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## THE GEOMETRY OF FEELING

A LOOK AT THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE

Why do so very few modern buildings appeal to our feelings, when almost any anonymous house in an old town or the most unpretentious farm outbuilding gives us a sense of familiarity and pleasure? Why is it that the stone foundations we discover in an overgrown meadow, a broken-down barn or an abandoned boathouse can arouse our imagination, while our own houses seem to stifle and smother our daydreams? The buildings of our own time may arouse our curiosity with their daring or inventiveness, but they hardly give us any sense of the meaning of our world or our own existence.

Efforts are today being made to revitalize the debilitating language of architecture both through a richer idiom and by reviving historical themes, but despite their effusive diversity, avant-garde works are just as bereft of meaning as the coldly technical approach to building that they are rebelling against.

The impoverishment of the inner meaning of architecture has also been pondered in numerous writings on architectural theory recently. Some writers think our architecture is too poor in terms of form, others that its form is too abstract or intellectual. From the viewpoint of cultural philosophy our entire hedonistic materialism seems to be losing the mental dimension that might in general be worthy of perpetuation in stone.

### ARCHITECTURE AS PLAY WITH FORM

In turning into a specialist profession, architecture has gradually detached itself from its intentional background, becoming a discipline which is more and more fully determined by its own rules and value systems. Architecture has come to be a field of technology which still ventures to believe itself a form of free artistic expression.

From *Skala: Nordic Journal of Architecture and Art* 4 (June 1986): 22–25. Courtesy of the author and publisher.

But additional proof can be offered of how architecture has detached itself from its proper background and purpose. I would like here to consider one viewpoint, the relationship between architectural form and how architecture is experienced. I am basing myself on the argument that planning has become so intensively a kind of game with form, that the reality of how a building is experienced has been overlooked. We make the mistake of thinking of and assessing a building as a formal composition, no longer understanding that it is a symbol or experiencing the other reality that lies behind the symbol.

It is time that we considered whether forms or geometry in general can give rise to architectural feeling. Are forms the real basic elements of architecture at all? Are even such elements of building such as walls, windows or doors the real units of architectural effect?

### THE ILLUSION OF ELEMENTARISM

The advance of modern science has been dominated by the principle of elementarism and reductionism. Every phenomenon considered is divided into its basic elements and relations and is viewed as the sum of these elements.

The elementarist view has also been dominant in the theory, teaching, and practice of art and architecture. These have at the same time been reduced solely to arts of the visual sense. On the basis of the ideology taught by the Bauhaus school, architecture is taught and analysed as a play with form combining various visual elements of form and space. This is thought to acquire a character which stimulates our visual senses from the dynamics of visual perception as studied by perceptual psychology. A building is considered to be a concrete composition built up out of a selection of given basic elements but no longer in touch with the reality of experience outside itself, not to mention striving consciously to depict and articulate the sphere of our consciousness.

But is not an artistic work actually the opposite of the whole elementarist idea? Surely the meanings of an artistic work are born out of the whole, from a vision that integrates the parts, and are in no way the sum of the elements.

Analysis of the formal structure of an architectural work does not necessarily reveal the artistic quality of the building or how it makes its effect.

### THE ARCHITECTURE OF IMAGERY

The artistic dimension of a work of art does not lie in the actual physical thing; it exists only in the consciousness of the person experiencing it. Thus analysis of a work of art is at its most genuine introspection by the consciousness subjected to it. Its meaning lies not in its forms, but in the images transmitted by the forms and the emotional force that they carry. Form only affects our feelings through what it represents.

Thus as long as teaching and criticism do not strive to clarify the consciously grasped dimensions of architecture they will hardly have anything to do with the artistic essence of architecture. The efforts being made today to restore the richness of architectural idiom through diversity of form are based on lack of understanding of the essence of art. The richness of a work of art lies in the vitality of the images it arouses, and—paradoxically—the images open to most interpretations are aroused by the simplest, most archetypal forms. Post-Modernism's return to ancient themes lacks emotive power because these collages of architectural motifs are no longer linked with phenomenologically authentic feelings true to architecture.

Ezra Pound said that music degenerates if it moves too far away from dance, and poetry shrivels if it becomes too remote from music and song. In the same way, architecture has its own origins, and if it moves too far away from them it loses its effectiveness. The renewal of an art means rediscovering its deepest essence.

