

# **TOWARD AN AESTHETIC OF WONDER**

Prem Chandavarkar  
CnT Architects, Bangalore, India  
[prem@cnt.co.in](mailto:prem@cnt.co.in)

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I examine three propositions:

1. The realm of the sacred is to be accessed through wonder rather than rationality.
2. A perspective of wonder implicates specific dimensions of architectural aesthetics.
3. It is possible to rigorously learn wonder.

## **Wonder versus Rationality in Accessing the Realm of the Sacred**

I will use here Huston Smith's definition of the sacred as a primordial tradition common to all spiritual traditions<sup>1</sup> that recognizes that:

- a) Reality is not one-dimensional but has multiple levels.
- b) These levels are not disconnected but are different dimensions of the same reality.
- c) Each of these levels is not an abstract construct and is experientially knowable.

It is not important at this stage to explicitly define the levels of this hierarchy; what matters is the implication of reality being hierarchically structured. Michael Polanyi points out that a hierarchical structure has certainty at one end, but the other end is less explicit and invariably involves transcendence.<sup>2</sup> An example is the system of speech that hierarchically involves the levels of (1) voice production; (2) phonetics; (3) syntax; and (4) meaning. Each level has rules that govern its own operations, but also has boundary conditions that leave itself open to modification by a higher level. Higher levels cannot be reductively described in terms of the lower level. The more one rises in the hierarchy, the more intangible the level is; the more the intangibility in the range of these hierarchies, the more meaningful it is; and the more meaningful it is, the higher the sense of transcendence.

To continue this thread, one can examine the hierarchical structures of consciousness of the embodied self from the bottom up as (1) *Body* (sensory awareness); (2) *Mind* (recognition); (3) *Ego* (sense of "I" versus "You"); (4) *Emotions* (likes and dislikes); (5) *Intellect* (causes and effects, conceptualizations); (6) *Will* (meaning and purpose); and (7) *Identity* (awareness of the self).<sup>3</sup> These levels form the sense of self as constrained by the individual body, and form the threshold for attending the world that lies beyond the limits of the body.

We do recognize a world beyond our own body: that there are other beings and things; that they seem to have life and intelligence; and that this intelligence is not random but has order, meaning, purpose and identity. The key question is how one considers these levels beyond one's body. Are they to be seen as separate from the body? Or are they to be considered as forming a unity with the body (a wider reality of which the body is only a part)? To perceive the world in terms of the former question is to constrain our understanding to the mundane. To perceive it in terms of the latter is to admit the sacred.

Our education trains us to use rationality to collapse all understanding to the level of explicit intellectual structure. As argued earlier, in a hierarchical system the higher levels tend to be intangible, so to construct a model that overemphasizes explicit intellectualization is to filter out tacit experiential awareness from the model. And in the process emotions, meaning, purpose and identity are also sanitized out of the model. In addition, this filtering creates a schism between the experiencing self and the universe beyond that self's body.

To heal this breach is to admit the intangible, so it can only be achieved through tacit experience rather than explicit intellectualization. To be at one level of reality, be aware of higher levels, and to sense the unity between one's immediate experience and these higher levels is to know the realm of the sacred. And to be overwhelmed by the joy, inspiration and immense and rich potential in the higher levels is to be consumed by wonder.

Wonder comes naturally to us as children, but we lose it as we grow up. This is partially because the overwhelming novelty of events tends to reduce with experience, but also because our education system pushes us toward rational certainty as it devalues tacit awareness as idiosyncratic and subjective, and therefore evading any standard of rigor. But to devalue an experiential foundation as lacking rigor is a judgment that is possible only when intellectualism is the sole qualifying standard that is permitted. Can one judge this on the qualifying standard of experience and seek experiential certainty and rigor? I will return to this question in the last section on learning wonder, pausing to look at the implications on architecture once we base the quest on experiential awareness.

