamation of Classical ideas in making Classically formed objects. The most prominent

¹⁹ Alberti’s *De re aedificatoria* is often taken as representative, rightly or wrongly. Alberti’s base in Vitruvius aside, he takes from Roman rhetoric the idea that humans have an innate appreciation of formal balance or symmetry (*concinntas*). Indeed, the mind itself has such a balance, in terms of which the appreciation is taken. Beauty (*pulchritudo*) is the overall effect of quantitative and qualitative balance (see IX, v.)

home for architectural beauty continues to be later forms of Neoclassicism. But the wherewithal of beauty to drive architecture, hard-won though it may have been, can no longer be taken for granted. By the 1920s in Europe, modernism is ascendent, a movement for which beauty plays a subordinate role.²⁰ In response, Neoclassicism has often positioned itself as anti-modernist. Part of its brief has been to resist and rectify a perceived decline in architectural beauty.

But Neoclassicism in architecture is not one thing, nor is modernism, and the two have not always pitted themselves against one another. Through much of the nineteenth century in Europe and in its colonial and former colonial extensions, Neoclassicism was firmly in place as an international style before “International Style” became an architectural watchword.²¹ The revival of Renaissance architectural principles and, through them, Greek and Roman ideals (really, the idealization of those ideals), was prestige building—the official architecture of the emerging nation state. Washington DC is thick with Neoclassical buildings, and so are Berlin, London, and Paris. But Neoclassicism’s power has never been a simple reach back for glory to polish up. It has been adaptive, and one of the things to which it has adapted is modernism.

Take Berlin. Schinkel’s *Altes Museum* (1820–1830) is a Neoclassical building if ever there was one. It sits on the Museumsinsel among several other structures, one of which, Messel and Hoffmann’s *Pergamonmuseum* (1910–1930), houses the titular altar, the Ishtar Gate, and other imperialist booty. The century separating the construction of the

²⁰ It is true of course that modernist architects freely call their projects beautiful. But this is not seriously meant; with very few exceptions, “beauty” is left completely unspecified, something like “excellent.”

²¹ “International Style” was a term invented by modernists to foster common purpose. One can trace its birth precisely, to the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock and the architect-in-the-making Philip Johnson, who co-curated an exhibition of modern architecture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1932. This was the first architectural exhibition at MoMA and, for many in the US, their first contact with modern architecture and its theory. Hitchcock and Johnson were concerned to extract from what they took to be elemental buildings in Europe and the United States a specific aesthetic ideal. The historical ambit was focused strictly, covering a period of only eight years, from 1922–1930. Selectivity was of the first order: work of only fourteen architects was featured with just under twenty buildings represented. Among the buildings chosen were Gropius’s *Bauhaus*, Mies’s *Barcelona Pavilion* and *Tugendhat-Haus*, Le Corbusier’s *Villa Savoye*, and Neutra’s *Lovell House*. The selectivity and compressed timeframe conspire to give the impression of a pregnant present moment, a crucible time in the “now.” Hitchcock and Johnson’s book based on the exhibition, *The International Style*, became an *Ur-text* in the theory and practice of architectural modernism.

two museums is revealing. The Neoclassicism is still there, but the latter building is in the so-called “stripped-down” style.²² Built to draw down on modernism’s vilified ornament, this genre of building was prominent in England, Germany, and Italy.²³ It is a style of degrees; the point at which unity gives way to austerity shifts with time.²⁴

German fascist architecture descends in part from stripped-down Neoclassicism. That makes perfect strategic sense, as fascism both looks to the Classical past for prestige and is also invested in modernism’s obsession with futurity. That investment had preclusive and inclusive dimensions. We tend to recall more often the preclusive, given the Nazis’ crusade against what they labeled “degenerate” (*entartete*) art, much of it now considered part of the modernist canon: e.g., Dix, Grosz, Kirchner, Klee, Marc, and Schwitters.²⁵ On the inclusive side stood most visibly Italian fascist architecture and the plastic arts in Italy more generally.²⁶ Mussolini personally endorsed the *Santa Maria Novella Train Station* in Florence (Gruppo Toscano, 1932–1934), perhaps the finest example of Futurist architecture in Europe. His state architect, Angiolo Mazzoni, designed its signature heating station. Giuseppe Terragni’s *Casa del Fascio* in Como (1932–1936), the most fully realized example of *razionalismo*, is Vitruvian to its bones.²⁷ The modernist credentials of German fascist architecture are less overt, but they are there. Deny it though a Neoclassicist might like, Nazi architecture is a member of the family.²⁸

²² See G. Kramer, *op. cit.*

²³ See A. Loos, “Ornament und Verbrechen,” in *Trotzdem: 1900–1930*, Prachner, Wien, 1982, pp. 78–88.

²⁴ To put the point differently, from Vitruvius on architectural theorists have deployed the body-column metaphor in an elastic fashion, depending on the historically available conceptions of what counts as order and what counts as body. See the magisterial J. Rykwert, *The Dancing Column: On Order in Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998.

²⁵ Even the ardent antisemite and party member Emil Nolde was not permitted to exhibit, no matter his groveling before “the authorities.” For good measure, the Nazis forbade him to paint altogether.

²⁶ Marinetti’s *Il Manifesto del Futurismo* (1909) was fully plugged into the strand of nationalism in Italy that led to fascism.

²⁷ On Italian fascist architecture, with an emphasis on its classicizing modernism, see S. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997.

²⁸ There are other forms of fascist building, of course Heidegger preferred the farmer’s hut. See A. Sharr, *Heidegger’s Hut*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2017, and M. Heidegger, “Bauen Wohnen Denken,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Neske, Pfullingen, 1954, pp. 145–162. Heidegger’s approach must be understood against the background of the move towards anthropological theories of the origin of building in nineteenth-century Germany. Chief among these are Gottfried Semper’s lectures in Zürich, published as *Der Stil in den*

On the assumption that successful Neoclassical architecture must be Classically beautiful, an uncomfortable question arises concerning fascist architecture. If it is allowed that fascist architecture can be successful Neoclassical architecture, then part of what makes it so must be its Classical beauty.²⁹ What might *fascist* Classical beauty amount to?

5.

The stripped-down style nods to the elementality that modern architects were increasingly finding aspirational and, at the same time, provides a way to translate Neoclassicism into modernism. The naked volumes of the stripped-down style would have previously been held to violate tenets of Classical beauty—too assertive of mass over form. Meeting modernism halfway required making concessions both as to what can count as beautiful and as to what beauty is in the first place.

Space had been cleared for that other Greek concept of beauty, according to which beauty was surfeit materiality: Archaic beauty. German fascist architecture stakes claim to machine-age, volumetric modernism *and* engineers a double reach back to the past, moving via Classical models to the Archaic. In other words, fascist architecture in the German mode often deploys stripped-down Neoclassicism in order to rehabilitate beauty back to its Archaic origin. Here, then, are the lineages with which we are working (figure 1).

6.

We have said that for both Greek conceptions of beauty aesthetics and ethics are two sides of the same coin. This is the point at which the phrase “the terror end of beauty” finds purchase. Fascist ideals of ethical, social, and political agency are strongly allied to dispositional conceptions of what fascism takes to be the good. Fascism deploys an idealized collective conception of the will of “the people,” the unity and integrity of

technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder praktische Ästhetik, Mäander, Mittenwald, 1977. Semper was as far from a fascist as one might get, but history will have its ironies. In any case, this explicitly antimodern ideal of building and the conception of “dwelling” (Heidegger’s *wohnen*) that underwrites it have their acolytes nowadays. But, aside from trailing behind its nostrums about how architecture has a socially expressive function that can call people back to their rootedness in order to combat “nihilism,” there isn’t much to this approach.

²⁹ One is free of course to deny that fascist architecture can be successful Neoclassical architecture, but one may not do so *ad hoc*.

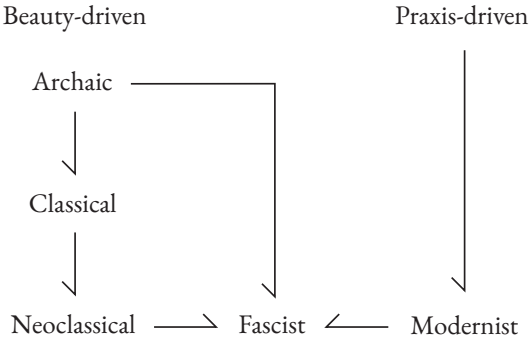


Figure 1.

which gain in focus by means of a leader-exemplar. And it built to suit. Mussolini, as mentioned, was keen on architectural programs. Hitler and Franco shared that enthusiasm.

Fascists across the board embraced modernized antiquity. Nazi propaganda was especially imaginative in reading back into history the future it desired for itself. It incorporated Greece and Rome into a specious pantheon of Nordic prehistory, according to which Romans were Lombards and Myceneans Proto-Germans.³⁰ Reaching back into a mythic past in order to reach forward into a mythic future is central to the intellectual character of fascism in Germany and cannot be decoupled from its conception of architectural beauty. Consider the *Olympiastadion* (W. March, 1934–1936), the *Flughafen Tempelhof* (E. Sagebiel, 1936–1941), and the *Haus der Kunst* (P. L. Troost, 1933–1937). The Munich museum stages itself as the most Neoclassical of the trio in terms of its handling of proportion and components. Berlin's *Tempelhof* was a harbinger of the mega-international airport that nowadays greets any air traveler to a major city; its sheer size makes its ties to a New Rome a bit less legible. The stadium falls between these extremes. Its function and designation establish the necessary Classical lineage; however, just because most stadia of this vintage look Classical, it stands out a bit less as a fascist example of Neoclassical beauty than does the *Haus der Kunst*.

More than any architect, it was the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl who situated fascist architecture in the neighborhood of beauty. She filmed the 1936 Berlin Olympics held in the stadium for her *Olympia* (released 1938), and two years prior to that, had shot the Nuremberg Nazi Party rally for *Triumph des Willens* (released 1935).³¹ Both films are innovative,

³⁰ There are several historical connections between the Lombards and German-speaking lands (especially Bavaria), but none of them make Romans into Lombards. The Lombards originated in lower Scandinavia in the first century BCE. Their relation to the Teutons—another favorite ethnic group of the Nazis—is uncertain. The Lombards did conquer most of the Italian peninsula in the late-sixth century CE. They held the north until the late-eighth century, when it was taken by the Franks, and held the south until the Norman conquest of it in the late-eleventh century. But none of these territories was any longer “Rome.” On “nordicism” in the fascist reception of antiquity, see J. Chapoutot, *Le national-socialisme et l'Antiquité*, PUF, Paris, 2008.

³¹ *Triumph* is a film of the sixth of a total ten party congresses held at the grounds over a sixteen-year period. Riefenstahl directed two other propaganda films in 1935, the short *Tag der Freiheit. Unsere Wehrmacht* and the feature-length *Der Sieg des Glaubens*. The latter presented the fifth party rally, held in 1933, and was thought for several decades to be lost. Now that one can watch it, it is clear how much *Triumph* depends on it, at several places replicating its shots.

ambitious, and canonical for film historians. Several of the shots and sequences from *Triumph* are iconic enough to be quotable in blockbuster Hollywood movies, e.g., *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Lion King*, and *Dune*. When one looks to those shots and others in the original film, there is no use in arguing that they do not contain beauty, the beauty of buildings included.³² That is part of what makes one's negative reaction to them so uncomfortable. They repel in the attraction.

Triumph immortalized the summit of German fascist architecture, the *Reichsparteitagsgelände* park complex (figure 2), which includes two early commissions by Albert Speer, the *Ehrentribüne* and *Zeppelinhaupttribüne*, both of which feature prominently in the film.³³

The park was constructed in part on a previously built site that held deep political meaning, the *Luitpoldhain* (a deer park named after Luitpold, the Prince Regent of Bavaria), which had been chosen in the Weimar period for a memorial to German soldiers killed in the First World War. Fritz Mayer, a rising regional architect, constructed its centerpiece, the *Ehrenhalle*. Mayer had been trained in the so-called *Heimatschutzstil* ("homeland preservation style"), his first commissions being churches, modern in fittings yet distinctively Bavarian in profile. The Memorial Hall is Classical at front elevation, but many of its elements are given modern treatment—most telling, the eight columns that form its façade lack capitals and are structurally continuous with the whole of the building's front, giving the impression of cutouts or reliefs (figure 3).

No doubt Mayer planned this in order to set the building as a backdrop for the eight (four to a side) matching plinths, on which rest large cauldrons in which flames were lit in remembrance of the dead. When the Nazis took over the planning of the park, they used the solemn Classicism to lend pathos to a repurposing of the memorial, joining remembrance of the fallen at Ypres with those who "fell" at the Beer Hall Putsch. The whole became an altar for the consecration of the *Blutfahne*—an ersatz relic—purportedly the only surviving Nazi flag from the Putsch, encrusted with the blood of the dead. Flags flown at the Nuremberg rallies were all either touched to this "original" flag or touched to a flag that had touched it.

³² Not even Susan Sontag in her excoriation of Riefenstahl's attempts to whitewash her past could deny the beauty of her work. See "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1980, pp. 73–105.

³³ Speer had been apprenticed to Heinrich Tessenow, a staunch anti-Nazi, important principally for his academic work but also for helping to import ideas from the English garden city movement into Germany. The Party Grounds could not be further from Tessenow's ideals.



Figure 2. Model of *Reichsparteitagsgelände* (1928–1945), exhibited at the 1937 Paris World's Fair. Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-2008-0118-501.



Figure 3. Fritz Mayer, *Ehrenhalle im Luitpoldbad* (1928–1930). Nürnberg, Germany. Photograph by Magnus Gertkemper, 2006. Wikimedia Commons.

As one emerged from this blood rite onto the plaza that fronts the hall, one would have been met with a panoramic view opening onto the paved *Luitpoldarena*, backed on the horizon by the semi-circular *Ehrentribüne* (figure 4). The *Luitpoldarena* is expansive, measuring roughly 200 square meters, but its immensity would have paled beside that of the *Märzfeld* and its grandstand, both unbuilt, that were meant to anchor the north-south axis of the grounds at its southern end.³⁴

The fulcrum of the complex was the *Zeppelinfeld* with its grandstand, completed in 1937 (figure 5).³⁵ Ground was broken for a *Deutsches Stadion* facing this portion of the complex, which was to have a capacity upwards of 400,000. Foundation work for this never-completed project is still there to see. The plaza has roughly the same dimensions as the *Luitpoldarena*, to which it runs parallel, across a lake to the south. The grandstand for this parade ground is modeled loosely on the Pergamon Altar and was Speer's first signature commission. The attempt to borrow cultural credibility from antiquity could not be more obvious. Recall that it was the German railway engineer and amateur archaeologist Carl Humann who excavated the Pergamon site and had its altar fragments shipped back to Berlin for reassembly. Speer was exceedingly impressed by the imperialist bravado it took to carry out the dig and commandeer the artifacts, but was moved even more by the altar itself and, especially, by the mistaken idea that it was originally a victory monument.³⁶

What is true of the *Luitpoldarena* is doubly so for the *Zeppelinfeld* and its grandstand. While they pay lip service to Vitruvian Man, they were calculated to be out of human proportion, i.e., of such immensity so as to overwhelm individual responsiveness. There is no way to experience them except as encompassing a place that is meant to gather a throng. Both grandstand and plaza demand group awareness—i.e., of a group *as* a group. The special genius of Riefenstahl's film is to take that awareness as something like a premise and to extrapolate it visually from almost every conceivable angle.

