

Aesthetics, Well-being and Health

Essays within architecture and
environmental aesthetics

Edited by

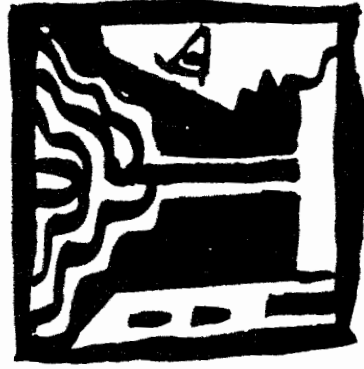
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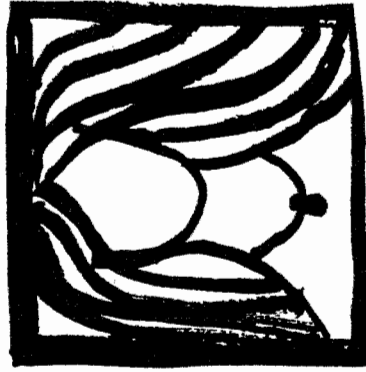
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Aesthetics in the Built Environment and its Influence on the User

Kaj Noschis



*Can beauty be a mediator between us
and "the unknown"?*

Introduction

As a psychologist who has been teaching for many years in a very design-studio oriented school of architecture my preoccupation has increasingly become to find a way of discussing the user's experience of built space in terms architects can acknowledge. Most of my architect colleagues feel that there is no special need for lectures on the user or dweller as an essential ingredient of an architectural project. On the one hand, architects are themselves users and, on the other hand, they prefer to rely on past experiences, whether of functions, materials, construction procedures or forms as experienced by human beings. The curriculum for the architecture studies is a synthesis of this past knowledge with discussions of a variety of examples and views. Thus, so the argument goes, users are implicitly always in the centre of the project as past experiences are analysed in terms of what users and designers have learned from them. With this knowledge the architect can concentrate on planning and designing shapes, construction details and colours in accordance with the cultural and contextual setting that will give the future building its unique quality, this being the essence of architecture, its beauty. The beauty of the buildings is then recognized and admired first of all by other architects and eventually also by the general public. Beauty's relations to the well-being of the users is never stated explicitly, it is implied that beautiful buildings are better for the users as well. This is how students are taught in our school, so those who eventually come to my lectures first of all have to be convinced that there is more to be known about the user that might be relevant for the designer. As aesthetics is quite at the core of the studio-teaching, to capture the students' interest. I discuss specifically the psychological model of man that is referred to when we look at architecture as beautiful design. In this paper I would like to take a look at aspects of this model.

Framing the aesthetic experience

What is the beauty of architecture - defined in the above terms as the unique quality of a built space - for the immediate user of a built space? In light of my own research I have come to consider this beauty with respect to time to be momentary and with respect to content to act as mediator between man

and the unknown. Most of the time people "just go about doing their things" without caring about what their environment looks like. Yet this does not mean that the aesthetic quality of the built environment is not important to people. Those moments when they are aware of the environment's characteristics might be existentially very important. These might be called *moments of connection*, phenomena which I will expand upon here. Let us consider that an architectural work acts as a mediator between man and the unknown around him, and that this might psychologically offer a key for understanding the aesthetic dimension of architecture for the user. One, of course, could counter that modern man is no longer surrounded by an unknown world. Our ancestors may have been afraid, but today we do not have the same fear of the elements because not only do we have explanations for them, we also have tools for keeping these hazards at bay. All the same, we have no more control over the onslaught of natural forces, whether floods, storms or hurricanes, than we have over an outbreak of disease, an accident or sudden death. And when such events do occur, we are always left to seek our own answers to the questions: Why me? Why him or why now?

To some extent we can rectify and remedy ills beforehand, and knowing that we can do so is a source of relief, but still we have to live with uncertainty about what the future holds. If bearing this in mind we think about, say, our home, apartment, or summer retreat, it is not a place that simply provides shelter from the cold and the wet; it also affords us psychological protection. Thus, still today, the home protects man against the unknown. The word *shelter* refers to that familiar symbol, the shell, something that comes between us and the rest of the world.

Mediator objects

Something like the above is what I have in mind when I talk of the *mediator*. The mediator calms fears, makes helplessness more bearable, gives security, provides a link with the unknown. At a more elementary level we could say that the mediator acts as a filter between us and the outer world. Here we have the opportunity to look more closely at this phenomenon of the mediator. We are all successors of Freud, or, if the thought of being included with his lot does not appeal, of the Romantics. At any rate we should ask whether

all the unknown, mysterious forces that we fear from time to time are outside - outside ourselves, that is - or whether they are also within us. Could there be something so unknown and so mysterious within us? I think that we, especially as progeny of Freud and the Romantics, should take this possibility into account. Each one of us has an unknown inner self that tends to cause much the same trouble as external forces. I believe that architecture might also be viewed as a mediator here, as a filter between us and the mysterious forces concealed within us, at those *moments* when this is needed.

