

Design Faith: Kierkegaard and the Designer

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“... a paradoxical and humble courage is required to grasp the whole of the temporal by virtue of the absurd, and this courage is faith.”¹

| Søren Kierkegaard |

Søren Kierkegaard’s conception of the “knight of faith” is a fitting model for the successful designer. In part this is because this concept offers an existential map, suggesting what it looks and feels like to be invested, vulnerable, and thus transcend the limitations of life undertaken as a calculation. The “knight of faith,” a trope constructed from chivalric love, indicates one who has the faith to commit oneself wholly to a situation that is seemingly “absurd”: that is, caring unreservedly for another human being, *knowing* that this situation is contingent vulnerable and out of one’s ultimate control.² As Kierkegaard puts the knight’s dilemma, “...the only thing that can save him is the absurd, and this he grasps by faith.”³ Kierkegaard goes on to say:

thus to live joyfully and happily every instant by virtue of the absurd, every instant to see the sword hanging over the head of the beloved and yet not to find repose in the pain of resignation, but joy by virtue of the absurd—this is marvelous.⁴

The paradox of this “absurd” condition is that *the act of commitment* (not what one is committing to) forms the genuineness and depth of the commitment. In other words, one does not become a knight of faith by waiting, weighing, and measuring, seeking an ideal so irresistible that one cannot do anything but commit. Instead, making a commitment in spite of uncertainty to a specific, temporal, vulnerable situation is the initiation of meaning and, as Kierkegaard goes on to outline, ethical action.⁵ In short, Kierkegaard’s basic message is that without a commitment made through faith (i.e. one that is not reasoned, calculated or measured) one remains in a passionless existence. Without a commitment one is without a world.

This particular aspect of Kierkegaard’s thought is relevant to architecture because the creative process demands an analogous act of commitment, as well as copious amounts of faith in the seemingly absurd. Yet, the complexities of architectural creation intensify the difficulties with making such a commitment, because the demands of function, life safety, and psychological well being suggest that a commitment not grounded in reason and logic to something in particular is at best irresponsible. Or, as Kierkegaard puts it, “...as soon as the individual would assert himself in his particularity over against the universal he sins.”⁶ In this way, the competing requirements and concerns of architecture can easily confound commitment and obstruct the designer from becoming a knight of faith because such complexity can lead one to spiral into either ethical paralysis or atomistic problem solving. The tendency toward problem-solving is common amongst students, and it frequently results in fragmented solutions loosely agglomerated but never fully bound up as a conceptual or experiential whole. In contrast, holistic environments arise when the parameters of a problem are properly circumscribed. But herein lies the paradox for design: often it is thought that to achieve a whole one must first know what the whole is, as a kind of intentional a priori, but this reasoning and focus on the universal is exactly what Kierkegaard is reacting against. As he says, “every movement of infinity comes about by passion and no reflection can bring a movement about...what our age lacks...is not reflection, but passion.”⁷

With passion, Kierkegaard insists, there comes a higher “immediacy.”⁸ This is a state in which things demand our attention with a sense of urgency that is close to instinct or desire, yet transcends these more primal functions because it is understood (through experience and constancy) to hold deeper significance than any mere fancy. However, the feeling of immediacy is parallel to instinct or desire because its relevance cannot be measured through the mediation of reason. For architecture this is an intriguing point, since young designers constantly rationalize their projects in vague ways, working with universals such as “space”, or “light”; or “views,” not realizing that these rationalized wholes really say next to nothing. This is why Kierkegaard posits that the “individual is higher than the universal.”⁹ For the designer, this aphorism points to the fact that if one’s commitment is to everything, really one has committed to nothing; and conversely, when one engages wholly with a specific situation through a particular idea, a whole world opens up around this investment. Further, because unproductive reflection begets stagnation, the passion Kierkegaard sees as associated with faith might, in design, be taken up as *the design process itself*. That is to say, each “right” step engaged passionately for its own significance (without knowing the intended end) can be an effective means of generating traces of the whole that is ultimately to coalesce as architecture. I sometimes call this phenomenon “design faith,” suggesting to students that often it is simply more important to *invest in something* and let it take you somewhere. For cultivating even those ideas seemingly odd or peculiar does what continuous reflection, calculation and waiting cannot—it *opens up the world of the project*. Here, architecture can occur because with such an opening the conditions for success and failure become evident. Training this ability in students occurs for me explicitly in basic design courses by assigning problems that have limited analytic footholds and are deliberately ambiguous, as well as more implicitly over the course of an advanced studio through the sometimes therapy-like dialogue of desk-critiques.¹⁰

Ultimately, finding one’s passion for *precisely* those things slightly odd acknowledges and embraces the fact that any creation does not arrive fully formed; most creative works start as a strange, even disconcerting, microscopic potentiality. Such recognition of the necessary unfamiliarity of pure potential and an on-going commitment to said uncertainty through design can evolve to become architecture; and when it does it is the designer’s faith that imbues the work with significance.

Endnotes

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling & the Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), 59.

² *Ibid.*, 57-64.

³ *Ibid.* 57

⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 64-77.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 91-92. Note: Kierkegaard says that the “first immediacy is the aesthetical...but faith is not aesthetical” Here he is alluding to the fact that faith and higher (second) immediacy are tied together, both addressing the ethical. See also Kierkegaard’s discussion of the teleological suspension of the ethical in Problem 1 - Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling & the Sickness Unto Death*, 64-77.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling & the Sickness Unto Death*, 92.92

¹⁰ The word limits of this paper preclude going into much detail here. However, I will show examples of specific works as part of the presentation.