³⁴ The name "Märzfeld" is a tiered allusion to the *Campus Martius* in Rome and to the Frankish (i.e., First Reich's) yearly assembly of heroes, which did not, however, take place at a set locale.

³⁵ Contrary to what its name might be thought to indicate, the *Zeppelinfeld* was not built as a landing site for zeppelins; it was merely named after the Graf Zeppelin, who had landed a prototype of one of the craft nearby.

³⁶ His plans exploited Roman imperial models as well, e.g., Ruff & Ruff's *Kongreßhalle* (1934–1938, unfinished), a copy of the Colosseum. It is now the home of the Nuremberg Opera.



Figure 4. Albert Speer, *Ehrentribüne*, across the Luitpoldarena, as viewed from the Ehrenhalle. Photograph by Georg Pahl, 1934. Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-04062A.



Figure 5. Albert Speer, *Zeppelinhaupttribüne* (1934).
Photograph taken in 1938.

German fascism's embrace of mass media was full-bodied, and the architecture of the site is pendant to the goal of disseminating fascist ideology. It is no wonder that the parade grounds presented themselves as picture perfect and ready-to-be-filmed. The architecture on the whole reads like a vast movie set, all but visually mandating an experience of vistas stretched out before one. The grandstands present Party speakers from afar, deified by their distance. The amplified voices of these demi-gods pulsed through the crowd, as electrifying as the current that made them audible. Add to that the following spectacle. Delays in the never-completed seating at the *Zeppelinfeld* inspired Speer to augment the grandiosity of the site—with Hitler's express approval—by creating what Speer declared to be a *Lichtdom* ("cathedral of light"), positioning over 100 anti-aircraft spotlights at regular intervals atop the *Haupttribüne* and pointing them 180 degrees on axis to the vertical in order to generate columns of light (figure 6). These were intended as an ethereal promise for the future stadium but, independent of that reference, were extremely effective in getting across the main aesthetic point relative to beauty. The light beams function Classically as columns: a regular and relatively simple pattern on which to lavish sight. But that these are *light* columns, shot deep into the night sky, has a power beyond that. Light is a physical phenomenon of course, but it is conceived as one of the least material sorts: soundless, tasteless, lacking smell and feel, in short, spectral. It is not for nothing that philosophers from the Presocratics to Descartes figure light as thought. And the direction of this "structure"—the heavens—for all its cliché (or maybe because of it), could not be more evocative. This is a hymn to the Archaic (aboriginal light), which deploys terms native to the Classical (columns) in order to surmount those terms. That the skyward beams also recalled spotlights shone into the night at Hollywood premières does not alter the point.

7.

We are now in a position to appreciate in greater phenomenological detail what the experience of a self-aware participant in the rally would have been like. Begin, again, with surfacing from the *Ehrenhalle* into the courtyard of the *Luitpoldhain*, its braziers lit, squarely facing the *Bühne*. To the left is the *Große Straße* extending far into the distance to the planned *Märzfeld*, which is visible even at that distance as a vanishing point in terms of which further experience of the grounds is organized.



Figure 6. Albert Speer, *Lichtdom*, projected above the *Zeppelinhaupttribüne* (1936). Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-1982-1130-502.

The overarching experience is one of advancing horizontality, sight focused on the line described by the top of the tribunal, the sky above and beyond it. As one moves forward, the sight line rises relative to point of view and extends further to the periphery as the tribunal's length takes up more and more of the visual field. This arena is mostly enclosed—there are gates to the north and south—but the tribunal extends on the perpendicular back towards the *Hall of Honor*. The arena does not feel limiting, however, given its breadth and depth of aspect.

Symbolism is there for the taking. A participant would find the structures and site to invoke—indeed, exemplify—the mythic elements: arena-earth, brazier-fire, both set off against a theatrical presentation of air-sky. A bit outside the arena, though out of sight just now, is the Großer Dutzenteiche, the repurposed medieval reservoir that is one of the two lakes on the grounds: water. There are more subtle significations at work as well. Any line registered as a limit will cause one to discriminate what is within the area it concribes from what lies beyond. When vision is staged up/down, as it is here, that produces a schema of below-line-within/above-line-beyond. Above-line-beyond here is sky; below-line-within are the tribunal stands. Festivities underway, they fill with party leaders. Seeing the horizon formed by the upper edge of the stands from ground level is to see it as distant and to see what is positioned near the horizon line it describes as ascendent. If what is beyond the horizon is experienced as transitional between heaven and earth, as it surely is for our participant, the remote yet eminent figures seated in the stands are experienced as upwardly approaching transcendence. They seem, that is, to move toward the condition of the memorialized “heroes” of the fascist past.

Our hypothetical reveler might also see clouds in the sky beyond, something out of which Riefenstahl's films make great deal of hay. She got her start as an actor, specializing in a genre of Weimar movies called *Bergfilme*, playing feral virgin-heroes who save villages from magical catastrophes.³⁷ The opening scenes of *Triumph* intercut shots ostensibly taken through the cockpit window of Hitler's plane as it descends to make its landing with aerial shots of the medieval architecture of Nuremberg. Continuity is provided by the clouds that are presented as if they are

³⁷ Her most famous turn as a director prior to her propaganda films was *Das blaue Licht* (1932), in which she also starred. (The script was co-authored with the great Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs, but she removed his name from the credits when she discovered he was Jewish.) Since Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1947, it is common to view *Bergfilme* as proto-fascist.

what separates the empyrean from the ordinary. A symphonic version of the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* in the soundtrack, Hitler is the as-yet unseen savior come to earth, complete with cruciform shadows of his plane's wings on those clouds and buildings.³⁸ He and the plane are one. Overkill, but it works. This is carried through in Riefenstahl's depiction of the 1934 rally, as figure 5 shows, storm clouds dramatizing the sublimity of the *Zeppelintribüne*. Were one to advance from the *Luitpoldarena* to the *Zeppelinfeld*, intensification awaits: an even more monumental tribunal, framing an even more expansive skyline. The over-under/without-within nested dichotomy repeats.

That is all spatial, but the site also constructs a form of temporality that structures one's movement through it. Part of the conviction that Ruskin's writing about Gothic churches conveys comes from the way he imagines his way into the handwork involved in the making of their components. One can sense that his eyes see past work still alive in the look of the stone.³⁹ Such "tensing" of material in architecture is often implicit, but some architects build in order to draw attention to it.⁴⁰ The temporality of the Nuremberg grounds is consciously built into it, carefully curated to be legible in the ordinary experience of moving in and around its structures. The site is processional. One begins in the past, *memorializing* heroes. But to memorialize them *as heroes* is to memorialize them for their sacrifice in securing what was for them a future, one they knew in the moment of their act they were not to see. *That* future is at the same time our participant's present, a present experienced as suffusing the site, demanding as it does an ongoing act of memory. But that past-future *cum* the present—that form of presentness—is also understood as a future that reaches beyond our participant's present—indeed, it necessarily outdoes *any* present moment of memorialization. Memory of this sort is ritualized through and through, dedicated to its own renewal and, moreover, to the general project of preserving the heroic past for the future. Our celebrant projects himself as a mnemonic caretaker for future like caretakers. It is in virtue of saving past sacrifice from oblivion that he holds the present open to the future.

³⁸ There is a Wagnerian tinge. Middle High German *nebel* ("mist," "cloud," "gloaming") is possibly cognate to the root of *Nibelung*, the Burgundian house that provides the protagonists for *Das Nibelungenlied*.

³⁹ See J. Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, Routledge, London, n.d., II. vi. 8. This idea also informs Ruskin's drawing practice, but I cannot go into that here.

⁴⁰ See D. Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1993.

Now add to this already dense structure the thought that the past sacrifice that finds present expression in memorialization is embedded in an understanding of a *mythic* past. What become crucial are not the historical dates at which “the fallen” fell; it is, rather, that those dates are but placeholders for something that must recur: continual, ever-renewing sacrifice. What is powerful about the mythic past is that it has prehistory written all over it; its inscrutability is what controls. *Withdrawn* presence constitutes the power of heroes; it is what deifies them and enthralls.⁴¹

8.

Fascist architecture is one of several ways of bridging Neoclassicism and modernism. It is discrete from forms of functionalism that try to do the same, as well as from its main conservative rival, New Urbanism. Beauty is not a concept one finds on the surface of functionalism—which figure 1 somewhat coyly labels “praxis-oriented”—but it is important to New Urbanism, in which vernacular forms of building play central roles, more traditional aesthetic markers in tow.

Is German fascist modernism, and with it its plea for inclusion of an Archaic conception of beauty in buildings, a dead branch on the Neoclassical family tree, a chance meeting at the crossroads of stripped-down Neoclassicism, modernity, and Archaic beauty? Or is it something from which to extrapolate? No one but a fascist wants to build in a fascist *style* of course⁴² If the preceding reflections have been on track, it follows that beauty, real beauty, can oppress. It can be terrible, depending on the use to which it is put. That is true of Classical beauty, of Archaic beauty, and of their hybrid. Fascist beauty is oppressive beauty, pure but not-so-simple.

⁴¹ Several of Hölderlin’s poems treat this theme, for instance, “Dichterberuf” and “Brot und Wein.” See *Sämtliche Gedichte*, vol. 1, Aula, Wiesbaden, 1970, 1, pp. 248–250, 290–295.

⁴² The university at which I happen to teach, the University of Notre Dame, has recently completed a building project that would not have been, in profile, alien to Speer. This is the transformation of an (American) football stadium into a vast educational complex, accomplished by adding a massive, upward-vaulting series of external buildings to the hull of the stadium, each an austere skyscraperesque Neoclassical wing. This is in fact a double-cladding of the original Notre Dame football stadium—the “hallowed ground” on which the famed football heroes of yore achieved their storied victories—in essence an act of architectural memorializing not unlike the *Ehrenhalle*. The Notre Dame complex is, naturally, not intended to be fascist. But given the size at which it had to be built, the specious idea behind it that big-money athletics and academic distinction tread the fields of glory hand-in-hand, and the connection with Notre Dame’s conservative architecture school, the result would not *look* completely out of place on the Nuremberg grounds.

That all said, the Archaic conception of beauty is not identical with fascist conceptions of the same. What are the prospects for nonfascist extrapolations from *it*? I wish to suggest that there is modern architecture that is informed by an allied conception of beauty. What I have in mind here are buildings that tap into what I have called elsewhere “deep aesthetics.”⁴³ By that I mean the practice of making art—in this case, architecture—that engages the complete suite of human perception. Human perceptual modalities form a system of sometimes modular but sometimes interpenetrating parts. Philosophical aesthetics tends to privilege those perceptual capacities that lie closest to acquiring empirical knowledge, principally (although not exclusively) sight. But the human perceptual system also includes nonconscious bodily awareness, such as proprioception (one’s sense of self-movement, urgency, posture, reflex activity, etc), and sense memory (bodily recall of prior bodily responses, especially recall via affect). Appealing to deep aesthetic responsiveness in art depends on structuring works that call upon several strata of experience at once. The means to do so will typically be varied and broad: not only construction that enlivens and extends human sensitivity to linear and volumetric form, but also that attends to sound, light, tactility, color, bodily comportment, etc. Architecture occupies a leading position here, given its ability to mobilize whole-body response.

One might say that such buildings are created with their phenomenology expressly in mind, concerned to broaden the aesthetic palette to include modes of perception other than sight. Even when sight is at issue, such work will be preoccupied with the implicit structuring of seeing through other modalities. This amounts to a denial of what some architectural theorists have called “ocularism.”⁴⁴ That is a challenge issued to architecture rooted in Neoclassical beauty, bound to canons of formal regularity. What is on offer instead is a recognizably Archaic idea of beauty in sheer radiance, but one that is adjusted for greater sensitivity to the subjective effects of embodying environments and shorn of any appeal to myth.⁴⁵

⁴³ See F. Rush, *On Architecture*, Routledge, New York, 2009, esp. chap. 1.

⁴⁴ See J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, Wiley, London, 1996.

⁴⁵ I remain convinced that the signal work here is Steven Holl’s *Bloch Addition to the Nelson-Adkins Museum of Art* (2007) in Kansas City. Part of its achievement is that it works with the Neoclassicism of the original museum building without sacrificing at all its own, very different, beauty.

This essay has its beginnings in a paper I gave in spring 2005 at the Université Paris-Nanterre and, in English translation, later presented at the AA School of Architecture in London. I thank Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Andrew Benjamin for invitations to speak at those venues, and I thank Paul Guyer for his invitation to contribute to this issue of the journal, which has given me an opportunity to revisit the work. The essay takes its title from that of an album by the group Harriet Tubman, The Terror End of Beauty (Sunnyside CD-B07HQ352GV, 2018). I stress that this is adaptation, not reference. The music on that record does not concern Archaic or fascist ideas of beauty, as does this essay. The guiding idea of the record is close in spirit to Rilke's lines (Duineser Elegien I. 4–5): "[d]as Schöne ist nichts / als des Schrecklichen Anfang," which I take to mean that extreme beauty, i.e., that of the withdrawn and icy "dominion of angels" ("Engel Ordnungen") of the poem, is the "onset of terror" in that it tokens the absolute difference between a being of true elevation and the human speaker of the poem. If pushed to the limits, beauty will yield something more primal than understanding, a call into the void.

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BEAUTY REVISITED:
INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER NEHAMAS

KHÖREIN: The cover of your seminal book “Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art” focuses on two details of Victorine Meurent – the model in Manet’s *Olympia* – the eyes and the hand covering her intimate parts. Was this your choice of how to illustrate the book that deals with the topic of beauty or to emphasize the “complex affair” you have with this painting? Perhaps both?

ALEXANDER NEHAMAS: The idea for that wonderful cover, I confess, was not mine but the art editor’s. I was delighted with it because it captures my idea that in love and beauty the “high” and the “low,” the spiritual and the bodily, are very closely, perhaps inextricably, connected with each other. It combines in one the “heavenly” and the “earthly” versions of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, of Plato’s *Symposium*. It reflects both my own relationship to Manet’s painting and my understanding of love and beauty as I present it in my book.

KH: Manet is regarded as one of the pillars of Modernity in visual arts. In your book, you cite a famous statement by the American painter Barnett Newman from 1948, “the impulse of modern art was to destroy beauty.” Would you say it succeeded?