I shall give three examples of what it means to be a mediator. Let us examine the object in general from this angle, from the definition according to which object is a tool or instrument to be used against the unknown forces hidden in nature or within ourselves. This perspective emphasizes the psychological significance of the object.

My first example is an amulet, worn either around the neck or on the wrist, or just carried around in one's pocket to ward off evil spirits or powers. To us this appears to be the behaviour of primitive peoples, but then many of us also wear or carry amulets: bracelets providing relief from rheumatism, lucky coins found lying on the ground, and many more.

My second example, which also explains the first, concerns the customs of the ancient Finns. Uno Harva¹ has described that when they found a sharp black stone, the ancient Finns took it home and told everyone that this was what Ukko (the old Finnish god of thunder, and chief god) made thunder with; that the God's wedge had fallen from the skies. They buried the stone under the threshold, where it provided the house with protection, particularly against fires caused by lightning. In this case, the object protects us against natural hazards; it is an instrument that controls forces over which man has no power, and that thus present a permanent threat to the continuation of life. I said that this example offers an explanation for the amulet, for there are also tales about amulets comparable to that of the wedge. The power of the object lies in the fact that it is somehow exceptional, for example, a particularly beautiful stone, or that it was found in a place so unexpected that it defies normal explanation; hence the magic power of the object.

The third example differs from the others in that it introduces the craftsman; the *enfant terrible* of modern architecture. We are familiar with

this example through the writing of Mircea Eliade.² What we are talking about is a wedge cast and engraved by a master mason in India and then hammered into the ground in a spot indicated by an astrologist "to ensure that it lands on the snake's head" to prevent it from getting away. The wedge is also the cornerstone of the house, and once it is in place the house can be built. This ritual or, rather, these gestures that initiate the building of a house also show clearly how the house constitutes victory over chaos, how chaos has been subdued. No longer can the snake move. Order has been built on disorder. The house represents victory over the rude forces that are now outside (under) the house, and hence it is a shelter from them. Eliade emphasizes that this wedge hammered into the ground also sets the house on the "axis mundi". Once again we get the same picture, this time of the house lying between the forces above and below it; it becomes a shell between them and the occupants.

At this point I should like to say a few words about the craftsman. It is clear that, just as an Indian mason casts and engraves a wedge, so some ancient Finn could have engraved something on the "hammer of Ukko"³ that he had found, or enhanced an amulet by carving or polishing it. But what is the point of such an act? The intention must have been to emphasize and augment the value of the object, perhaps its qualities as well. Thus the dialogue with the object has continued, a dialogue in which man, particularly the refiner of the object, may have grown in the eyes of others; they admire the skill of the craftsman while their emotional attitude to the object develops from identification with the dialogue that the craftsman has held with the object and the result of which is thus there for all to see. Perhaps we could take this as the psychological interpretation of what Marx refers to as the value of labour in the days before industrialization (although this has a rather outmoded ring to it).

The role of an object is crucial in our emotional development as well. The work of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott⁴ makes a strong case for this. In Winnicott's theory, the "transitional object" is a key concept; an object with transitional, i.e. mediative capabilities. By this he means an object that on the emotional level makes it possible for the child to (safely) be separated from its mother; a teddy bear or a blanket that the child clings to and to which he

can transfer his sense of security and love, earlier devoted exclusively to his mother or nanny. This frees the child from dependency on the mother, emotions are transferred to other objects, and the child can be content with a teddy bear rather than its mother, if such a gross generalization is permitted. The objects in our examples - the amulet, the stone hammer and the wedge - can also be approached from this angle; they can be seen as "security markers" in coming face to face with the unknown. Transitional objects, therefore, open a broader dialogue with the unknown.

Another example of an emotional relationship such as this is the *churinga* stone, the object of many ethnological studies. Australian aborigines calm themselves in frightening situations by rubbing this small stone that they always carry with them. This offers an emotional explanation for the amulet.

Therefore, objects are mediators in our relationship with both the external and the internal world. By handling objects we become familiar with the outside world, we get a grip on it and learn its logic, after which it is no longer as unknown to us. On the other hand, by projecting our emotions onto external objects, we also realize that we can soothe the restlessness within ourselves. I suggest, therefore, that such analysis and deductions be focused on the craftsman and his relationship to his work. Here I am attempting to give a psychological view on what is traditionally valued aesthetically. If we examine details like door hinges in farm buildings, forged by smiths in various forms (such as arrows, goats' horns, hearts), one is clearly justified in seeing a kind of dialogue with matter in them, aimed primarily at expressing the role of the object as mediator. The symbolism is meant for others to see and to keep evil forces at bay.

This example also shows how the meaning of craftsmanship extends to other people as well. Mediation is not only felt by the craftsman alone; other people also recognize the result. I imagine that people experience an object as mediator differently, and that different people recognize the dialogue with the object in different situations and with different objects. However, I believe that the dialogue with objects is relatively permanent in the history of mankind. As adults we can still find it as a need in us, and it thus gives us a viewpoint from which to examine our relationship with all "objets d'art".