The language of art is the language of symbols that can be identified with our existence. If it lacks contact with the sensory memories that live in our subconscious and link our various senses, art could not but be reduced to mere meaningless ornamentation. The experience of art is an interaction between our embodied memories and our world. In one sense all art originates from our body, as the perceptive art essayist Adrian Stokes has pointed out.

It is also vital if we are to experience architectural meaning and sense that the effect of the building should find a counterpart in the world of the viewer's experience.

#### THE EIDOS OF ARCHITECTURE

As architects we do not primarily design buildings as physical objects, but the images and feelings of the people who live in them. Thus the effect of architecture stems from more or less common images and basic feelings connected with building.

It is basic feelings like these that phenomenology analyses, and it has become a more common method of examining architecture, too, in the last few years. A philosophical approach attached most closely to the names of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, it is introspective in nature, in contrast to the desire for objectivity of the positivist standpoint. Phenomenology strives to depict phenomena appealing directly to the consciousness as such without any theories and categories taken from the natural sciences or psychology. Phenomenology thus means examining a phenomenon of the consciousness in its own dimension of consciousness. That, using Husserl's concept, means "pure looking at" the phenomenon, or "viewing its essence." Phenomenology is a purely theoretical approach to research in the original sense of the Greek word *theoria*, which means precisely "a looking at."

The phenomenology of architecture is thus "looking at" architecture from within the consciousness experiencing it, through architectural feeling in contrast to analysis of the physical proportions and properties of the building or a stylistic frame of reference. The phenomenology of architecture seeks the inner language of building.

There is on the whole great suspicion of an introspective approach to art because it is thought to lack objectivity. But people do not seem to demand the same kind of objectivity from the artist's creative work. A work of art is a reality only when it is experienced, and experiencing a work of art means recreating its dimension of feeling.

One of the most important "raw materials" of phenomenological analysis of architecture is early childhood memory. We are used to thinking of childhood memories as products of the naive consciousness and imprecise memory capacity of the child, something with great appeal but of as little real value as our dreams. But both of these preconceived ideas are wrong. Surely the fact that certain early memories retain their personal identifiability and emotional force throughout our lives provides convincing proof of the importance and authenticity of these experiences, just as our dreams and daydreams reveal the most real and spontaneous contents of our minds.

#### ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ARCHITECTS

Fruitful material for a phenomenological analysis of architectural experience is also offered by the ways in which architecture is presented and depicted in other branches of the arts. In poetry, images connected with buildings are common, and are the actual material of Gaston Bachelard's work "La Poétique de l'Espace." Bachelard has also written a phenomenological work on the poetics of daydreams ("La Poétique de la Rêverie"), which has many points of contact with the art of building in spite of its nonarchitectural subject. In novel writing, film, photography, and painting the secret language by which landscape, buildings, and objects influence people also often plays a crucial role. There are examples in the classics of Russian literature, the films of [Alfred] Hitchcock and [Andre] Tarkovski, Walker Evans's photographs, or the architecture shown in paintings, from medieval miniatures to Edward Hopper's landscapes of metaphysical loneliness and Balthus's rooms full of erotic anxiety. A writer, film director, or painter has to give the human event he is presenting a setting, a place, and thus in fact to perform a job of architectural design without a client, structural calculations, or a building permit. The presentation of architecture in other arts is the "pure looking" of a child's way of experiencing things, for the rules of architectural discipline do not regulate the experience or the way it is presented.

#### THE ARCHITECTURE OF MEMORY

The inner architecture of the mind emerging out of feelings and memory images is built on different principles from the architecture developed out of professional approaches. I personally, for instance, cannot bring to mind from my own childhood a single window or door as such but I can sit down at the windows of my many memories and look out at a garden that has long disappeared or a clearing now filled with trees. I can also step through the innumerable doors of my memory and recognise the dark warmth and special smell of the rooms that are there on the other side.

