

## ***The Extraordinary in Architecture: Studying and Acknowledging the Reality of the Spiritual***

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Under certain conditions the experience of architecture is able to deliver us into an extraordinary state nothing short of mystical. Such ecstatic events are usually kept secret, protected behind a shield of privacy, for fear of not just embarrassment but, worse, academic or professional ostracism. Yet, despite such dangers, qualms, and repression, we find a few trustable testimonies here and there [1]. What is remarkable about these reports is their consistency in describing situations that defy our beliefs, ideas, and knowledge of architecture, self, and beyond. For example, people recount the dissolution of the subject-object divide, an overwhelming sense of well-being, profound intuitions on nature and life, significant space-time perceptual abnormalities, ecstatic love for it all, a direct apprehension of the ultimate goodness of/in the universe (god, or reality) and language's inefficiency to express the experienced. Substantial and newly available empirical evidence strongly support these testimonies. [2]

Although we are initially tempted to categorize such profound experiences of architecture as 'extreme aesthetics', these events challenge the 'aesthetic' definition at least as understood by Modern and Postmodern philosophies and cultures. Aesthetics is a limited, perceptual understanding of experience focused on 'beauty' that was created at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century in direct response to Cartesian dualism and the raise of rationalism and science [3]. In contrast, the experiences we are talking about are not limited to the sensual or perceptual realm alone. Quite to the contrary, once in 'trance', these experiences present reality as a beautiful, true, and good wholeness all at once. Having one of these rare experiences (and they are indeed very infrequent) makes the lucky individual appreciate and understand Plato's argument that beauty inevitably leads to, indeed *is* love and truth.

But let us make no mistake. There is no Platonic idealism here. These realizations come from direct, first-hand experiences and, in this sense, are close to a Zen or Heraclitean take on reality. In other words, we don't stay at the bank and observe, measure, analyze, or theorize about the "river of life". Instead, we jump into the water, get wet, taste it, feel it, swim on it, and come to *really* know the actual nature of the "river". We are 'one' with it, which is to say, there is no separation between me-subject and the river-object. There is only a conscious experience happening.

This non-dual state of consciousness is precisely what people report when describing profound experiences of architecture. And, when we thus engage a place, we find that the good, the beautiful and the true, the 'Big Three' as philosopher Ken Wilber calls them, are next to one another. [4] More precisely, they are one and the same and what compels Wilber to argue that the integration of the 'Big Three' reveals their foundation on the 'Big Fourth': the spiritual. This strongly suggests that the spiritual realm is just one perspectival shift away, continuously present, next to us, only waiting for us to make the necessary mental move to bring it into awareness. It just takes a sudden shift of consciousness to turn an ordinary into an extraordinary event.

This seems easy enough, doesn't it? However, the available data (regardless of censorship) and our own life experiences demonstrate that these epiphanies are very rare events. What keeps us from getting there? Why is it so hard? Returning to Ken Wilber, [5] we can say that profound experiences (i.e., accessing the spiritual) require a fundamental phenomenological move from third person detachment to first person intimacy. This means that "my" experience of a building ("it") must shift from "me" and "it" as a duality, to just an experiential oneness where subject and object are merged. Although traditional phenomenological work enables us to move from the limiting and instrumentalist view of a building as inert matter to be externally approached (an "it") to one of architecture as materialized intentionality that actively interacts with us in a meaningful and experiential conversation (a "you"), such shift is still not strong enough to move us away from dualism. It is only when we completely dive into the 'thick' reality of a building, without holding back, that the "*unio mystica*" has a chance to occur. [6]

And it is here that the great power of architecture becomes apparent. The architect through their work may create the potential conditions that if properly engaged (and this is a very important if) allows the visitor/user to go from third to first-person experience, thus, accessing a realm of integral spiritual unity: beauty, goodness, truth. [7] Architecture may compassionately assist us in effecting the radical shift!

Such remarkable a potential in what we do and surrounds us cannot and should not be kept unspoken, secret, repressed, forgotten, dismissed! For there are few (if any) more necessary revolutions for our trouble times than storming the numbness, cynicism, blindness, and materialism that impede, paraphrasing Thoreau, our awakening to the divinity of the present moment. [8] Once that insight and sensibility is attained, we cannot help it but developing an attitude of profound appreciation compassion, care, and commitment toward life, others, ourselves, and the environment. From such position, most serious problems afflicting our world today can be tackled in agreeable, believable, and solvable ways. It is for this reason that airing, studying and discussing the hitherto

silenced or rejected voices of the extraordinary in architecture is a major duty of architecture to the ethos of today. Hence the creation of ACS and the writing of this very paper.

## References

[1] Among others, see: Frederick Franks, *The Awakened Eye* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) p.11; Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) p.97 and 102. Robert Ivy, "The Essence of Education" (Editorial), *Architectural Record* 07 (2006) p.17. Steven Holl, "Archetypal Experiences of Architecture", *A+U: Questions of Perception* (special issue 1994) pp.121-135. Heinrich Hermann, "On The Transcendent In Landscapes of Contemplation", in Rebecca Krinke (ed.): *Contemporary Landscape of Contemplation* (New York: Routledge) p.36-37. See also Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), Louis Kahn, *Between Silence and Light* (Boulder: Shambala, 1979), Claudio Silvestrin, *Claudio Silvestrin* (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser, 1999) Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture* (Boston: Basel, 1999).

[2] I just finished collecting nearly 2,900 testimonies of profound experiences of architecture (using an online survey). The analysis of this huge database is in progress. For more, see <http://faculty.arch.utah.edu/alive/survey.htm>

[3] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance Of The Beautiful And Other Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986 — translation by Nicholas Walker). Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 1997). Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007)

[4] Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality* (Boston: Shambala, 2006)

[5] Ken Wilber, *Integral Psychology* (Boston: Shambala, 2000)

[6] William James, *Varieties of Religious Experiences* (New York: Touchstone, 2004)

[7] Gadamer (ibid., pp.112-113) sees the role of art as one close to Husserl's *phenomenological reduction*. The "bracketing", as it is often termed, is a reductive method consisting in filtering out all biases unrelated to the ongoing experience in order to access the unspoiled and immediate contents of consciousness alone, reality-as-it-is. I would like to add here that the presence of a conducive piece of work of course does not guarantee the reduction or move from third to first-person experience. The situation is like tango: there needs to be

two parties engaged. The person must be 'ready'. What this 'ready' means or how to attain such preparedness is the subject of another paper!

[8] Henry Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1894)