Ornamentation

The purpose of the above examples was to illustrate the role of the object as a tool, an instrument, a mediator in the dialogue with the unknown. Sometimes the concepts of this dialogue are individual - and this may be discerned in my examples - but at other times they are common to a whole group or community as well. When that is the case the craftsman is an inter-preter in a special position. Before I return to the craftsman as the enfant terrible of the modern movement I would like to say something about the house as a transitional object. I have already mentioned the house as a shelter, a shell, or as a point on the "axis mundi". Ornamentation is also an integral part of house building. I mentioned door hinges, but the building of the whole house should be seen in the same way. Ornamentation as a component of architecture is a clear sign of the dialogue between man and the unknown, and the tangible signs give other people in that situation the opportunity to recognize their own wonder. But how are we to link the craftsman with architecture? This question, which has been topical ever since the breakthrough of industrial production, has received many a frenzied answer.

We know that, beginning in the '20s, all the figurative patterns that had been models for architects went out of fashion. Industrial standardized forms took their place. An object becomes lighter when it is stripped of decoration. Machines and industrialization remove all superfluous human traces from an object, above all the imprints of the craftsman. This is the achievement glorified by the modern movement - the simplicity and purity of form.

Does architecture still serve as a mediator? In my view, we can seek an answer from two angles. On the one hand, we are given man who creates order by drawing lines and who - most important - fears practically nothing. Reason triumphs over the unknown in nature. An object does not need to be a mediator in this case, since everything is subordinated to human skills. Signs of this view were present in the ideas of the Greek philosophers, but it did not really blossom until the 18th century. Pythagoras combined religion with these ideas; Descartes contemplated pure reason. On the surface, the achievements of our science enhance a mechanical view of the world, a world whose control is fully within our reach. All the mysteries of the elements are within our grasp. Nothing can stop the triumph of reason. When reason

becomes God, there is nothing to fear and consequently no need for transitional objects or spaces. In other words, these mediators are just tools for expressing our superiority over nature. This trend has gained more ground this century. Our capacity for harnessing matter has grown: we can create any form and shape we wish; we can manipulate nature. Even our art proclaims this triumph.

On the other hand, there have been reactions to the triumphal progress of reason. The Romantic movement was the strongest opponent of such glorification of reason. Both the mystery of the meaning of life and, above all, the forces within us that are by no means mechanical are promoted and contemplated; poetry and art are seen as the best vehicle for this. The mediatory role of an object is thus assured. This ideology is also alive today, as I have attempted to show. What, then, is the relationship of modern architecture to this view?

Acknowledging our heritage

Modern architecture, expressed as the product of a logical evolution in which the prime human need is efficient action, remains hermetically inaccessible to many people. People still feel the need for the craftsmans' works. We know that for many (if not most) people this is where beauty lies. But how do we answer their needs in an industrialized age? It would be nostalgic to answer that the only possibility is to return to crafts, or that some decoration must quickly be added to external form. I think the architects who acknowledge the craftsman as their ancestor find the answer; they see themselves as the heirs of the craftsman in shaping matter in dialogue with themselves and the unknown elements in nature.

Thus, the person who lives with his fears, but who also experiences peace through beauty, recognizes this heritage. This is also a more explicit view about how beauty influences well-being - in this case psychological health. And I think there are many people who believe this. Architecture that glorifies reason is not enough for them: it amputates part of man. An architect who acknowledges a craft heritage does not necessarily use decoration. I mentioned Pythagoras' religious attitude to geometry. Pure, clear-cut forms can be interpreted thus, even today. Man does not proclaim his superiority in

such a case. His opponents are nature and its forces. The point is not to conquer them, but to express human thought and feelings so that other people recognize them as part of the dialogue with the unknown. The point is not the use of decoration, though the contemporary debate centres largely on this. The point is our attitude: either we declare our superiority or we express the search in which we admit that both nature and man contain things unknown to us. This is a tradition in which architecture is the mediator.

So what does this psychological perspective add to the curriculum that my architect colleagues advocate - where users are investigated mainly indirectly as having influenced built forms through history? And what does my argument specifically add about aesthetics for a design project? It does make a point about the importance of "the model of man" that we have in mind when we design. In fact this model is necessarily there, so it might be good to have it explicitly based on current knowledge and concepts. Psychological knowledge that we have today allows us to view human beings from several perspectives in terms of an interplay between conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational forces. This can help us in formulating a view - as I have tried to argue - to architecture in terms of beauty. It might also help in understanding why the extreme forms of Modern architecture may be rejected as "cold shoeboxes" and might not at all sustain people psychologically. Not all beauty praised by architects is capable of acting as mediator for human beings. Its influence might then not be positive anymore for the user as it might directly influence his or her well-being. This could become a criteria for questioning beauty. At this point some students at my lectures leave, but some others remain for the rest of the course.

✱

This text is close to reflections that I use in my introductory seminar on environmental psychology for students in architecture. I first referred to my examples in a lecture and paper subsequently published in ACANTHUS, 1990, entitled "Man recognizing his imprint".