AN: The short answer is “No.” Modernism destroyed a *conception* of beauty that took it to be immediately obvious and limited to the appearance, not the true nature, of things—a sort of “rhetorical” trick, as the critic Dave Hickey put it, to attract its audience to its often controversial, if not “litigious or neurotic,” content, which they might well have ignored otherwise. Hickey rejected modernism because he thought that it had forsaken beauty. I think, by contrast, that Modernism showed, perhaps inadvertently, that beauty is not always immediately apparent and not only a matter of seeing. It is by no means as Bellini or perhaps

Bouguereau made it seem. It can require growing familiarity, effort, and understanding—in a word, interpretation—in order to emerge. If I am right to think that beauty is the object of love and that we can't love what we don't find beautiful, then, to the extent that a modernist work is loved it is to that extent beautiful. Think of beauty as what makes you want to devote a part of your life to a particular work, something that draws you to it with a promise that things will be well with you if do, and you no longer have to give up either Modernism or beauty.

KH: You write that “the art we love is art we don't yet fully understand,” which raises many questions about the role of interpretation and its entanglement with beauty. How do you see this interdependence?

AN: You are right, it raises many questions, not all of which I can answer. To love a work of art (or, for that matter, a person) is to want to engage actively with it, to interrogate it, to understand what about it accounts for its effect on you. What draws you to it is the promise it makes, and the hope it generates, that what you will come to understand will be as beautiful as what you have already come to know about it. None of that is possible with something that you fully understand. It is deeply ironic that success—full understanding—signals the end of our active engagement. It seems almost as if love, when it achieves its aim, cancels itself.

We must be careful here. The fact is that you can never fully understand *anything*, since everything has indefinitely many features of its own and even more relationships to everything else. What usually happens is that as you get to know something better you may reach a point where the effort to learn more about it becomes too costly in comparison to what you are likely to learn. That's what happened when I went back to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which I had read several times before. I am sure I would have seen new things in it but, having already engaged so extensively with it, I also felt (perhaps wrongly) that they would not be important enough to justify the effort I would have to make to see them.

But that doesn't mean that I am now indifferent to it. As Aristotle says about old friends with whom you are no longer directly involved, you still love them because of your history together, because of what you have both become through your friendship. You still feel affection, concern, and respect for them but you no longer have the desire to interact with them as passionately as you once did.

I once felt about Manet's *Olympia* as I felt about *The Magic Mountain*. I thought there was nothing more I could get out of it, and it gradually became less important to me. But when I saw the painting again recently, I noticed something new: as she lies on her bed, Olympia is holding the edge of a silk coverlet, prompting the question, is she about to lift it and cover her naked body or has she just pulled it down, revealing it? And, all of a sudden, the painting came alive again and our "complex affair" was rekindled. (I still don't know the answer.)

KH: In your work you acknowledge the importance of Arthur Danto: he considered beauty only one among many aesthetic qualities in art. And although not crucial, beauty for Danto had an important role if its presence made a difference to the meaning of an artwork. Do you find aesthetic pleasure in looking for meaning in art and not just in looking at art as it stands before us?

AN: "Looking at art as it stands before us" seems to me one of the least productive and satisfying ways of interacting with a work of art. When you are attracted to something, you want to understand the source of the attraction, you want to see exactly how the work produces that reaction in you—that is, you want to interpret it. Interpretation, as I see it, is the effort to determine as precisely as possible *what* the work is that attracts you and the better you come to know it the better you come to understand the features that draw you to it. If beauty is only a promise of happiness, then, as long as you find something beautiful, you will keep looking for an account of its beauty that you don't yet have. And, as Plato said, what makes something beautiful must be itself beautiful. Beauty and meaning and intimately interrelated. When I ask what an element of a work means, I want an answer that will show why it is as it is, how it supports and is supported by the work's other elements, and how it contributes to my delight.

KH: Of all the possible definitions of beauty, you paraphrase Stendhal's: *la beauté n'est que la promesse du bonheur*.

AN: My use of Stendhal's phrase is not meant as an explication of his view. It is what the phrase suggests rather than what Stendhal may have taken it to suggest that I wanted to emphasize. Whether or not he would have agreed with my interpretation, the idea of beauty as only a promise of happiness, as an incitement to continue to interact with the beautiful

object rather than as an opportunity for a passive (and, in more than one sense, a dumb) contemplation has proved, to me at least, profoundly helpful.

KH: Moreover, the conception of beauty as “the promise of happiness” binds strongly the idea of beauty to the idea of a promise. The latter term belongs to the register of belief, trust, faith and even to what Plato refers to as *doxa*, or even more precisely, *pistis*. Can beauty go beyond the realm of opinion?

AN: If to say that promise belongs to the register of belief is to say that we can never be certain that the promise a work issues will be fulfilled, then I agree that beauty and certainty don’t go together. Plato thought that beauty does lead to certainty because he considered that the “ascent” of beauty he describes in the *Symposium* ends with a revelation of the Form of Beauty, the one and only explanation of the beauty of everything else. But I don’t think that the search for beauty has a definite end—interpretation is interminable—nor do I believe that everything that is beautiful is beautiful for the same reason. In fact, as I claim in my book, I take beauty to be a symbol of uncertainty. At that point, though I owe a huge debt to Plato, I take a different route.

KH: You agree with Collingwood that beauty is connected with eros. However, as opposed to him, you explain that eros can be directed at art. What kind of “libidinal economy” lies in your response to art?

AN: We need to separate the erotic from the sexual. Eros, which is produced by beauty, is the desire to spend part of your life—sometimes more, sometime less—with a particular object or person so that you can get to know it better and submit to its influence, perhaps changing yourself as a result. When the object in question is a person, eros often (though not always—not, say, in many cases of friendship) involves sexual desire. When it is a work of art, sexuality is not directly involved: the work is not itself an object of sexual interest (though its content may be). The reason is not that there are, as some believe, different kinds of love; the reason is that love is prompted by different kinds of things.

KH: Do you think that beauty can be considered separately from art and love? Or even, from aesthetics? What could be the “je-ne-sais-quoi”

or “presque-rien” (as Vladimir Jankélévitch says) that would be specific exclusively to beauty?

AN: I believe that beauty is essentially connected to art and love—in fact, the really essential connection is with love: art simply consists of objects that many people find beautiful and on account of which they love them. But we need to distinguish between beauty, so to speak, “in itself” and what people actually find beautiful. It is the latter that I am concerned with: with the question what it is *to find something beautiful*, not with the question what beauty is. The answer to the latter question, as far I am concerned, is “the object of love.” That is, I don’t think that there are any structural features that are common to all beautiful objects and explain why they are beautiful. Features like *symmetry* can only take us so far because what counts as symmetry is not the same in every case. Renaissance paintings, for example, generally rely on geometrical symmetry according to the laws of perspective; but the axis of symmetry of earlier works, like Duccio’s or Cimabue’s, depends on the relative size of the depicted figures, the more important ones, like the Madonna and the Child, being much larger than, say, angels or donors. Similarly, some faces that have been very much admired, Loren Hutton’s for example, are anything but classically symmetrical. The “presque-rien” that is exclusive to beauty is love: it is almost nothing because, however obvious the beauty of an object is to me and however passionate I may be about it, its beauty may be quite imperceptible to, and excite no passion at all in, you. What is everything to one person may be nothing to another.

KH: How might we distinguish architecture from art, such as painting?

AN: All the arts are important to us and all of us—those of us at least who are not in constant danger and who have enough to eat—are in one way or another exposed to them. We live *with* them but, in contrast to architecture, we don’t live *in* them, nor do they surround us in the literal sense in which an urban landscape or a particular building we happen to be in creates an environment within which we move, within which we in fact live. That, to me, suggests that architecture has certain obligations toward its “audience” that the other arts either lack altogether or have to a much lesser extent. It is, for example, a good thing for some paintings or literary works to be disturbing, to raise issues that make their audience

uncomfortable. I wonder, though, whether that is a legitimate purpose in architecture.

KH: Keeping in mind the issue of function or purpose, do you think that the relationship the observer has towards architectural objects is radically different than, say, towards sculpture?

AN: The practical dimension of architecture certainly influences our relationship to it in ways that are not that common in the other arts. A beautiful building may actually be a failure in terms of its function. I am thinking, for example, of Frank Gehry's Science Library for Princeton University. It is an impressive building, in several ways typical of Gehry—several surfaces that seem not to fit perfectly with one another but ultimately constitute a unified whole, serious contrast among the materials of which it consists, multi-directional planes and other shapes that seem to want to fly away but are, nonetheless, solidly held together. It is, in my opinion, a beautiful building, almost sculptural in its complexity (as Gehry's buildings often are). But once you get inside, you are instantly lost. There is no sense of direction, no way to know where you should go after entering; the building pulls you this way and that at the same time, producing a sense of bewilderment that stops you from moving. In that respect, it is a significant failure.

That dissonance between the aesthetic and the practical certainly affects our relationship with architectural objects in a way that is absent, or at least much less pronounced, in our reactions to the other arts. At the same time, architecture is much more difficult to recontextualize than the other arts. We can place a painting in different rooms, different buildings, even different countries; we can show it next to all sorts of different works, accentuating some of its features and diverting attention from others. That may make a serious difference of how we react to the painting. But buildings can't be moved, and their context is more or less given. There is a short street in Athens, Greece, on which there are five apartment buildings, each designed in a different decade, and none of them seems, so to speak, aware of its neighbors. Some of the buildings are attractive, others are not. But the street as a whole is a failure, disorganized and irrational. And we can do little about it, other than tearing it down and starting again. Again, though, if we find an architectural object beautiful, our reaction to it, in my opinion, is not different in kind from our reaction to the other arts.

KH: Would you say that in architecture, the figure of the author or creative subjectivity vanishes?

AN: I am not sure that either the figure of the author or of creative subjectivity *is* vanishing in architecture—certainly not in connection with successful architects. We do speak of Adamite or Palladian buildings, of Mies van der Rohe or Marcel Breuer, of Michael Graves or Antonio Gaudí, as we speak of Impressionism or Baroque, of Giotto or Caravaggio, and so on. The difference, I think, is that we are generally exposed to the best of painting in our museums, galleries, and so on whereas there is no such vetting process for the buildings around us. For that reason, we are exposed to many more mediocre or inferior buildings, which, not having an arresting style, are simply non-descript and seem to be designed either by committee or by no one in particular. But the same is true of most of the paintings and the novels that have ever been created—it's just that we are not as insistently and unavoidably exposed to them. If you consider a medium like television, whose works are much more generally available than painting, you will be faced with the very same situation: most of them are non-descript, unable to express a unified vision, and also apparently created either by committee or by no one in particular. In other words, it is not architecture itself that eliminates the figure of the author but *bad* or *mediocre* architecture that does so. And the same is true of the other arts, as long as we are not exposed, by and large, to their better instances.

KH: You argue that the judgment of beauty or taste has a social dimension, but only on a personal level that lies between the private and public spheres. Could you elaborate on this claim?

AN: If we think of the private as what affects yourself only and the public as what affects everyone, the personal affects both yourself and a circle of others. But that circle is never as broad as the range of the public. When we find something beautiful, we are moved to share our feelings, and our reasons for them, with others—we are in “a rush to converse,” as Dave Hickey once put it. We want others to share our view (although they may also convince us to abandon it) but, contrary to Kant's influential approach, we do not *everyone* to do so. The art we love unites us with some people and separates us from others: it confirms some of our friendships and undermines others, and it also creates new ones. It creates

a community but it neither envisages or wants that community to extend universally. My personal taste distinguishes me from my circle, my circle's taste distinguishes us from many others, and I belong to many circles, some which do and some of which do not overlap.

KH: One perspective of beauty, at least since Kant, is to understand it as disinterested and disconnected from everyday desires. Kant himself, however, allows that art, as well as nature, provokes both social and moral interest in beauty. You tackle these issues and criticize Schopenhauer's radicalization of disinterestedness. In which sense can we speak about the "autonomy" of art?

AN: I am as suspicious of the isolation of beauty and art from our everyday desires as I am of their subjugation to our moral concerns. When we find something beautiful, we are committed to making it part of our life. Beauty, therefore, truly affects our life's shape. It leads us to new places, new people, new experiences—places, people, and experiences that we would not have known without it. For Plato, beauty (he had little to say about *art*), inevitably leads to virtue. I am not so sure. The promise of beauty is not a guarantee—that is part of the reason I connect it with uncertainty. Although it promises happiness, it often delivers disappointment. If we think of our relationship with art not as the passive contemplation I mentioned above but as an active investigation, a continuing involvement with it, then it is clear that it affects the life it becomes a part of. How exactly it affects it, however, necessarily differs from one case to another. While our moral and political values aspire to connect us with everyone else, aesthetic values help to differentiate us from one another. Art is autonomous not because it is distinct from *life* but because it is a distinct *part of life*. Aesthetic reasons are *sui generis* but a beautiful work, like a beautiful person, can still have unacceptable practical or ethical effects on a life and even undermine its overall value.

KH: Throughout the book, you make connections between the notions of beauty and value. How are evaluation and worth related to beauty? Further, is evaluation to be understood as an onto-genetic prerequisite of beauty? Is beauty intrinsically connected with value and worth?

AN: Beauty is intimately connected with value, it *is* a value. It is something, especially if we agree that appreciating it is not, as we have said,

a passive affair but an active pursuit, to which we devote considerable parts of our life through interpretation and the various engagements interpretation requires—examination of the beautiful work, of course, but also the need, if be, to travel to see it and to see other works with which it is related, to meet people with whom we can discuss it (and perhaps to avoid others with whom we can't). Interpretation, in short, presupposes that its object is valuable, though perhaps not always positively. We sometimes interpret in order to show that something does not deserve our attention. But that is as it should be: the ugly belongs to aesthetics. What doesn't, what really is the negation of beauty is not the ugly but the non-descript, what we don't notice at all. It is the same with love, whose opposite is not hatred but indifference, the absence of salience. Beauty, love, and value—positive or negative—form an essential nexus. They either come altogether or not at all.

KH: You seem to insist on the fact that when we find an object or a person beautiful, we necessarily commit ourselves to it – we devote our time and our attention to it, we engage deeply and durably with it in active pursuit. Yet, what about things we find beautiful just in passing? Beauty whose specificity escapes us, which we cannot fully articulate? Is there beauty in ephemeral objects or phenomena? Is there something we might call “beauty of the moment?”

AN: Two things. First, love and beauty come in degrees. I can say that I love both Proust and whodunits but my relationship to Proust is one that has lasted a lifetime while no whodunit has occupied me longer than a few hours or days. So, the time and attention I devote to Proust are vast compared to how long I remain focused on a mystery novel. The same holds true of my relationships with people: some last a lifetime, others are much shorter. But I believe they are all on one and the same continuum: we can't identify love only with its greatest cases just as we can't identify, say, the novel only with the very, very, very few great novels with which we are familiar. Yes, there is what you call “beauty of the moment” but every moment has some duration, during which the relationship I am trying to describe obtains: a commitment doesn't have to be lifelong in order to qualify as love.

