

## **ON TEACHING THE DESIGN OF POETICALLY/SPIRITUALLY CHARGED ENVIRONMENTS**

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How can one design poetically/spiritually charged spaces, starting from a tabula rasa? And how can the design of such spaces be taught? Are such qualities restricted to only a small category of buildings, perhaps of clearly spiritual/religious function, or can they occur independent of utilitarian demands?

I have always believed in the latter. After all, each of us knows of religious spaces lacking spirituality while we also have encountered poetry and spirituality in the most unlikely places.

Last fall I began exploring the teachability of poetic-spiritual qualities in a studio I called 'STRUCTURES OF THE POETIC, embodied in a research and meeting center in Pawtucket, Rhode Island', patterned on the Rockefeller Foundation's residency and conferences program in Bellagio on Lake Como in Italy. Its small compound was to provide an informal, stimulating setting uniquely fostering deep thinking about education, religion, psychology, and improving world order by visiting researchers and thinkers. Individual or group participants would typically spend four weeks removed from the pressures of their professional lives, in rooms and associated private studies, lounges, a small library, meeting rooms, dining facility, and the required support spaces. Space permitting, several art and music studios were intended as well. While the center's orientation had some spiritual components, its program was largely secular in function.

To first establish clearly what would constitute a range of the right kind of qualities to be pursued by all eleven members of the studio, we started with an intensive research workshop on how 'structures of the poetic' help to determine the character of space in selected works of modern architecture. It focused on light, proportions, dimensions, orientations, directions, materials, tactile, auditory attributes, etc) and how they help structure a building's unfolding in the process of encounter (approach, threshold, spatial sequences including movement and repose, highlights, inside and outside, culmination(s), and return. It consisted of four assignments:

The first was an analysis of masterful buildings by architects ranging from Alvar Aalto, Tadao Ando, Luis Barragan, and Louis I Kahn, to Fumihiko Maki, John Pawson, and Peter Zumthor. In their analyses the students needed to go beyond the selected works' surface of appearance and identify ideas, principles, strategies and devices employed by the architects in the service of making the building elicit the desired responses in viewers/users. Thereafter they were to

propose viable poetic alternatives using the same principles. To explain to the students what I meant by underlying ideas and principles and the strategies and actual devices employed by architects to translate their idea into reality I used Eero Saarinen's Kresge Chapel at MIT which we visited during a field trip to Boston.

Given the brevity required here, I will illustrate these four assignments and the final design mostly through my student Ryan Cho's work who incidentally chose for his first analysis Aalto's Library here at Mount Angel Abbey.

With a first set of ideas, principles, strategies and architectural devices so to speak 'in hand', the students were now asked to use these findings as departure point for creating works of their own, as illustrated by Ryan's exploration of a space defining screen design.

For a second set of case studies we focused on movement sequences and on how one's experience of discovery and exploration of a building/complex is being structured/choreographed through specific architectural ideas, strategies, and devices. Again I had the students choose from masterful buildings by architects from Rafael Moneo, Alvaro Siza, Todd Williams and Billie Tsien, to Carlo Scarpa and Edward Larrabee Barnes. Once again the emphasis was on both capturing the essential qualities present in the work and identifying analytically the underlying ideas, and specific architectural strategies and devices operative and, in each case, proposing alternative poetic manifestations using the same principles.

Here Ryan analyzed Scarpa's Museo Canoviano and from there, in the fourth assignment of interpreting the findings in a work of their own, began creating an artist's retreat consisting of three components as shown.

Only mid-semester did we start the main design project, using for a site a former paper mill along the Seekonk River in Pawtucket, RI.

In Ryan's case the final design shown here could only come into being due to his earlier explorations (I will refer to three instances of earlier explorations echoed in his compound). As is often the case in works of architecture, the cultural background of this Korean student also is discernible in the harmonious marriage of client's needs, vision of the architect, and influences from the site and its context, near and far.

Would hindsight make me change my method? Yes, not fundamentally but in aspects. Out of fourteen weeks we spent seven on the introductory assignments and I realized I could accomplish the same degree of preparedness in less time in favor of having perhaps two more weeks available for the final design.

Would I choose a different program or site for the same goal? Because I believe strongly as an educator in the importance of readying students to make significant design contributions even when seemingly hardly an opportunity exists, the specific vehicle should be of secondary importance. What I found important is above all to provide the students with opportunities to create intellectual and artistic tools and with didactic opportunities for gaining insights that they can internalize and that thus become part of their makeup as creators.

I would be interested in what different didactic models others have followed towards the same goal of enabling students to endow both religious and secular buildings with qualities we all appreciate so much.