

Habit, Spirituality, and Architecture

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“Familiarity breeds contentment.”

George Ade (1866-1944)

The proposition I would like to put forth for discussion is that the deterioration of the spiritual dimension in our contemporary world may parallel our loss of faith in the existential importance of habit, and that the recovery of this dimension in our built environment may require a re-examination of the relationship between our notions of habit and architecture.

It should not be surprising that many human endeavors that put a high value on the achievement of spirituality are characterized by an equal emphasis on the importance of habitual actions. To take an obvious example: virtually all monastic orders pervasively regulate the daily life of the members of their community. From the sequence of daily activities from dusk to dawn to the ritual enactment of special events throughout the year, from the kind of food to be produced to the manner in which it is prepared and consumed, from the work to be done to the clothes to wear—characteristically called “habits”—monks don’t have to think much about what to do how and when. It is fair to assume that these habitual practices evolved because they were deemed to be a successful framework to achieve higher states of awareness and consciousness.

It also stands to reason that the limitations of our central nervous system, in its capacity to process and to retain information, would make us seek to develop habitual patterns of behavior to deal with the repetitive situations in our life (that vastly outnumber the singular and unique ones). By their economy of means these patterns not only leave enough capacity for us to attend to genuinely new situations that require our undivided and focused attention—like survival—but also liberate us for the development of various cultural pursuits that define us as a human race. Habit is, as Pascal has observed, indeed man’s second nature. The execution of repetitive and uniform acts enables us to broaden and to deepen our spiritual life by unburdening our mind from paying undue attention to everyday routines.

But habit is not only of practical survival value; it is equally the source of aesthetic attraction and delight. Probably based on our primordial experiences of the “habits of nature”—the multifarious variety of related forms of life as well as the repetitive diurnal and seasonal patterns—we tend to find similar pleasure in experiencing the repetitions and variations of cultural artifacts, the quotidian life-

habits of cultures, and ultimately the typicality of their physical environments. The perceived identities of things, animals, persons, places, and cultures—how we think about them, remember them, and ultimately why we love them—probably have more to do with their repetitive characteristics than with singular and unique ones. Personal habits—habits of the body, of the mind, of the heart—condense themselves into individual identities, successful collective habits become customs and traditions, significant habits are formalized and elevated to the status of rituals, and our communal habitual actions sediment themselves over time as the physical patterns of our places of habitation: as our built environment.

One can demonstrate the phenomenological link between place, habit, and habitability by examining the etymology of the German term **Stelle**, one of three German words for “place” (the other two are **Platz** and **Ort**). The word **Stelle** comes from the verb **stellen**, which means to put or place something somewhere. It also is related to the word **stehen**, which means to stop and to stand (still), and further to **Stab** (stave, stick), **Steher** (post, pole), but also to such notions as **Stall** (stall, stable), **Stätte** (stead, as in homestead), and even **Stadt** (town, city). A place is where we have stopped on our path, where we have put our things down, where we are going to stay for a while, where we can erect things, things that become our possessions (literally what we sit on), where circumstances are steady and our life habits have time and space to unfold. The semantic halo surrounding these notions of place points to the fact that settlement, construction, and habitation seem existentially connected to such notions as familiarity, stability, and continuity, all related to the repetitive, the habitual, the ordinary. In this context it is difficult not to point to another connection, that between **Wohnung** (dwelling), **Gewohnheit** (habit), and **Gewöhnlichkeit** (ordinariness), all containing **wohnen** (to dwell) in their core. Home is where our ordinary habits are at home: it is the epicenter of familiarity.

If we understand the human impulse to build as our desire to make a home for humans on earth, and as a way to domesticate the habitual patterns of our communal life in material form, then the anthropological function and identity of architecture emerges not as one that should reflect, stimulate, or even amplify the uncertain and changing world in which we live, but rather as a counterpoint to it. It is the realm that protects our already destabilized human sensibilities from further assaults, resists the fickle winds of fashion through its physical inertia, and reassures and comforts us through its stability and continuity: it provides a shelter for the dreamer, the poet, the sage.

We are all aware of the other side of habit, the way we conventionally think about it today: mindless repetition, resistance to change, numb routine, stale convention. But this pejorative view of habit, more than likely a direct result of our somewhat exaggerated faith in the powers of innovation and progress, is unbalanced and in need of correction. Our phenomenological life-world,

dominated by all that we take for granted, cannot function if architecture refuses to participate in it, if sees itself mainly as the exception—as the “raisin—rather than accepting responsibility for the quality of the “cake” itself. If this were the case, as it essentially has been for thousands of years, I have reason to believe that it again would become an important part of the fertile ground from which our spirituality, architectural or otherwise, would naturally grow like a flower in the sun.