Second, there are many cases where something strikes us as beautiful but, for all sorts of different reasons, we decline to pursue it. I may not

approach someone I find beautiful because I suspect that they will not enjoy it or because doing so might hurt someone else I love or because I am shy or because I suspect that they may be in some way or other dangerous for me. I may not approach a work of art because of time constraints or because I feel that doing so will take me away from others with which I want to interact in more detail or even because of moral qualms I may have regarding it. These too may be “beauties of the moment:” I recognize their attraction but, for some particular reason, I resist them.

In any case, the specificity of beauty always escapes us—at the beginning. That is why we want to commit ourselves to the beautiful object: to *articulate* what it is that we find beautiful in it. It is very likely, therefore, that the beauty that we can’t articulate is either the beauty of something that we have only begun to interact with or the beauty of something that we decide to stay away from—a beauty that might have become articulate had we stayed with it instead.

KH: By revisiting the dilemmas in history of aesthetics and following the difference between Kant, Schopenhauer and Plato, but also Nietzsche, you claim that art has more than a contemplative value, and in a certain sense that it has value in itself. Can you tell us more about this specific aesthetic value?

AN: There is a contrast between the values of science, morality and politics on the one hand and the values of art and beauty on the other. There is, of course, disagreement in science but its purpose is to reach a conclusion that is common to everyone: the goal is consensus, a general agreement. Similarly, the values of morality and politics depend on our similarities to one another—similarities that exist or that we want to encourage—and to the extent that they are correct they are binding on everyone. But the values of art and beauty emphasize our differences from one another. In the arts, differentiation is of the essence. The goal is to establish new ways of looking at things and new things to look at, new ways of representation that add to our repertoire without making our repertoire’s past obsolete. The best way to learn Newtonian physics is to study the most recent textbook on the subject, not to go back to Newton’s *Principia*. But the only way to learn what Manet was doing is to look at Manet’s own paintings and to do so for oneself. Scientific, moral, and political thought is (or aspires to be) independent of the particular

individuals who engage in it, responsible only to the rational considerations that (we hope) are common to us all. But artistic accomplishment is essentially tied to the individuals whose accomplishment it is, whether as artists or critics. Art and beauty are valuable because they are emblems of the importance of developing our own personality, of perhaps accomplishing something with our life that differs significantly from what others have accomplished with theirs. Something that may allow us to stand apart, be noticed, and perhaps become an object of love in our own right.

Consider Descartes and Montaigne for a moment. Descartes begins his *Meditations* concretely, placing himself in a particular situation, at this desk, near his fireplace, and so on. But as the book continues the “I” that was individual in the beginning gradually speaks for everyone, it gradually becomes what all human beings have in common. Montaigne, by contrast, piles detail upon detail in his account of himself in the *Essays*, and the more we know about him, the more he turns out to be a specific individual, idiosyncratic and firmly located in a historical and social context. I believe that both are necessary if we are to understand ourselves better. Our similarities are crucially important. But so are our differences. Human beings are not ants, and art is one of our main tools for making something of ourselves that is truly our own and not merely a repetition of what others have already accomplished.

KH: How do you relate to other categories that were the subject of philosophical analysis in art, such as the *sublime* that was put forward by Edmund Burke and further developed, particularly concerning avant-garde art of the twentieth century, by Lyotard with his “aesthetic of sublime?”

AN: I am afraid I am bound to disappoint you on this question. I have serious doubts about the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, especially as Burke, who understands it in explicitly gendered terms, presents it. I suspect that the sublime re-entered aesthetic thought in the twentieth century because people, having identified beauty with an object’s immediate attractiveness, realized that, on that understanding, modern art is not beautiful. The sublime, which also spoke to the difficulty, distance, and demandingness of much of modern art, was then introduced as the alternative to beauty. But if we think of beauty as the object of love instead of as a set of specific visual features, we can see that everything that we want to say about the sublime can also be said in terms of the beautiful.

Matisse once wrote, “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter [...] a soothing, calming influence on the mind, rather like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.” I am not sure that this is true of most of his own work but, no doubt, his words express what many people would identify as beauty’s effect. Perhaps some art is like that. But it is also true that beauty can disturb, challenge, and, in the magnitude of its accomplishment, generate the awe that supposedly belongs only to the sublime.

The appreciation of art is not the work of a moment. It is the work of a lifetime. A lifetime whose shape and quality are as they are because of art, beauty, and love.

Interview conducted by Zoran Erić, Snežana Vesnić, Igor Cvejić, and Andrea Perunović.

THE RIGHT TO BEAUTY: INTERVIEW WITH ÁLVARO SIZA

PIERRE-ALAIN CROSET: Since this is a journal that deals with architecture and philosophy, let's talk about some more general issues. I would like to start with a fond memory, the first time we spoke at length, in the autumn of 1981, when you, Álvaro, were an invited professor at the EPFL in Lausanne. I had just started working with Vittorio Gregotti on the design of the new *Casabella* the previous summer: the first issue, published in March 1982, featured the project for the Quinta da Malagueira in Évora as the main project. When you design, there is always a story; when you draw, it is as if you are telling a story.

ÁLVARO SIZA: I remember that when the SAAL, in which I had worked for two years, was abolished, I was left without a job, because all those who had worked for the SAAL were subsequently marginalised. I received this invitation from the Mayor of Évora, a fantastic person; I accepted and went, although I did not know Évora very well, nor the site, an old abandoned agricultural estate. One of the aims of the general urban plan for Évora, drawn up by the architects in charge, including Nuno Portas, was to abolish the previous project, which included seven-storey buildings that blocked the view of the centre of Évora, yet a small part of which had already been built. It was a 25-hectare plot of land, slightly sloping, abandoned, with a watercourse that they wanted to preserve, which crossed the land diagonally, arriving very close to the centre of Évora, a centre that was well preserved, given that the Alentejo had a sparse population, and which still had its medieval wall. The aim was to build low-cost housing, mainly for members of the cooperative; the only guidelines were to design buildings of only two storeys, to ensure views of the historic centre, to keep costs down, of course, and to provide the necessary facilities for the residences. I made the first visit, of which there is a sketch published by *Casabella*, where I can be seen in the middle of the area, looking towards the ancient city. But in addition to the programme,

which included many seemingly identical houses, I was confronted with an abandoned building, and this worried me greatly. As architects always do, I wondered where to start and what to do, like writers who wonder how to begin when faced with a blank page and no idea what to write. I did not want to be in that void, and I tried to look for the differences.

ANDREA CANCLINI: You started looking for traces.

ÁS: Yes, I found a little undulation of the land, then the view towards the city, then a rock here, a rock there, a tree here, a tree there, little things, and then next to the area there was a road with small squatter buildings. Little, very little, but it was beginning to work: after all, that was the basis for starting on that blank sheet of paper. Then, as happens in SAAL projects, I started talking to the cooperativists, an old association of neighbours. In the meetings, the traditional typology was considered, not for its language, but for the organisation of the houses, which could evolve over time. The discussion was very lively, we talked about the equipment they needed, about the relationship with the city, and so we began to develop the project. The questions I wanted to start with were how to make the houses, how to associate and organise this sequence of 1,200 dwellings. The solution came from a visit I made to Pompeii: it was a revelation. I had to make the same number of dwellings as in the previous solution, and when I visited Pompeii, I saw these dense clusters of small houses, one or two storeys, following the undulations of the terrain. Then the starting point was that this abandoned area was no longer a desert: I had found the character of this place, which was no longer the emptiness it had seemed to me on my first visit.

AC: Your attention has always been directed towards the interior of the discipline of architecture, without ever attempting, as has often been done, to intellectualise the profession by seeking external references; or rather, for you, the intellectualisation of the profession has always been an effort directed towards the interior of the architectural project.

ÁS: There are so many who concentrate their work on theorising, sometimes this is done in the writing of project reports, so many are not even architects, not out of incompetence, but because of concentration; this is very common today, everywhere. I like to write, except that everything I have written is in direct relation to the project, but not as its structure.

AC: Sometimes writing say things that drawing cannot.

ÁS: Yes, there is a line of great theoretical critics of architecture. There is Bruno Zevi, there is Vittorio Gregotti, there is Kenneth Frampton, but basically there are only a few.

PAC: You have always cultivated relationships with the other arts: sculpture, visual arts, literature, poetry, but you have rarely spoken of your relationship with philosophy or philosophers, or whether you have read much philosophy.

ÁS: In Portuguese secondary school there was some teaching of philosophical disciplines, but it was not very strong, so it passed me by a bit.

MILOŠ ČIPRANIĆ: In one conversation¹ you say that you have tried several times to read books on the history of philosophy and that you have never managed to finish any of them, always stopping with the ancient Greeks.

ÁS: Well, first, it is a shortcoming of mine, which I can explain a little in the following way. As I said, in high school here in Portugal there is philosophy as a subject, but when I took the course at the right time, it was very... how shall I put it... not well curated. The teaching was much more related to mathematics or Portuguese than to philosophy, and when the teacher went through the history of philosophy, it always ended in the eighteenth, early nineteenth century. There was no time to go further. So, I have very little training in that aspect, and perhaps that's why I've never been deeply interested in it. When I talk about the Greeks, it is not deep knowledge, but it is a proximity to the richness and so many mentions of Greek art and Greek philosophy throughout history that is almost irresistible. But it is not really deep knowledge.

AC: What about poetry, literature or music?

ÁS: Yes, poetry, literature and even music obviously have a lot to do with architecture. In philosophy, however, there is a need for a structured construction of knowledge. In my personal self-education, there is my poor philosophical training, and when the architectural debate touches on

¹ Á. Siza, J. M. Hernández León, *Una conversación*, Abada Editores, Madrid, 2021.

philosophical issues, I feel a kind of inadequacy. I feel closer to disciplines that belong to the same family as architecture, that share the same means, the same tools of work, of implementation, activities that are very close, like music. Music has rhythm.

AC: And symmetry, and harmony.

ÁS: And rest, silence, noise: all characteristics that also inhabit architectural space. Then the reference is automatic, it comes without thinking, a functional relationship is established in my mind. The same thing happens in cinema: for example, in terms of paths, as in architecture, directors also do long tracking shots, and then a pause, it's the same. Or you go under a low ceiling and immediately find a high one, or vice versa; all this is found in architecture, and it is also found in music.

MC: Architecture and music can be considered sisters; you love jazz, has this music genre influenced your architectural practice? Do you listen to jazz when you are designing, planning or thinking about a particular object?

ÁS: When I draw, no, I don't listen to music in the office, like many people do in front of the computer with headphones, it would be a Babel, when I work, I don't listen to music because there are always so many demands: the drawing, the telephone, visits, interviews...! There is no room for music. But at night, at home, yes, I listen to a lot of music, and a lot of jazz, because jazz has this combination that is very important for us architects, and that is that it has a great spontaneity and freshness, but also a solid structure. It is not by chance that today jazz has conquered the whole world and has become universal. Brazilian music, for example, with its links to Africa and slavery, arrived here in Portugal as a mixture with a great and irresistible vocation to express itself; when jazz recognised these qualities, Jobim did the other way round and looked for them in jazz. I still listen to Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and others.

SNEŽANA VESNIĆ: What does architectural concept mean to you? How would you define it?

ÁS: It is the result of analysing and studying all the problems involved in the project.

PETAR BOJANIĆ: I would like to ask you a question about the problem of innovation. In the text “Projecting” you write that no one “ever invents or copies” anything. In the text the verb invent is put in quotation marks, which is very significant. If architects do not invent, but only transform reality, emphasising the role of tradition as a challenge, how can we think or create the new in architecture?

ÁS: With the exception of a few very special historical moments, innovation comes from what exists, from attention to what exists, and is transformed; what exists is not just a form, but a force in the dynamics of society, and therefore comes from what exists, or something in between what exists.

AC: It is precisely about accepting the objectivity of reality in your projects, the necessity that this reality imposes on you; it is a dialectical relationship, if you like, with innovation or originality, which is always a dialogue between necessity and creation. This ability to maintain the complexity of reality in the project seems to me to be a fundamental datum of your activity.

ÁS: Yes, imagination in a vacuum is not in my capacity, I think I have no imagination. I have this attention to reality, to what exists, to history, to the past. For me it is more a need than anything else, because otherwise I am inactive.

PAC: There is a dimension of dynamism in your drawings, in your sketches. You said earlier that you are always transforming, and so your drawing is always in motion. You often use sketches to imagine stories, and they are sketches of architecture and landscape, always populated by figures, people, angels, animals, plants.

ÁS: What distinguishes the sketch from other means of expression is that it is so important to me, more important than to other architects, because it is very quick, it is done in seconds, and it is very elastic, and it is always possible to modify it, and therefore both in certain initial phases and throughout the project, sometimes even during the construction, the sketch allows me to accompany what I think in reaction to what happens, what I experience. The sketch is very quick and always retains its function, like a support, ideally until the last stone of a building is laid. The

computer, which dominates architectural practice today, fragments the process: it is very fast, but it is slow, actually. I remember spending a few months at Harvard, where there was a discipline dedicated to studying the possibilities and the evolution of the use of computers, always with this idea of invention. But in the end, this variability or flexibility is perhaps already present in the sketch.

AYA JAZAIERLY: Frampton, referring to a conversation with you, congratulated you on a project telling you that you must be very happy, and you replied: “How can I be happy if Europe has no project?”

ÁS: True, and it is even more true today. I remember this conversation that took place a long time ago, and today it is even worse. Architecture in Europe is suffering from a campaign that tends to make architecture something useless, inconvenient, traditionally reserved for people, but which no longer counts for anything. The architect is portrayed as a capricious, inconvenient and useless professional. It’s terrible, and you don’t see any reaction from architects, either individually or from the professional associations, everyone in Europe is in this state. In Portugal, there are no copyrights, there is no direct control or authority over construction; the last straw is that, by law, all public works are decided by competition between contractors, not between architects, so it is the contractors who make the choice: faced with this situation, we do not see the necessary reaction from the professional boards of architects.

PAC: If you are trained as an architect and love architecture, you cannot just work on projects. An architect must also go to the places of power, in politics, in real estate, in commissioning. Think of Nuno Portas, who was also an important minister in Portugal: an architect can also act at high decision-making levels and defend the value of architecture.

ÁS: Access to politics is difficult, because politics is only accessible through parties, and even there, this idea of architects as capricious, used to working for popes and kings, forgetting everything that allowed for the expansion of modern architecture, which has nothing to do with that, but has to do with social housing.

MC: In the text “On Education,” you define architecture as a collective art, while elsewhere you describe the creative process as an act of

depersonalisation. If architecture is a collective art and creation is an act of depersonalisation, then the position of the architect in relation to the project he is working on is very complex.