#### THE PRIMARY FEELINGS OF ARCHITECTURE

I have said that architecture cannot be a mere play with form. This view does not spring from the self-evident fact that architecture is tied to its practical purpose and many other external conditions. But if a building does not fulfill the basic conditions formulated for it phenomenologically as a symbol of human existence it is unable to influence the emotional feelings linked in our souls with the images a building creates. Architectural effect is based on a number of what we could call primary feelings. These feelings form the genuine "basic vocabulary" of architecture and it is by working through them that a work becomes architecture and not, for instance, a large-scale sculpture or scenography.

Architecture is a direct expression of existence, of human presence in the world. It is a direct expression in the sense that it is largely based on a language of the body of which neither the creator of the work nor the person experiencing it is aware.

The following types of experience could well be among the primary feelings produced by architecture:

- the house as a sign of culture in the landscape, the house as a projection of man and a point of reference in the landscape;
- approaching the building, recognising a human habitation or a given institution in the form of a house;

—entrance into the building's sphere of influence, stepping into its territory, being near the building;

—having a roof over your head, being sheltered and shaded;

—stepping into the house, entering through the door, crossing the boundary between exterior and interior;

—coming home or stepping inside the house for a specific purpose, expectation and fulfillment, sense of strangeness and familiarity;

—being in the room, a sense of security, a sense of togetherness or isolation;

—being in the sphere of influence of the foci that bring the building together, such as the table, bed, or fireplace;

—encountering the light or darkness that dominates the space, the space of light;

—looking out of the window, the link with the landscape.

I should think that experiencing loneliness is one of the basic feelings given by architecture, just like the experiences of silence and light often found in [Louis] Kahn's texts. A strong architectural experience always produces a sense of loneliness and silence irrespective of the actual number of people there or the noise. Experiencing art is a private dialogue between the work and the person experiencing it which excludes all other interaction.

The natural landscape can never express solitude in the same way as a building. Nature does not need man to explain itself, but a building represents its builder and proclaims his absence. The harrowing feeling of being left alone achieved by the metaphysical painters is based precisely on signs of man which are a reminder of the viewer's solitude.

The most comprehensive and perhaps most important architectural experience is the sense of being in a unique place. Part of this intense experience of place is always an impression of something sacred: this place is for higher beings. A house may seem built for a practical purpose, but in fact it is a metaphysical instrument, a mythical tool with which we try to introduce a reflection of eternity into our momentary existence.

Architecture exists in another reality from our everyday life and pursuits. The emotional force of ruins, of an abandoned house or rejected objects stems from the fact that they make us imagine and share the fate of their owners. They seduce our imagination to wander away from the world of everyday realities. The quality of architecture does not lie in the sense of reality that it expresses, but quite reverse, in its capacity for awakening our imagination.

Architecture is always inhabited by spirits. People known to us may well live in the building, but they are only understudy actors in a waking dream. In reality architecture is always the home of spirits, the dwelling place of metaphysical beings.

The defenders of the humanization of architecture today are completely mistaken when they claim that buildings should be designed for the needs of real people. I would like them to name a single great building in the history of architecture that was not built for the idealized man. The primary condition for the production of good architecture is the creation of an ideal client for the commission at hand.

## MULTISENSORY EXPERIENCE

An impressive architectural experience sensitizes our whole physical and mental receptivity. It is difficult to grasp the structure of feeling because of its vastness and diversity. In experience we find a combination of the biological and the culturally derived, the collective and the individual, the conscious and the unconscious, the analytical and the emotional, the mental and the physical.

The symbols and associations in the language of art can be interpreted in many ways and make our consciousness shift from one possible interpretation to another. Adrian Stokes refers, for instance, to the close connection between experience of marble and low relief, and water fantasies.

Then how about the sound space created by drops of water falling occasionally in a dark, damp vault, the urban space created by the sound of church bells, the sense of distance that we feel when the sound of a night train pierces our dreams, or the smell space of a bakery or sweet shop? Why do abandoned, unheated houses have the same smell of death everywhere? Is it because the smell we sense is in fact one created through our eyes?

## THE BEGINNING

I talked once with a church official about church design. He stressed the importance of knowing about the liturgy, iconography, and other internal rulings of the church. He seemed upset when I said that only a heathen can design a really expressive church. In my view the symbol of faith can only be turned into stone by someone who is being newly introduced to the dimensions of faith. A person for whom the design of a church is merely the organization of given forms can produce only empty sentimentality.