

Outcomes of The Architectural Extraordinary: An Empirical Study

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Introduction

This paper reports on new findings coming from a long-term phenomenological investigation of the architectural extraordinary. In my first paper to ACS (2009b), I discussed the relationship between Extraordinary Architectural Experiences and spirituality in the context of an architectural discipline too timid or afraid to acknowledge and discuss it. In last year's symposium (forthcoming), I provided empirical evidence supporting the central role that (psychological, cultural and physical) 'distancing' plays in enabling profound aesthetics — thus validating pre-modern over modern or postmodern claims on the matter.

This article looks at the effects of Extraordinary Architectural Experiences (or EAEs). My focus is not the scholarly consideration of the many theoretical and philosophical conjectures made on the matter. We hardly need more speculation in an area collecting arguments since Plato's time. On the contrary, the challenge is on deciding which, among the many philosophers and aesthetic positions, is closer to the mark. Consider for example the very different accounts on architectural aesthetics given by De Bottom (2006), Perez-Gomez (2006), and Scruton (1979). How are we to decide? Do we use reason, ideology, or plain subjective experience? Regardless of how we respond to these questions, something is clear: barring breakthrough rhetoric, it is unlikely that one particular viewpoint will convince the other. For this reason, I argue that, unless some empirical evidence (i.e., concrete data) enters the conversation, dialectics by itself will not get us far except to more discourse.¹ This was my rationale for designing and conducting a large survey on EAE in English and Spanish. My poll was freely accessible on the internet for one year (April 2007 to April 2008) and gathered the largest number of personal accounts of EAEs ever collected (1,890 in English and 982 in Spanish). I will not here expand on the details and decisions shaping the survey nor the responding population characteristics. This information and more is available elsewhere (Bermudez forthcoming, 2010b, 2009a, 2008). In order to facilitate the readability of the results, responses to the English part of the survey are formatted in **bold** whereas answers to the Spanish component are in *italics*.

Outcomes of EAEs

One survey question was particularly designed to determine the effects of EAEs by asking participants to define the three main outcomes coming out the experience. Chart 1 summarizes the results:

¹ This conversation is part of yet another long debate regarding the possibility of 'progress' in philosophy — a subject of particular interest throughout the 20th Century. I am not saying that progress is possible only through empirical or scientific investigation. I am only arguing (along others, such as those in today's Experimental Philosophy —Knobe & Nichols 2008) that we should not ban empirical evidence from the debate, particularly if it may help us elucidate long standing controversies.

Rank	English Response			Spanish Response		
	Response %	Respondents %	Result	Result	Respondents %	Response %
1	19.5	55.0	Insight	Beauty	54.5	20.5
2	17.0	49.0	Beauty	'conocimiento' *	54.5	20.5
3	15.5	43.5	Joy	Satisfaction	44.5	17.0
4	14.0	40.0	Peace	Peace	33.0	12.5
5	12.0	34.0	Knowledge	Joy	27.5	10.5
6	10.0	28.5	Satisfaction	Other #1	19.5	7.5
7	6.5	19.0	Other #1	Discernment	16.0	6.0
8	3.5	10.0	Release	Release	10.5	4.0
9	1.5	4.0	Other #2	Other #2	3.0	1.0
10	0.5	1.0	Other #3	Other #3	0.5	0.5

Chart 1: Summary of Responses to the question: "What did you get out of the experience? (please choose top 3)". Participants were given 7 choices: beauty, insight, joy, knowledge, peace, release, satisfaction, and 3 open slots for entering other terms if dissatisfied with these 7 (the 'Other' categories). Asterisk* indicate a term in Spanish whose literal translation into English (unlike the rest) does not fit expectations. See discussion below.

While these results reaffirm the age-old claim that experiencing the architectural extraordinary deliver us into an appreciation of beauty along with a sense of fulfillment and wellbeing, they bring particular attention to their mental or cognitive effects. This is relevant for at least two reasons. First, because the data show that there is a relatively balanced (if not higher) weight of this dimension vis-à-vis beauty. In other words, the extraordinary in architecture has a double-arrow directionality pointing outwardly *and* inwardly.² Since our discipline pays little attention to the psychological, this study of profound phenomenology may help us consider conditions that make subjective states more propitious to receive the architectural significant. Second, the mental response/attitude in aesthetic experience is an area where Classical and Modern/Postmodern philosophies deeply disagree. Here, this empirical examination may help to shed light into which one of these views best fits the reported facts. For these reasons, this paper will focus on the internal dimension of EAEs.