ÁS: Yes, it is complex, but the architect is potentially very capable, because today it is necessarily interdisciplinary work: the architect cannot dominate everything, in terms of the complexity of the construction, because if they do, there will be no time for architecture. They nevertheless, have a very important role to play, which has to do with the whole process, it has to do with all this complexity, it has to do with coordination, with the fact of collaborating and debating with others, with specialists, with all those who have to do with the construction, with approval. This is the nourishment of the architect, who, one could say, has a great deal of freedom despite reduced general knowledge. I think it is this complexity of the disciplinary environment that gives the architect the nourishment for invention.

PAC: Which brings us back to the cinema, or the conductor.

AC: And perhaps it is this lack of specialisation that allows this freedom.

ÁS: Yes, what is important is that the architect is the specialist of not being a specialist, it is the basis of this need for specialisation and design put together, it is a liberation other than spontaneous or offered freedom, it is a constructed liberation, through all relationships. The ultimate meaning or reason for being an architect, I believe, is beauty. All these specialisations do not deal with beauty: beauty is not something that comes down from heaven, beauty comes from construction and the articulation of needs, this is the bread and butter of architecture today. The need for quality from the point of view of comfort, maintenance, etc., comes from these different disciplines, but the rendering, what unites all this in the most complete, coordinated and correct form, that is the task of architecture.

MĆ: In the foreword to a book about the impact of the built environment on the mental health and well-being of children and young people,² you mention the issue of “the right to beauty.” You argue that beauty is

² P. Strecht, *Uma certa harmonia: notas sobre arquitetura, urbanismo e saúde mental infanto-juvenil*, Assirio & Alvim, Lisboa, 2001.

not about luxury, but about functionality. You also mention Plato in this foreword. You believe that the beauty of architectural forms is a quality that should be available to everyone. Everyone has a right to beauty.

ÁS: Yes, what I mean is that I combine beauty with functionality. I say that beauty is the ultimate in functionality, they are not opposites. There are people who think that beauty is something extra, that it is somehow a luxury, and that is not the case. I often think about what it was like to talk about modern architecture in the twenties and thirties, in its development, in its awakening, in what was the main theme that was portrayed, which was social housing, quality architecture for everyone, including beauty, because it is beautiful architecture. In a city like Berlin today, the most important part in terms of quality is social housing, with architects like Mies van der Rohe, Gropius and the great Bruno Taut, who built more than all the others put together. So this idea, which is very much in the air today, that architects are expensive and that they are an unnecessary luxury, is historically untrue: it's not just a mistake, it's a lie.

Interview conducted by Andrea Canclini, Aya Jazaierly, Miloš Čipranić, Petar Bojanić, Pierre-Alain Croset, and Snežana Vesnić.

BODY AUGMENTED: INTERVIEW WITH STELARC

KHÖREIN: You tend to use architectural terms when speaking about your work. For example, you have frequently emphasised your exploration of “alternate anatomical architectures.” What does the project of designing a “new body” mean to you?

STELARC: I have always thought architectonically, structurally, of spaces both internal and external, of circulatory systems—going beyond the mere surface of things. My parents would have hoped I had undertaken a career in medicine. Hence the general interest in both anatomy and architecture. In fact, I was accepted into the architecture course at Melbourne University, but after a hesitant start, I decided to do a visual arts course instead. The internal body probes and the sculpture inserted inside my stomach amplified the use of that kind of terminology. The body is an intricate, evolved analogue body. But objectively, it is not well designed neither for full adaptation with its natural environment nor able to effectively cope with its own engineered technological habitat. Before the possibilities of nanotechnology became apparent to me, I thought that we might only be able to redesign the body not from inside out but rather at the skin level. If we could engineer an alternative skin which had the additional properties of photosynthesis and be permeable to oxygen, then we could radically redesign the body. We would not need lungs to breathe, a mouth to chew, a gastrointestinal tract to digest food or a circulatory system to convey nutrients and oxygen throughout the body. The body would no longer be an organisation. We could hollow out the human body, making it more amenable to technological components it could become a host for. Admittedly a naïve idea but seductive at the time because it bypassed the internal complexity and analogue complexity of the body. So yes, we can accept poetically the biological status quo of the body as a malfunctioning and even fatally flawed organism whose very operation guarantees its demise. Aside from speculation, the emphasis



Figure 1. Stelarc, *City Suspension*. Copenhagen, 1985.
Photograph by Morten Schandorff. Courtesy of Stelarc.

is not so much on designing a new body as such but rather considering alternative anatomical possibilities that allow the body to perform more effectively, not only pragmatically, in Earth environments but also beyond this biosphere in zero G and in extreme electromagnetic and gravitational fields. Perhaps our only contribution as a species is to provide the brains for humanoid robots that can be engineered to become more mobile and more robust systems that can disseminate intelligent life beyond this planet. As individuals and as a species our longevity is so limited that we only experience phenomena and the universe in an incredibly brief instant of cosmological time. So, the perpetuation of intelligent life in any form or substrate becomes a priority if indeed it is such a rare occurrence. What is needed is a splitting of our species. We need to reconsider embodiment beyond this particular form with these particular functions.

KH: Could you tell us more about your experience of “surgical sculpting” of your body; you started with an implant of a third ear on your arm, is that right?

STELARC: During a residency at Carnegie Mellon University in 1996 and after growing rat myoblasts in a petri dish, I had an idea of engineering a soft prosthesis—one that would become a permanent modification of my body rather than simply a mechanical attachment as with the *Third Hand*. And being always with the ear structure—which is not only an organ of hearing but also an organ of balance—the idea of an extra ear became an obsession. Albeit its external structure. At first, it was imagined as an extra ear on the side of my head. But no one would assist in realising that. It took ten years to get funding and to find three plastic surgeons to actualise the project, but as an ear on my arm. There have been four surgical procedures since 2006. Although “surgical sculpting” is seductive terminology, the process is more prolonged and constrained and not without complications. There were several serious problems that occurred: necrosis during the skin expansion process necessitated excising it and rotating the position of the ear around the arm. Ironically, this proved to be the original site that the 3D model and animation was visualised. Anyway, the inner forearm was anatomically a good site for the ear construction. The skin is thin and smooth there and ergonomically locating it on the inner forearm minimises the inadvertent knocking or scraping of the ear. There was also a serious infection having left the microphone inside the ear construct for a week. Melodramatically, I could

have lost an arm for an ear. The process involved firstly inserting an expander in the arm, self-injecting sterile saline solution for several months to stretch the skin. The expander was then removed and a Medpor scaffold was inserted. The Medpor implant is a porous, biocompatible polyethylene material, with pore sizes ranging from 100–250 micrometres, encouraging your cells to populate it. In about six months there was tissue ingrowth and vascularisation. The construct becomes a living part of your body. The project was not about merely replicating an ear and relocating it to my arm. The ear is not for me. It is a remote listening device for people in other places. The *Ear on Arm* is an alternative aesthetic gesture for a new organ for the body: an available, accessible and mobile organ for other bodies in other places, enabling people to locate and listen in to another body elsewhere. The intent is still to realise a functional capability, but up till now I have not found any elegant and inexpensive way to do that (figure 2). There are biomedical, technical and issues of scale that still exist. The test done immediately after the second surgery with the microphone implant demonstrated that it is a plausible project. Even with a partial plaster cast and the arm and ear wrapped in bandage, and even with the surgeon wearing his face mask, his voice was picked up and wirelessly transmitted. But rather than an ear that hears and transmits, I first imagined an ear that would speak to the person who came close to me.

KH: If the ear implant became part of your body and was meant for remote listening as you say, or as a communication device oriented to the “external world,” what was the idea behind the project *Stomach Sculpture* where your body was a host for a surgically inserted sculpture?

STELARC: There was a simultaneous interest to both probe and extend the body, and to externalise internal body functions. For example, with the *Amplified Body*, *Third Hand* and *Laser Eyes* performances, brainwaves, heartbeat and muscle signals were acoustically amplified, morphing body shape into the cuboid gallery space and immersing the audience. As well as actuating the *Third Hand* and amplifying the motor sounds, I was able to scribble with laser beams directed to the eyes via optic fibre cable, piercing and probing the space. The eyes metaphorically become transmitters of light, rather than passive receptors of images. The nervous system of the artist inhabits the gallery and contains the audience. And the realisation that just as technology can be now attached, it could also

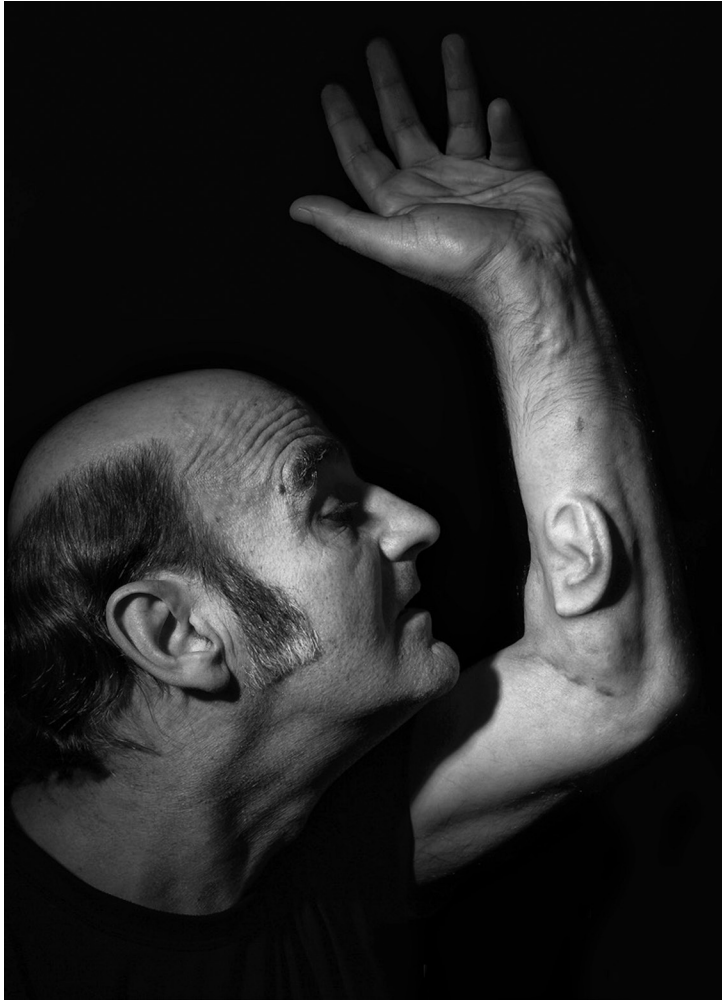


Figure 2. Stelarc, *Ear On Arm*. London / Los Angeles / Melbourne, 2006. Photograph by Nina Sellars. Courtesy of Stelarc.

be inserted. Between 1973–1976 I filmed three metres of internal body space into the left and right bronchi of the lungs, the stomach and the colon using endoscope technology. For the first time for me, there was an experience of the body not as a surface of skin but rather an internal architecture of spaces, structures and circulatory systems. Twenty years later I was invited to participate in the Fifth Australian Sculpture Triennial, whose theme was site-specific works. But instead of a sculpture for a public space, I decided to engineer a sculpture for a private physiological space. The empty stomach had to be inflated to make the insertion safer. This was realized with the assistance of a friendly endoscopist five minutes away from the local hospital. When fully closed as a capsule structure, it could be inserted down the oesophagus into the stomach cavity. Inside the stomach the sculpture could open and close, extend and retract, it had a flashing light and a beeping sound. A simple machine choreography inside a soft organ of the body. The concern was that if the mechanism failed to close it could not be pulled out, necessitating a serious operation to extract it. The body here not as a site for the psyche nor for social inscription, but rather the body simply as a site for a sculpture. The body as a host for a work of art. The process involved six insertions over a period of two days. It was certainly the most uncomfortable and traumatic of the projects and performances and the one requiring observation overnight in a clinic. It proved to be the most difficult of all of the performances, including the suspensions (figure 3).

KH: You have often stated that you treat your body as a host. Could the trauma that has been inflicted on your own body, within the internal cavities of your stomach, be regarded as an act of “unconditional hospitality?”

STELARC: Any references to my body should be understood as this body. Language fatally encourages us to always speak as a subject. Trauma of course was not intended but certainly was an outcome of some of these projects and performances. And that exposed both the body’s spaces and structures as well as its vulnerabilities. Although pain is an early alert that you might be doing damage to your body or that you are suffering a pathological condition, a body in pain is a throbbing body, a painful condition that collapses distinctions of mind and body. You are only one throbbing body. The intent again is not to deliberately inflict pain, nor should the performances be seen as some sado-masochistic act. To actualise some ideas has been physically difficult and at other times technically



Figure 3. Stelarc, *Stomach Sculpture*. Melbourne, 1993.
Photograph by Anthony Figallo. Courtesy of Stelarc.

challenging. The experience since the early endoscopic probing of the body was to open up the body, to be open to possibilities. Through both exposing the spaces and circulatory systems and through the experience of extrusion of the self only, the bounded and contained body becomes a Hollow Body. A hollow body is a more hospitable body, more capable of welcoming, both spatially and psychologically. Yes, it can be seen as an act of a Derridean hospitality but not so much in terms of the welcoming of the other, but of the artifact. An openness mixed with an indifference. Indifference here meaning a state of not having any expectation. To allow an unfolding with its own time, in its own rhythm. Technology is no stranger to the body. What it means to be human is to construct artifacts, instruments and machines. The trajectory of technology is the trajectory of the human. There is agreement with Bernard Stiegler's assertion of the prostheticity of the body. So, it is not about inducing trauma but rather about indicating what is happening in the transition from attachment to insertion. Technology begins as artifacts and machines that are external to the body. In a sense, technology explodes away from the body, finally immersing and containing it. With micro-miniaturisation, technology implodes back to the body. It not only attaches but sticks to the skin and also becomes implanted into the body. The most significant event in the twentieth century was not technology landing on other planetary bodies but landing on the human body itself. The body welcomes technology given its scale and substance.

KH: You speak of an analogy between space and architecture, and about an architecture of spaces (albeit, spaces within the body). Is digital, virtual architecture the prosthetic element that enables the future?