### **Architecture and the Aesthetic of Wonder**

Rationality seeks validation in standards of objectivity, and therefore foregrounds origins from beyond the subjective self. As a result discussion on architectural aesthetics tends to look to origins of meaning such as the intentions of the architect and the tectonic qualities of form and space. But an analysis that privileges experiential awareness will need to foreground origins generated by the experiencing self, privileging the perspective of the *inhabitant*. An aesthetic of wonder, as seen from this angle, will be founded on:

1. The Exactitude of Art: We tend to believe that art offers us meaning, but what it really offers is an exactitude which stands in resistance to the entropic mess of everyday life. It offers a refuge of inhabitation that allows one to take a measure of one's existence.
2. The Sensation of Space: We are always in some way *within* architectural space, and can therefore never see all of it in front of our eyes.<sup>4</sup> The space has to have qualities that allow us to build a concept of it in our mind, and only then can we comprehend it. We must value this holistic sensation of space to the inhabitant over the communication of an idea, thus foregrounding how space responds to the position and scale of the human body.
3. Layering and Hierarchies: Spaces should be layered in a hierarchy of scales so that the extent to which one conceives the space can vary depending on the mood of the inhabitant.
4. Stillness: This occurs when the overall form and its details exhibit the same spirit, so that the same presence offers itself even if one's gaze or body is moving.
5. Extension: This sets up the boundary conditions of a space to demonstrate that it is not a thing in itself, but always unified with larger hierarchies of realms, scaling eventually to the level of infinity (typically depicted by nature and light).
6. The Aesthetic of Absorption: Meaning is a process that begins after the architect's job is over, and is primarily a product of the way in which architecture is inhabited, day after day, year after year. This inhabitation breeds memories which make the place meaningful, and design has to facilitate a culture of inhabitation that is aligned with the capacity for architecture to absorb memory.

### **Learning Wonder**

An educational structure that prioritizes wonder will depend on experiential rigor and seek:

1. Humility: One should see the subject of inquiry as an entity that is greater than any individual, believing that to express yourself is to use your body as a channel through which this greater entity can flow.<sup>5</sup>

2. Practice (Riyaz): Training in Indian classical music is based on the idea of *riyaz*: a pattern of rigorous, immersive and repetitive practice.<sup>6</sup> One may conceptually understand the position of a note through understanding scales. But by repetitively experiencing the note greater levels of subtlety are revealed, the note positions itself with greater exactitude, till one day it hits the spot and the existence of the self, the note and the composition are unified into a single reality. Without *riyaz* this would remain an abstract process, limited in its expressive power with the self condemned to a distance.
3. Stillness and Subtlety: Recognizing unity across the hierarchical levels of consciousness is like trying to look into deep water: if there is churn at any level vision is limited, but if every level is perfectly still one can see clearly from top to bottom. Similarly one cannot have churn at any level of consciousness. The mind has to be trained to be still to recognize the subtle dimensions of existence that are essential to exactitude
4. Reason: Shifting the foundation from reason to experience does not mean that reason no longer has any role to play. Reason critiques experience and experience critiques reason, and through this conversation one develops the essential capacity to *discern* what is authentic.
5. The Guru: The word 'guru' means 'dispeller of darkness'. The teacher is not seen as an expert with a privileged relationship with knowledge, for the truth has an independent existence within each person. The teacher is that person who guides the student in how to lift the veil of darkness over his/her self to reveal the hitherto unperceived light that has always been shining within.
6. Conversations and Notations: Notation is a way of taking your experience out of yourself and placing it in front of you so that you (and others) may step back and converse with it. This conversation is crucial in ensuring that one produces learning; recognizing that learning is not a process that slots neatly into instructional modules.<sup>7</sup>
7. Spaces of Engagement: A system of learning that depends primarily on reason will construct spaces of engagement (such as the classroom, studio, or design practice) as vehicles for promoting the delivery of individual genius. It will foreground the question "What is my philosophy of architecture?" A system that depends primarily on wonder will rephrase this question as "How can architecture, as an entity that is greater than me, speak through me?" It will seek spaces of engagement that facilitate experience, practice and conversation.
8. Innocence: Innocence is the ability to suspend all pre-condition, judgment and ideology to achieve the liberation of reveling in experience in its pure essence of being. This is different from the innocence of a child, as it involves a threshold that must be crossed, where one learns to sustain this essence in the face of the vicissitudes of life. The primary mission of education should shift from the certification of sophistication to the preservation of innocence.

---

<sup>1</sup> Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1992

<sup>2</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/mp-transcendence.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Here too, the recognition of a hierarchy is of more importance than the precise delineation of the levels of the hierarchy

<sup>4</sup> See Erno Goldfinger, *The Sensation of Space*, *The Architectural Review*, November, 1941

<sup>5</sup> All creative expression arises from this sense of flow. For a detailed study see: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper & Row, New York, 1990

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that training in other traditions of classical music is not based on this idea of practice. I will confine my remarks to the Indian tradition here solely because that is the tradition with which I have the greatest familiarity.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed exposition on learning versus instruction see: John Tagg, *The Learning Paradigm College*, Anker Publishing, San Francisco, 2003