Moving forward means to address a big discrepancy between what English and Spanish groups tell about their major internal response to EAEs: 'insight' is far from being 'conocimiento' (or 'knowledge' if English translation is literally executed). While we could be seeing cultural differences at play, a closer examination reveals another situation. First comes the possibility that this divergence is at least partially due to language differences: Spanish does not have a word for the English term 'insight'. 'Discernimiento' was the given choice but it feels as alien or unfamiliar to people as the Anglo counterpart 'discernment' is to English speakers. Plus it doesn't have the same concise, powerful, and instantaneous meaning that 'insight' does. As a result, it is possible that Spanish speakers may have selected 'conocimiento' to indicate something similar to 'insight' although a literal reading of its English translation ('knowledge') would not permit such interpretation. There are several clues supporting this reading. Before we investigate them, however, let me point out that this inquiry on the Spanish 'conocimiento' response will assist us very well in elucidating the psychological side of EAEs for both groups.

² The importance of the inward direction may also explain why these phenomenologies are often reported to move beyond architecture into an experience of consciousness (Bermudez 2010a).

Going back to seeking clues on what respondents meant by 'conocimiento', leads us consider the words entered by participants unhappy with the choices given in the question —the 'Other' categories in the chart (representing **24.4%**, 23.3% of the total number of responses). For example, of the 118 words Spanish participants entered, the top choices were design appreciation (#10), 'admiration' (#9), 'peace' (#8), 'wholeness' (#8) and 'awareness' (#7) in that order.³ Considering these qualifiers in the context of the main three choices ('Beauty', 'Satisfaction', 'Peace') suggests that the 'conocimiento' Spanish speakers are referring to is not one related to gaining a skill, intellectual grasp, or memory.

More clues are found in the responses to another survey question. This one asked participants to define the phenomenological quality of the experience. (see Bermudez 2009a, 2008) The result shows EAEs as:

"Emotional" (**70.5%**, 76.5%),
"Sensual/Perceptual/Physical" (**71%**, 50%),
"Timeless" (**50%**, 37%), and
"Pleasurable" (**41%**, 38.5%)

Reviewing the **548**, 271 words entered in the 'Other' category of this question (similar to the one above for outcomes) provide us with more indications of a non-intellectual or not-knowledge seeking phenomenology (and, consequently, results). For example, Spanish speakers' top choices included 'awe'/'admiration' (#65), 'spiritual'/'transcendental'/'illumination' (#29), 'spatial'/'physicality' (#25), 'harmony'/'unity' (#16), and 'ecstasy' (#14) in that order. The parallel with the English response is remarkable: 'spiritual' (#56), 'awe'/'amazing' (#50), 'peace' (#33), 'inspiring' (#32), 'connectedness' (#26), and 'transcendental' (#21). Notice that neither these experiential qualities nor the top four descriptors chosen to define the nature of EAEs make any hint at thinking. In fact, the descriptor "Analytical/Intellectual" received a relative low **5th**, **6th** ranking in the survey (**36%**, 34.5%) indicating that thinking is not running the experience but instead playing along, in a background or supporting role.⁴ Lastly, we need to consider the more than 1,000 stories that survey participants wrote to share their unique moment. These narratives make evident that the inward effect of EAEs is far from being directed to gain knowledge. Here are two representative stories (for more, refer to Bermudez 2009a):

Salk Institute, California, 1971. "We arrived at the Salk and just walked out into the courtyard without going into the reception office first. Within the first 5 minutes of being in the courtyard and seeing the horizon, I remember having a tremendous rush of joy. I remember coming to a (sudden) realization that I was now involved with something that was connected to something powerful and bigger than I ever imagined possible. I remember a physical feeling in my chest: like my "heart in my throat", which I do not remember feeling before (but have felt since). I also recall wanting to jerk into motion -- I wanted to run; swing my arms; do anything other than just stand in place. It was like I suddenly knew something that I didn't know before. I also recall thinking about the fact I could not make a direct correspondence between what I was feeling and the architecture, per se. It's that strangeness that in retrospect points me to the feeling that I felt I was in touch with something really awesome and bigger than the structure itself. Joy and optimism."