STELARC: We now construct virtual structures and spaces that are more responsive and intelligent in algorithmic and organic ways. Virtuality is a mode of operation, a mode of interaction. Virtuality generates an inverse embodiment. Presence not so much about a feeling of being here but rather a feeling of being over there. Virtuality is a digital prosthesis for being elsewhere, of being somewhere rather than being in some time. Generating pure spatiality devoid of time. A mode of interaction of being lost in virtual space. Rather than a prosthesis enabling the future, it is a means to be present without presence. The virtual pacifies the body and simultaneously liquefies its materiality. And Virtuality is not so much an extending prosthesis but rather a flattening mode of interaction,

not between bodies but bodies interacting with screens. A doubling of the between. The between of bodies has now collapsed onto the surfaces of the screens. Our screens have become our skins. I caress my screen to caress your skin. An intimacy without proximity, an intimacy with skin contact. What the virtual perhaps does in enabling simulation, it facilitates prediction. Prediction exposes possible outcomes rather than enabling us to see the future. And that is if you assert that the future is a time yet to come. William Gibson made the observation that the future is already here, it is just not equally distributed. The future should not necessarily be framed as happening next—that is, after a present made possible by a past. Memory (associated with the past), attention (what constructs the present), and expectation (or imagining a future) blur into all-at-onceness in oscillation. We conveniently assume that we have been formed by the past and we, in the present, construct the future. But it is not so much an additive process, a progressing towards, but rather an oscillation between memory, awareness and imagining in generating the other, the alternative. Deleuze thought of the virtual as potentiality. The not-yet-actual. But the virtual in techno-speak is what can now be engineered. And because we are increasingly seamlessly sliding between the actual and the virtual with our simulations and interactions online, there is no need to speak of the virtual as the not-actual. No longer meaningful to separate the real from the actual. Increasingly we experience a blurring of these modes of operation and existence.

KH: How do you think the prosthetic character of the human body and the idea that it has to be “augmented, extended and enhanced by technology” contests traditional concepts of beauty?

STELARC: At a body hacking conference several years ago, two of the attendees were a female with a prosthetic leg and a guy with an artificial arm that had a detachable hand. Although human like, neither prosthesis tried to be cosmetic in appearance. The leg was ornamental with its 3D printed design and the arm exposed its carbon fibre and metal materials and was proudly displayed. Individually we are becoming accepting of prosthetically augmented bodies with industrial materials. We are accepting of the other as hybrid human-machine. The new ambidextrous arm and hand, now being engineered with the assistance of the ISIR Lab at the Sorbonne, has double-jointed fingers and continuous wrist rotation becoming both a left and right hand in the one design. It will have four

modes of control—an autonomous AI function, a bio-signal animation, an exoskeleton actuation, and a remote interactivity. As an extra arm, it will be uncanny in switching from left to right arm and hand, with a continuous wrist rotation. Alternate operation, alternate aesthetics. And well, I am seduced by the aesthetics of the smooth, the shiny, the metallic, the plastic, and the transparent. Acrylic, stainless steel, aluminium, carbon fibre are materials used in my Third Hand, Extended Arm and Exoskeleton Arm. What also generates alternative aesthetics are the developments in material sciences that lead new materials with new capabilities, to flexible circuitry and biodegradable chips—the research outcomes of John Rogers at the University of Illinois—and soft robotics (figure 4).

KH: Can we speak about the biological body augmented with technology as a kind of aesthetics of a future human body? Is it even still a human body, or perhaps a cyborg of sorts? In your view, does the use of new, sophisticated technological material, that you say you are seduced by, also imply a new aesthetics or even a new kind of beauty?

STELARC: Having given an interview for *The Journal of Somaesthetics* and having had a discussion with Richard Shusterman as part of a public event organised by the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, there was a focus on the centrality of the aesthetic experience, beyond the pleasurable and the beautiful, beyond art and nature. Cultural norms are questioned and there is an imperative to go beyond social assumptions of beauty, encouraging self-improvement and enhancement of the individual body. And an aesthetic approach that collapses distinctions between mind and body. The body as a site and a means by which aesthetic experience is generated. The historical notions of beauty have often been associated with the experience of transcendence—the wonder of the divine celestial heavens, transitioning to the awe of nature and to the ideal form of the body. Beauty is not only pleasurable experiences. Experiences of the incomprehensible, of the immensity, of the complexity of nature, have historically contributed to the aesthetics of the human, shaping our engagement with the world and generating meaning with existential reality. As an art student there was a distinction made between the naked and the nude. The body transformed from its gross materiality of a naked body to an ideal, perfect form in the nude. In contemporary society, the beauty of the world of appearances has given way to seeing beauty in the malformed, in the monstrous, in the differently enabled, in the deviant,



Figure 4. Stelarc, *Third Hand*. Tokyo / Yokohama / Nagoya, 1980. Photograph by Pamela Fernuik. Courtesy of Stelarc.

in the chimera. The human is a historical construct. And now specifically a bio-techno body. I characterise the body as a contemporary chimera of meat, metal and code. Its beauty is generated in the aesthetics of its hybridity. A kind of hypertrophy of the human. Not a human-animal chimera but as a human-machine system. Any beauty resides in this monstrous hybridity. Not only the look and feel of its mixed materiality but also in its operational and computational capabilities that these augmentations generate.

KH: In terms of aesthetics of hybridity, you have often expressed the need to “deconstruct our evolutionary architecture” and to “redesign humans.” With the potential that the current advances in computing, robotics, AI, etc., what in your view is a new “hybrid human?” Is it a product of evolution that “revives” the body/chimera with technological “injections” to make this hybrid entity more compatible with machines and more disposed to being automated?

STELARC: It depends on how we frame evolution. If we are speaking about Darwinian evolution, it is a process taking about four billion years to unfold gradually through natural selection and random mutation generating the diversity of life forms we know now. There is nothing to suggest that evolution is not an ongoing process. But the difference now is that there are feedback loops and interactions with human research and biomedical instruments, machines and computational systems that not only allow for physiological modification but also with CRISPR, intervening on a DNA level, accelerating change in the body in form and function. Whether we see this still as part of natural evolution or whether accelerated and technological intervention is considered “unnatural” depends on how we frame the human and the natural. But having constructed the technological terrain that it now inhabits—one of fast, powerful and precise machines and computational systems that extend cognition—the body is exposed for its inadequacies. The body’s metabolism and 1400cc brain will increasingly be unable to compete. The body is soft and vulnerable, can be fatally infected by microbial life and viruses it cannot detect until symptoms surface, if one organ fails this is usually fatal and its analogue design means it is difficult to replace malfunctioning components. It has to gulp air continuously to stay alive an average of 80 years, and its heart must beat faultlessly almost 3 billion times. The body fatigues easily and spends an average of one third of its life inactive

in sleep. Of course, we can poetically accept the biological status quo of the body and the Heideggerian assertion that life is authenticated with death. Or we can examine the body's design and consider whether biological evolution has resulted in an adequate body. The answer is both yes and no. The body is not self-sufficient in the natural realm it has evolved in. It requires protective covering and necessitates augmentation with artefacts, instruments and machines. Through technology the body extends its spatial and temporal parameters beyond its biological longevity and its biological sensory and cognitive realm. In retrospect, the chimera has been both a contingency and a necessity.

KH: What is the paradigm, the idea or model, for the design of this hybrid body?

STELARC: There is no simplistic paradigm, model or prototype for this hybrid human body. And whatever is proposed should always be contestable and it will be contingent on a multiplicity of conceptual, medical and technical possibilities. The urge is to aesthetically experiment with additional capabilities. What does it mean to perform with a Third Hand, an Extended Arm, have your bipedal gait translated into a six-legged locomotion and to be actuated by a six degree of freedom exoskeleton? These actions are not about enhancing the body but rather augmenting it in unexpected ways. Do we accept the biological status quo of this biological body, or can we reimagine and reconfigure it? And it will be contingent on the social adjustments, ethical acceptance, new instruments and technologies and the possibilities they generate. Also, increasingly skilled surgical procedures, genetic interventions and synthetic biocompatible materials. So, the process for a hybrid body might accelerate but it will happen incrementally for both medical necessity and aesthetic and cosmetic reasons and extending functionality. It will depend also on why this hybridity might result. Will a splitting of the species occur as the form and function of bodies elsewhere need to change significantly in varying electromagnetic and gravitational fields? Certainly, there are general parameters that can be considered in the design of the body. Its limited longevity, its vulnerability, its robustness, its analogue design, its limited sensory perception, just for starters.

KH: Human-machine interaction, which is a recurrent theme in your work, has raised many philosophical and ethical questions. You yourself

wondered, “Would a machine physiology generate a machine phenomenology, a reflective loop developing an awareness and consciousness?” To which you answer that “until complex cognitive systems learn to incorporate new experiences and make appropriate associations machines will not achieve the intelligence for subtle interactions with humans.” Have we reached that point? What is your view on a potential future human-machine cohabitation?

STELARC: We assume an agent is intelligent if it responds appropriately. We largely interact and respond interpreting the actions of the other. We react to certain behavioural cues—facial expressions, speech and gestures. How we imagine the inner state or emotional condition of the other depends on how subtle or overt these behaviours are. With 32 micromotors embedded into flexible silicon skin, humanoid robots have real-time lip syncing, express human emotions through facial expressions and now robot limbs and hands have become more dexterous and subtle in their articulations. And embedded with AI algorithms trained on large language models, humanoid robots will adequately predict and compose appropriate speech responses. Simulation becomes real enough to the point where it becomes meaningless to discern any difference between a human and a machine. Daniel Dennett asserted that you could have competence without comprehension. You can exhibit appropriate and what would be considered intelligent behaviour without necessarily having the attributes which we call consciousness. So, a machine physiology certainly will be able to exhibit that kind of intelligence behaviour but at present we can only speculate that it will develop a machine phenomenology and what it means to experience consciousness. I would suggest though that what we assume to be an individual internal state is perhaps an essentially learned and consensual one.

KH: You say that the human is a historic construct. How then should we frame the human today, in what philosophical terms? And in the skein of recent terms and vocabulary regarding the human, such as non-human, more-than-human, other-than-human, post-human, trans-human—what path are you inclined to take?

STELARC: Human+? More-than-human? Other than human? Well, Transhumanism is about enhancement of the body, about achieving motor, sensory and cognitive capabilities beyond our biology. These projects

and performances are not so much about enhancement but rather more about augmentation experiments with alternative anatomical architectures. But I have said that altering the architecture of the body means adjusting its awareness of itself and the world. Transhumanism might be seen as an offshoot or a phase of Posthumanism. And Posthumanism might be defined as the more radical outcome of enhancing the body to become something other. I would assert that what it means to be human is rather not to remain human at all. That impulse, that striving to experience and even become the other, something other. The fascination of the alien contaminates our thoughts, imaginings and actions. We use language to categorise and hopefully clarify the world but often categories can confuse us philosophically by what they exclude. There is a certain contingency when we categorise. There is a certain indifference, as opposed to having expectations, that allows for being open to possibilities. To allow a performance to unfold in its own time, with its own rhythm. It is that indifference that allows for the body to be suspended, that allows the body to insert a sculpture into an organ of the body, that allows a body to have an ear surgically constructed on this arm. To actualise requires indifference. I am not inclined to plot a particular path as such. There is no pre-determined trajectory, a linear plotting of a particular direction that is taken, but rather a more circumstantial, opportunistic, intuitive, fluid twisting and turning. Not really knowing where you are going and how you are getting there, but still desiring, still persisting. Can one desire without desiring something? Can one persist without a purpose? And is intentionality simplistically an attribute of an individuated agent, or the outcome of a more complex interactivity with other bodies, objects, social and cultural systems? Again, it depends on how we construct the world, how we designate and classify things, and this also depends on their spatial presence and their temporal existence in relationship to the human.

KH: You mention that a certain indifference is necessary for a performance to unfold. For your performance *Fractal Flesh*, you decided to give other people's minds the freedom to remotely control your enhanced and augmented body. How does this process affect your sense of self and free will? Are you repudiating Cartesian mind-body dualism?

STELARC: Firstly, the issue is not one of control but rather constructing more complex and extended operational systems where bodies, spatially

separated but electronically connected can interact with distributed agency. Problematising the body's intentionality as simplistically all its own. *Fractal Flesh*, for two days, six hours each day, was about accessing and choreographing the body's movements remotely (figure 5). The body performs involuntarily via the muscle stimulation system, but one leg is free to pivot and it can still also respond by actuating its Third Hand. The body experiences itself as a split body, not a Cartesian split mind and body but a physically split body. Voltage in on the LHS generating involuntary motion, voltage out on the RHS intentionally actuating its Third Hand. The body is simultaneously a possessed and performing body. There are more recent but different iterations of this concept. With the *StickMan*, a minimal but full body exoskeleton, the body is algorithmically actuated for a five-hour continuous performance. Sixty-four possible combinations of gestures are generated. The artist performs unaware of how it will be actuated at any time. Sensors on *StickMan* generate sounds that augment the pneumatic noise and register the limb movements. But he can pivot on one leg, modulating the projected video feedback on one wall and adjusting his shadow on the adjacent wall. A ring of speakers circulates the sounds, immersing the audience. There was a miniStickMan (figure 6) interface that allowed the audience to insert their own choreography by bending the limbs of the interface and pressing the play button. And with the *Re-Wired/Re-Mixed* performance for five days, six hours each day continuously I could only see with the eyes of someone in London, I could only hear with the ears of someone in New York, whilst anyone, anywhere, at any time could access my right arm via the exoskeleton and choreograph its movements. I couldn't anticipate what I was going to see, what I was going to hear or how I was going to move. An experience of distributed agency and shared visual and acoustical senses. The body was effectively in three places at once, two virtually in London and New York and one physically at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. *Re-Wired / Re-Mixed: Event for Dismembered Body* was an internet enabled performance that explored the physiological and aesthetic experience of a fragmented, de-synchronised, distracted and involuntary body—wired and under surveillance online (figure 7). It is as if the body has been electronically dismembered, spatially distributed and possessed with multiple agencies. The body was indifferent but not insensitive. Disturbed but not dismayed. When I speak about the body it is not in counter-distinction to a mind. And the more and more actions that have been performed the less there is a mind of my

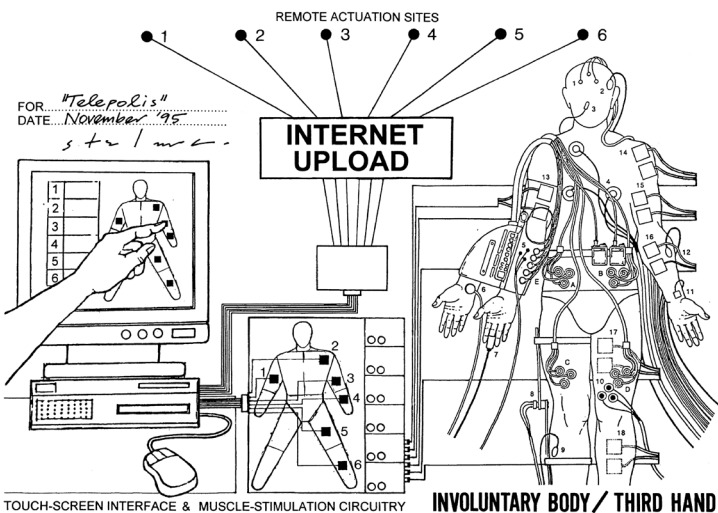


Figure 5. Stelarc, *Fractal Flesh*, Luxembourg, 1995.
Diagram by Stelarc. Courtesy of Stelarc.

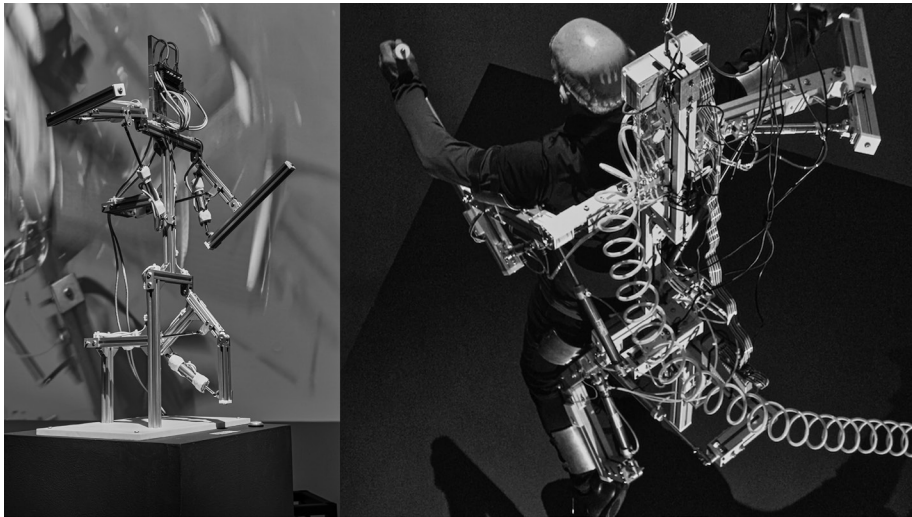


Figure 6. *Stelarc, StickMan / miniStickMan*, Melbourne, 2022. Video still Stelarc. Courtesy of Stelarc.

own, nor any mind at all in the traditional metaphysical sense. This is a complex physical and phenomenological body, aware and interacting in its world of other bodies, artefacts and ecosystems.

KH: If giving control to an external agency is not a key issue for your performances, is then connectivity what is at stake here?

STELARC: What is important is not the body's identity or agency but rather its connectivity. Not its location nor its mobility but its interface. With its increasing functioning online, it performs remotely with a distributed sense of agency, in Mixed and Augmented Realities. The body's sense of self is extruded beyond its skin. This extrusion empties the body. This hollow body is an empty body. Not through any lack but rather through the excess of its technologies. Through its extension and extrusion by artificial and external nervous systems of sensors, circuitries and information and image generating machines. Fractal flesh is that condition of bodies and bits of bodies, spatially separated but electronically connected, generating recurring patterns of interactivity at varying scales. This more intricate, interacting extended operational system reconfigures what an entangled body is and how a body performs.

KH: In your writing, you make frequent use of philosophical ideas; one could say that your work is theoretically informed. On the other hand, you also claim that your ideas are authenticated only through physical actions, in the choreography of performance. How important then are the ideas you find in the theorists you have mentioned, for your performances?

STELARC: Well, it can be both. Media Theory and Philosophy interests me and undeniably there is a feedback loop that occurs over time. But most of my ideas are premised on the performances. In turn they prompt me to read some past philosophers and particular contemporary theorists. You might have an idea, but to actualise it and experience it personally is what is necessary in this process. Those experiences generate unexpected other ideas. And sometimes they synchronise with other critical theory and philosophical writings which will then prompt me to read further. For example, I have always referred to the body as an object so I was intrigued with Graham Harman's definition of an object as not being able to be reduced to its component parts nor its relations or effects. Of being something other. Riffing from Arthur Eddington's

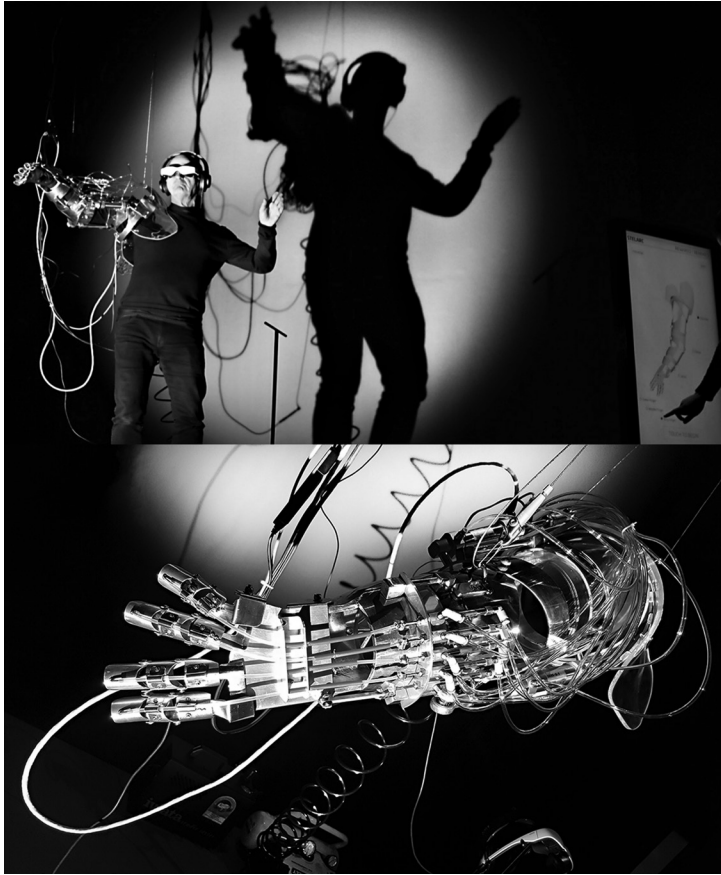


Figure 7. Stelarc, *Wired / Re-Mixed*. Perth / London / NY, 2015. Photograph by Steven Alyian. Courtesy of Stelarc.

distinctions of the scientific table and the phenomenological table. And experiencing the body as a component in an operational system made me read both Actor–Network Theory and more on Object–Oriented Ontology as these are both flattened ontologies where the human is not privileged. Yes, sometimes my ideas are elaborated and informed by these readings. Typically, I will read writers who contribute to my own ideas in some way. As a younger artist reading McLuhan’s ideas of technology as an extension of the body, Heidegger discerning notions of “ready-to-hand” and “present-at-hand” in using technology and when it malfunctions. Semiotext(e) publications such as Baudrillard’s *Simulations* and Virilio’s *Speed and Politics* were interesting and informative to read also as a younger artist. Having said all that, I do enjoy reading other theorists and philosophers that challenge my comfortable assumptions about what constitutes a body and how we experience the world. For example, Hilary Lawson and Donald Hoffman whose ideas veer towards an Idealism, privileging mind-constructed worlds, consciousness over materialism. It is important to remember that art practice is not about accumulating information nor illustrating ideas but rather creating aesthetic experiences. Artistic practice certainly includes the realm of design and craft but contemporary art is more conceptually inclined. Just to remind, speaking about these performances is not the same as performing them, of the artwork itself. And to emphasise that an artist doesn’t simplistically illustrate ideas.

KH: We could not agree more about the reflection on the role of art practice. However, when you say that you “always referred to a body as an object,” it opens up many avenues for philosophical analysis of the body. Thus, German recognises the difference—particularly prominent in Nietzsche’s writing—between *Körper* (physical body) and *Leib* (living body), both of which are translated into English and French with a single word, *body*, that is, *le corps*. More recently, Richard Shusterman has insisted on the use of the Greek word “soma” in his theory of somaesthetics, and to which you referred earlier. With this in mind, how do you perceive the “body,” theoretically speaking?

STELARC: I speak about the body in a simple, generalized, abstract way, albeit very much embodied, as a physical form, with particular functions and with a certain analogue, anatomical structure, that is increasingly problematized. So very much the material body embodied and embedded

in the world. And, if I am permitted, without speaking gender, without speaking Soma, without speaking Leib and without speaking Mind. But I appreciate language and cultural distinctions made in discerning and enriching our ideas of what a body is and how a body performs. And yes, different languages and cultures provide additional insights. But these are categories constructed in language. Just as the word “I” is a convenient way of designating this body. It means little else. An “I” is not what is possessed but what is pointed at. But what I find meaningful is the blurring of distinctions between the potentially alive, the actually living, the non-dead and the dead. Frozen embryos (yet to be born bodies), comatose bodies (on technological life-support systems), prosthetically augmented bodies, cryogenically preserved bodies (awaiting reanimation), and plastinated bodies (previously alive). And these are now all in proximity with each other and with other biologically alive bodies. We inhabit liminal realms of transition rather than being in bounded discrete states. Everything is blurring. In the process of breaking down boundaries rather than being blocked by them. Being in states of transition means being ambivalent, anxious and uncertain. Perhaps being on edge rather than being at the edge. In a stage of oscillation rather than being on a trajectory. I would characterize liminality as a condition, if not negating boundaries, of blurring boundaries. Not so much necessitating obstacle avoidance but rather postponing obstacle collision.

KH: *Prosthetic Head* was “theoretically supported” with the philosophical idea of Friedrich Nietzsche “that there is no ‘being’ behind the ‘doing’,” as well as that of Ludwig Wittgenstein that “thinking is not located inside the head.” Nevertheless, you imply that this engineered *Head* has the capacity for creativity. What kind of creativity are we talking about, how would you explain it?

STELARC: Yes, I thought those statements from Nietzsche and Wittgenstein were applicable in better understanding our interactions with robots and virtual agents. They exposed and problematised issues of internal agency and what constitutes intelligence and mind, which is not simplistically an internal essence but rather what is actualised by our verbal responses, behaviour, and our actions. That is, what is important is what the robot or avatar does and says that determines attribution of agency and intelligence. We need not be concerned about an internal mind if it responds appropriately in the world in unexpected situations

and with its social interactions with humans. The *Prosthetic Head* was completed in 2001. A 12,000-polygon mesh with a flattened image of the artist face providing the skin. So, the head was hand-made ha, ha. It has an Alice chatbot engine that was modified—subtracted and added to. With real-time lip syncing, speech synthesis and facial expressions it is still reasonably seductive. In fact, the *Prosthetic Head* came about when I was getting many requests from PhD students for interviews. Sometimes I could not accommodate them, but sometimes on the move or really busy it was hard to give them time. I thought that if it was not possible to interview me personally, they might be able to interview my head instead. So, the *Prosthetic Head*, an embodied conversational agent and somewhat resembling the artist was programmed with the artist's personal information and his artistic history, his projects and performances and his ideas. It also had general information on current affairs, and being synced to the computer could tell you the time. It was an automated, animated and reasonably informed head. And if you introduced yourself, it would remember your name. As a chatbot engine it would speak to questions it was asked. Depending on key words, key phrases and depending on how it was asked, resulted in the way it answered. Sometimes its responses were plausible, sometimes it didn't know the answers but gave a trivial response. Sometimes it simply deflected by asking if you would like it to sing a song. Sometimes it seemed intelligent, sometimes it sounded stupid. Somewhat like the artist ha, ha. In defence of its responses, I would point out that the *Prosthetic Head* is only as intelligent as the person interrogating it! For a conference in Melbourne that I couldn't give the presentation in person as I was overseas, the *Prosthetic Head* was programmed to give my lecture instead and then at the end was able to respond to audience questions. What is meant by it being creative was due to its unexpected generation of song-like sounds when it strings together vowels, due to the quirks of its text to speech engine. If you asked it to sing a song it would be different each time. Also, it had simple rules in its programming so that if you asked it to recite a poem, it would generate simple poems that were different each time, from its rules and database of words. So, creative in the sense of generating unexpected outcomes. The *Articulated Head* is a more recent iteration. Instead of the *Prosthetic Head* being displayed as a five-metre-high projection as a purely virtual head, the *Articulated Head* had a monitor displaying the head on a robot arm, giving it a physical and sculptural presence. Which combined its virtual facial behaviour with the physical motions of the robot arm.

With added body tracking and sound location it became a more physically interactive presence in responding to its interlocutor. All my projects and performances are aesthetic gestures realised with limited funding and depending on the expertise available at the time. Art needs to be surprising to be interesting. If these installations generate some uncertainty and ambivalence and necessitate rethinking and reimagining then, way to go. All these projects, from the *Third Hand* to the *Ear on Arm*, to the *Articulated Head*, to the recent exoskeletons and robots have never been fully realised in ways that were intended. Admittedly, I have made a career out of being a failure. That is, nothing ever turns out the way that it is imagined. Having said that, my definition of art is that which happens in the realm of slippage between intention and outcome, incorporating the accidental and the unexpected.

Interview conducted by Zoran Erić, Snežana Vesnić, and Željko Radinković

Miloš Ćipranić*

EDUARDO SOUTO DE MOURA, *ARCHITETTI*,
ARCHITETTURA, ELECTA S.P.A., MILANO, 2023.

One of the central motifs in this book is the reluctance of its author to express himself through writing. Eduardo Souto de Moura writes, “In contrast with other architects, writing does not interest me at all.”¹ This is a clear illustration of this position. Of course, the life of a person is filled with words, whether uttered or penned. What should be added is that this not just any person, but a person as architect. Architecture is manifested through the works it produces. The question is what is the exact meaning of the term “work” in the previous sentence. It remains ambiguous there.

Eduardo Souto de Moura prefers the non-discursive act. Architects write texts, but the primary work of architecture remains the architectural object. In this book, that is, in the very same text containing the above quote, we find an observation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “The artist has but one way to represent the work on which he is engaged. It is to make it.” This is a place from *Phenomenology of Perception*.² With this act, the architect represents their work to themselves and others. It is easy to imagine a context in which a work is bashfully silent due to the manipulative eloquence of its author. An architect’s discourse about an object not yet designed cannot stand in for that work, *il faut qu’il la fasse*. The same is true when the work is completed for, although the author is its representative, one who may speak on the work’s behalf. It is well-known that Souto de Moura has an issue with windows, yet this

¹ E. Souto de Moura, “Scrittura, tempo, architettura,” *Architetti, architettura*, p. 27.

² M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris, 1945, p. 210.

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book is a “window” into his and other architects’ opus. Even expressing resistance to writing through writing displays a philosophy or theoretical conviction.

The quote from Merleau-Ponty was probably copied from a so-called “red notebook.” Souto de Moura mentions this notebook, in which he jots down the thoughts of various authors he finds inspirational or significant. This book is replete with selected quotations, from poets to philosophers, and their use in specific places is characterized by *adequacy* (to use a term from the title of one of the collected texts). Deference towards the other is evident in another aspect. Not only architects, but also projects and built objects are a legitimate subject of the portrait genre. Among else, Souto de Moura writes about his friends Fernando Távora and Álvaro Siza. When the subject of a given text as a whole is a particular object, it is always designed by someone else (e.g., “Herzog & de Meuron: The Bordeaux Stadium”). The careful reader will note the absence of egocentrism.