Therme Vals Bath, Switzerland 2007. "No building has ever revealed such a 'conscious architectural experience' as did Peter Zumthor's baths in Vals. I felt this building more deeply than I

³ These choices resemble in flavor and quality the top five most common terms offered by English speakers (out of **288** words entered): 'connectedness' (#32), 'inspiration' (#23), 'awe' (#22), 'enlightenment' (#16), and 'appreciation' (#13).

⁴ The statistical study of only those responses with "analytical/intellectual" as their main qualifier of EAEs (i.e., **100%**, 100%), still finds "Sensual/Perceptual/Physical" (**73%**, 56.2%) and "Emotion" (**67.7%**, 81.8%) in second and third place, followed by "Timelessness" (**47.5%**, 35%) and "Pleasure" (**42.2%**, 43.3%).

have ever felt any piece of architecture. As soon as I entered the baths, I felt that I had been reduced to nothing but senses and emotions. I touched the expertly crafted stone to my fingers and toes. I dipped my body into each individual pool, marveling at the sensations each change in temperature caused. I breathed in the sweltering black heat of the sauna. I smelled the mineral water and swished its metallic coolness in my mouth. I watched the green mountains from the outdoor pool. I was overcome. Such overwhelming simplicity in design and material was closer to divinity than I had felt in any other man-made design. As I surrounded myself with the purity of living rock, water, mountain, and light, I couldn't help but crying for the beauty and deep spirituality of it all. I felt the spirit of the place. I cried and cried at the realization of the deeper meaning of it all. Zumthor had captured the immaterial and the immortal. I had no idea that someone could do this in architecture."

When we consider all these data, it becomes clear that the 'knowledge' ('conocimiento') Spanish respondents are referring to is not about intellectual inference or rumination but rather acts of immediate, emotional, embodied, 'subjective' apprehension. It is a 'knowing' close to the Latin verb 'sapere' instead of its counterpart 'cognōscere'. Thus, it is fair to conclude that 'conocimiento' is meant to signify something close to the English word 'insight' than to its literal translation into 'knowledge' would have it. This study also implies similar experiential outcomes for the two groups despite their distance in language, culture, and space – something also reported for other characteristics of EAEs (Bermudez 2008, 2009a).

In short, there is an essential mental component to the architectural extraordinary but one that is not burdened by analytical or interpretive operations. Instead, it is delivered effortlessly, immediately through insight via the body, sensations, emotions, intuitions. In other words, we can naturally 'savor' ('sapere') it with no need of intellectual labor. In fact, the survey tells us that thinking takes us away from the extraordinary and that we should instead put our energy in being vividly and intensely present, attentive, and emotionally involved (Bermudez 2010b, 2008). Such an approach promises us a profound fulfillment that is being continuously born out of a simultaneous appreciation of beauty and gaining of insight.

In this light, Nehamas and de Bottom's argument that beauty goes hand in hand with happiness is true but not comprehensive enough. Less obvious is the connection of beauty to 'love' that Plato and Perez-Gomez refer to, although such recognition may be *the* gained insight (as many of the entered words and shared stories suggest). Other views tying beauty to the divine (Aquinas), emotionality (Romanticism) and so on, find some support in the data. A fair analysis of any of these philosophical hypothesis would take too long and this is not the time or place to do it. In this sense, this study only begins to define the empirical space from which we can now test hypothesis. Yet something specific can be said: the survey data indicates that the architectural extraordinary hardly follows the aesthetic model advanced by either Modernity or Postmodernity, where detached, analytical criticism is the way to engage the work/world. Instead, we see the extraordinary providing lasting and significant glimpses of being, existence and beyond through the hybrid means of embodiment, emotion, intuition, and (also but not solely) intellect. It is an aesthetics centered around a phenomenology of 'sapere', not 'cognōscere'. For extraordinary aesthetics, we should trust more the philosophy of our forefathers than the one of our contemporaries.

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