The book title, *Architects, Architecture*, is simple, which does not mean it is banal. Actually, attempts at unnecessary complexity often result in the banality. However, is the order of these two terms significant—in the sense that the more important one is placed first—that is, that architecture as such draws on and lives through architects? It is a coincidence that the last word of the book is “architect.” Nevertheless, the fact is that the first word in the title and the last word in the book are the same, bringing us thus full circle. The difference is only that the former is in the plural, while the latter is in the singular.

A reputable architect must articulate their views through text and publish a book. It is a matter of convention or expectation. While architects design objects, philosophers write books. What would be the difference between their respective works? Souto de Moura says that writers are responsible to themselves, while architects are responsible towards others. Architecture is a “social art,” and its objects acquire the status of artistic when they are collectively accepted and adopted.³ This book no longer belongs to its author, but to architecture. Souto de Moura notes that to Távora, books were “friends.”⁴ This book has become my friend, with whom I continue to spend valuable time.

³ E. Souto de Moura, “Le Thoronet,” *Architetti, architettura*, p. 105.

⁴ E. Souto de Moura, “Fernando Távora,” *Architetti, architettura*, p. 70.

Aya Jazaierly*

KENGO KUMA, *POINT LINE PLANE*, THAMES
AND HUDSON, LONDON, 2024.

Point Line Plane builds on a series of arguments that distinguish Kengo Kuma's approach, communicated through his numerous publications.¹ Kuma's thesis developed throughout the years starting from an idea to *erase* architecture, leading to an elaborate design strategy that puts construction materials at the centre of the design process.

In his essay about the architect, architectural academic Thomas Daniell argues that Kuma's projects and writings seek to dismantle "the public image of the architect."² Advocating for a method—rather than an architectural style or a specific geometry—following the ideals of master masons and master carpenters of the pre-Albertian architect, Kuma ultimately aims to suppress the architect's authorship, aligning with Roland Barthes' *the Death of the Author*,³ where Barthes argues that the value of literary work is independent of the author's life and intent. Kuma's legacy, thus, lies in a method derived from the essential characteristics of materials and the continuity between nature and people, creating a "humble"⁴ anti-volumetric architecture that blends with its surrounding.

The paradox here lies in the very fact that Kuma's projects and international recognition turned him into a *starchitect*, leading a large architectural company, with offices in Tokyo, Paris, Beijing, Shanghai and

¹ Namely the *Anti-Object* published in 2000, the *Architecture of Defeat* (*Makeru Kenchiku*) in 2004, *Natural Architecture* (*Shizen na Kenchiku*) in 2008, *Studies in Organic* in 2009, *Connecting Architecture* (*Tsunagu Kenchiku*) in 2012, and *Small Architecture* (*Chisa na Kenchiku*) in 2014.

² See T. Daniell, "Acting Natural," *AA Files*, 69, 2014, pp. 100–106.

³ R. Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1968), S. Heath (trans.), in *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 1977, pp. 142–148.

⁴ A term constantly used by Kuma.

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Seoul. In recent years, especially after Kuma was awarded the design of the Japan National Stadium, imminent questions emerged. How will Kuma be able to *erase* architecture—or architectural authorship—as his company receives larger commissions and as the practice continues to expand both geographically and professionally? How will he maintain smallness while becoming big?

The book seems to be responding to these questions; “this made me wonder if it might be possible to create something that, while being large, existed in a small state that would convey a sense of defeat to people.”⁵ Despite being a *starchitect* and despite the company’s fame, Kuma’s buildings—with an austere, almost frugal aesthetic and expression—are derived from a continuously evolving design method that adapts to the context with its materials, users, and state-of-the-art technology.

In this book, Kuma reflects on the architectural trends of the 20th century, mainly dominated by concrete as a material, and large volumes and geometric shapes. He proposes a shift towards smaller, more democratic designs where material is the protagonist; to him, “material is not a finish,”⁶ it is not a thin layer of cladding added to a concrete structure, instead, every material, natural or engineered, defines the building’s structural system based on its inherent characteristics. The book presents, through series of critical reflections and observations on the writings of artists, architects, philosophers, psychologists throughout history, Kuma’s point of view. Like in his other writings, he calls for a return to materials to design and build with “particles,” where the world is made as an aggregation of dots and lines, and not as three-dimensional objects.

The book is organised into four main sections: the first is titled “A Discourse on Method,” it follows on—as the title indicates—with a section on “Point,” another on “Line,” and finally on “Plane.” Throughout the manuscript, Kuma strikes a parallel and a dialogue with Kandinsky’s book with a similar title.⁷

In the first section—A Discourse on Method, Kuma investigates the process of moving away from an architecture of volume, specifically by breaking the dominance of concrete and going back towards smaller elements in wood. To support his argument, Kuma refers to Mies van der

⁵ K. Kuma, *Point Line Plane*, 2024, p. 9.

⁶ See K. Kuma, *Kengo Kuma: materials, structures, details*, Birkhäuser-Publishers for Architecture, Basel/Boston, 2024.

⁷ See W. Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1947.

Rohe's architecture of lines and to psychologist James Gibson's ideas about dismantling volume to texture. Kuma highlights the shift from traditional design methods to computer-based parametric design, as an innovative tool to experiment with 'additive' design.

Within the same framework, Kuma uses the *Point* section to delve into the use of stone and other materials. He discusses the transition from Greek to Roman architecture, the influence of Mies van der Rohe's modernist designs, and the challenges of using stone in architectural projects. By experimenting with new design and construction methods, he transforms heavy volumes to particles, or lighter elements. He explains this process by referring to some of his built work, namely Stone Plaza, Water Branch House, the China Academy of Art's Folk Museum, Tsumiki, Lotus House and Nagaoka City Hall Aore. Interestingly, these projects vary in size and scope; while Tsumiki is a children's toy, the China Academy of Art is a museum with a built-up area of 5,000 square meters. This confirms once again Kuma's lack of interest in the project's scale, and his focus on a bottom-up approach using parametric design as a method of aggregating small elements to create a system of joining or stacking to generate a whole.

In the *Lines* section, Kuma compares the architectural approaches of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, where the former works with *volume* and the latter uses *lines*. Here, he examines Kenzo Tange's original use of lines, especially in the design of the Yoyogi National Gymnasium. Kuma moves to discuss the shift from thin lines to heavy volumes in Japanese architecture, referring to the works of Hiroshi Hara, Arata Isozaki, and Kisho Kurokawa. He reflects on his early experiences with wooden architecture and celebrates the flexibility and lightness of traditional Japanese wooden structures. He highlights the importance of lines in Hiroshige's *Ukiyo-e* and demonstrates how it influenced Vincent van Gogh and Frank Lloyd Wright's works. He concludes this section by presenting his experiments in designing with lines, referring to his projects: the Ando Hiroshige Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum (Dundee), the Komatsu Seiren Fabric Laboratory and the Tomioka Waterhouse.

The *Planes* section examines the work of Gerrit Rietveld and Michel de Klerk, who—unlike their Modernist peers—worked with planes rather than volumes. Kuma goes one step further, beyond Rietveld and de Klerk's planes, and is inspired by the thinness and flexibility of Bedouin tents on one hand and Gottfried Semper's textile model of architecture, on the other. Once again, Kuma provides examples from his own

portfolio, referring to the design of fabric structures like the tearoom in Frankfurt and the experimental ecological house in Hokkaido.

Besides his technical critique of what he calls 20th century architecture, Kuma touches on the complex question of the concept of time in architecture. He brings *time* back to the material itself: “To me, time is not mere motion, but something fundamentally embedded in all matter; and through matter, space and time are inseparably connected.”⁸ With that, he bears texture and human scale as phenomenological components that render the time/space continuum tangible, as if translating Brodsky’s statement into an architectural philosophy: “(...) every surface craves dust, for dust is the flesh of time.”⁹

Throughout the book, there is a constant reference to Japan on one side and the “West” on the other. As a prolific writer and public speaker, Kuma constantly positions himself and his work in reference to these two poles, whether citing historical examples or speaking about current times. The book once again certifies Kuma’s *Japan-ness* par excellence, both architecturally and culturally.

Furthermore, Kuma presents another critique to the capitalist system that produced “extra large architecture”¹⁰ by proposing to divide, dissect and disperse large objects into small physical elements. Recovering the extra small¹¹ scale, Kuma continues to execute his own “Architecture of Resistance,”¹² first by rooting himself in his *Japan-ness* and then by responding to the project’s direct context: “The world is not evolving unidirectionally toward larger and larger things. Rather, the more that large things grow larger and fast things move faster, the more we are drawn to and enchanted by the small, slow things that are always close at hand and can be grasped directly.”¹³

With his focus on tectonics, Kuma builds his reasoning just like he makes architecture, starting from a point—a particle, connecting it to other points, forming lines and gradually creating planes, allowing the

⁸ K. Kuma, *Point Line Plane*, p. 38.

⁹ J. Brodsky, *Watermark: An Essay on Venice*, Penguin Group, London, 1992.

¹⁰ In reference to Rem Koolhaas’s “S, M, L, XL.” See R. Koolhaas, B. Mau, S, M, L, XL, Jennifer Sigler (ed.), *The Monacelli Press*, New York, 1995.

¹¹ K. Kuma, *Point Line Plane*, p. 55.

¹² In reference to Kenneth Frampton’s famous essay “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” in T. Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Routledge, London/New York, 1993, pp. 268–280.

¹³ K. Kuma, *Point Line Plane*, p. 54.

architectural volume to emerge. Similarly, the book creates thematic threads between different thinkers throughout history, to make critical lines and planes, constructing a consistent and regenerated argument about architecture and society in the post-industrial age.

Emanuele Morezzi*

SYLVIE RAMOND AND ALAIN SCHNAPP (EDS.),
FORMES DE LA RUINE, MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS
DE LYON, LYON, 2024.

Formes de la Ruine is the catalogue, enriched with scholarly and critical essays, of the eponymous exhibition held at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon, France, from December 2023 to April 2024. The exhibition explored various forms and practices related to ruins, whether they concern the gathering of fragments of human activity on or within the earth, the arrangement of natural spaces for commemorative or ritual purposes, or the construction of megalithic buildings, pyramids, and artistic works of ancient empires. The curatorial project was conceived as a journey through ruins, establishing an ongoing dialogue among civilizations articulated around four main themes: memory and oblivion, the balance between nature and culture, the connection between the material and the immaterial, and the tension between present and future.

The catalogue highlights wonderfully the variety of experiences that human beings can derive from ruins, ranging from the care and preservation of past architectures—so highly valued by Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Pre-Columbian Americans—to the more distanced or even critical approaches of Chinese and Japanese cultures, which partly reject the monumental cult so prevalent among their contemporary Asian, European, and American counterparts. Similarly, it addresses the commemorative practices of Indigenous peoples in India, Africa, and Oceania, revealing how these cultures often privilege a form of pact with nature rather than a subjugation to grandiose architectural forms. In this way, the work offers a journey through ruins that not only encompasses past civilizations but also reaches into contemporary industrial societies.

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The volume is further enriched by an anthology and a “ruinarium,” consisting of 75 entries dedicated to places, artists, theorists, and concepts. Yet this cultural undertaking manages to go beyond simple documentation. The exhibition originates from Alain Schnapp’s book *Une histoire universelle des ruines*, the result of years of work and research, and has inspired a publication that aspires to become a milestone in the field. Drawing from this foundational work, both the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue aim to establish a dialogue among all types of ruins. They investigate the centuries-old traditions that in both Western and Eastern contexts have fostered a culture of monumental ruins, now dominant, as well as the perspectives of societies that entirely disregard the very notion of the monument.

A broad array of ruin-related practices are addressed: from the collection of remnants of human activity, to the arrangement of natural sites for commemorative or ritual purposes, and the construction of iconic structures such as megaliths, pyramids, and major architectural works of past empires. The book is divided into two main sections: an introductory part with theoretical-critical essays, and a second section dedicated to the works on display, offering a broader reflection on the theme of ruins not only from a historical or aesthetic standpoint but, more significantly, from a contemporary perspective.

This indeed represents the greatest challenge of both the exhibition and the catalogue: the intention to move beyond the romantic aestheticization of ruins as picturesque remnants, linked to the Grand Tour and nostalgic contemplation, and instead to reaffirm the strength of ruins, as well as their beauty—one that is not only aesthetic. This dimension becomes evident while leafing through the volume, where one can perceive a clear and coherent connection among landscapes, objects, representations, and places that may appear diverse, yet are all rooted in the semantic universe of the ruin—not in a literal sense, but as embodiments of an idea, a concept. This is true not only in Western culture, where the cult of ruins is well-established and supported by a robust scholarly tradition, but also beyond continental boundaries, affirming that the focus of the exhibition and the related research is not on the individual architectural fragment but rather on a universal and human cultural archetype.

Ruins, thus understood, are not simply relics of the past; rather, they are characterized by the notion of absence—a concept that recurs throughout both the selected works and the accompanying scholarly essays. Beginning with Alain Schnapp’s essay *La poétique des ruines: une*

histoire universelle, the ruin is approached as a global and universal paradigm, not tied to any specific culture that may claim it exclusively, but as a shared system of thought—an archetype of thought itself. This concept resonates throughout the other introductory essays as well (by authors such as Yves Le Fur, Pierre Wat, and François-René Martin), which explore the idea of ruin across different media and contexts: from sculpture to nature, from theoretical approaches to other manifestations of the ruin.

The catalogue thus succeeds in proposing an innovative reading of the ruin, or rather, in assembling a body of works that aim to affirm the validity of an alternative perspective on ruins. This approach deliberately detaches from historicist or aestheticizing interpretations, offering instead a new vision of ruin aesthetics—one that is liberated from disciplinary epistemologies and able to perceive the phenomenon of the ruin as a living cultural spirit, endowed with its own intrinsic beauty. However, the objective is not to construct a new aestheticizing narrative; rather, it is to demonstrate that ruins may serve as the foundation for a comparative study, treating them as a universal principle and a paradigm of human existence.

To this end, the exhibition—and, by extension, the catalogue—organizes the displayed works into four thematic sections, each intended to trace trajectories for reflection and comparison across multiple levels: Memory and Oblivion, Nature and Culture, Material and Immaterial, Present and Future. Each section is introduced by one or more curators, guiding both the exhibition visitor and the catalogue reader through diverse yet interrelated images and concepts, all aligned with the publication's core aims. As Jean-Yves Jouannais reminds us in his recent work *L'usage des ruines: portraits obsidionaux*,¹ ruins acquire meaning and value only through their interaction with humans. This fundamental notion is strongly echoed throughout the volume.

These bold and thought-provoking comparisons ultimately lead to the central reflection proposed by the catalogue: not merely to define the role of ruins in contemporary culture, but to question our present-day relationship with ruins—not only architectural ones—and to explore whether a new aesthetic of the ruin can be formulated, one that moves beyond passive contemplation and opens up to new modes of understanding and relating to the past. Implicitly, such a shift would also redefine our relationship with ourselves.

¹ J. Y. Jouannais, *L'usage des ruines: portraits obsidionaux*, Gallimard, Paris, 2012.

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