

“Alchemy and Material Transfiguration In Architecture”
Lori Ryker

Abstract

My position is that the current methods used to educate students of architecture are not comprehensive in respect to beauty and reduce the issue to the superficial role of material “icing.” In this paper I employ the primary concepts and issues Jacques Maritain contends with in his book *Creative Intuition In Art and Poetry* to support my premise that beauty in the realm of architecture cannot be achieved through the current mode of aesthetic thought. In addition, I make a case for the consideration of beauty, particularly Maritain’s understanding of beauty, as an alternative to the idea of aesthetics used in contemporary schools of architecture.

Background

Throughout history, Western civilization's greatest philosophers have claimed that architecture is an art. Architecture, they perceived, like other arts, has a cultural responsibility for conveying the ethics, morality, sense of time and place, and the particular culture's expression of their relationship to the world. As an art, architecture is also believed to have the power to convey the transcendent nature of the world; humankind's spiritual relation to the world. Plato, Hegel and Heidegger, to name a few, all believed the transcendental nature of the world was captured in beauty. In early Western civilization the architect's responsibility to beauty led to a specific type of training that was borne out of a pre-scientific construct for knowledge. It was a knowledge, we can speculate, that considered the world as intrinsically bound, and with reciprocal relationships. Inherent to this understanding of the world is the belief that all things sensed, needed to be contended with not only physically, but also spiritually. Through the spiritual, everyone and everything was bound together through the transcendental nature of the world. This conception of the world provided for the belief that beauty, when sensorially experienced, bound us spiritually to the world. William Desmond¹ explains that the ancient Greek's understanding of the beautiful called upon "receptive powers of the psyche" that opens beauty "out to something ingredient in the nature of being itself." Something is not beautiful because of our interpretation of the thing or event, but because the thing or event " precipitates our distinctive response." "Platonic aesthetic beauty" Desmond claims, "has metaphysical meaning, revealing to man something ultimate about being itself."

Since the renaissance, architectural training has been ensconced in a different basis for knowledge. A basis born out of scientific method. The rise of scientific and logical thought, and the educational systems that adopted this model for knowledge, left behind the previous basis for knowledge, considering only objective, physical aspects of the world. We still base our architectural education on these foundations today. Through this model students are trained to understand that architecture is achieved by the assembly of parts, rather than out of an integrated and inseparable whole. These parts roughly stated are: functional need, structural integrity and beauty. Perceiving architecture as an assembly of parts has reduced the preoccupation with the inseparable whole, allowing certain parts to be left behind. Typically what is left behind and not integrated is beauty. Architecture, when developed through this method of fractured parts, is disengaged from its responsibility as art.

Typical contemporary architectural practices and educators are at a loss not only for understanding the role of beauty, and how it comes about but also for the means to teach about beauty. Beauty, unlike function and structure, cannot be understood in explicitly conceptual terms and through scientific methods. Universities have played a large part in our current lack of understanding beauty by indoctrinating the view that beauty can be understood through a scientific study we have come to call aesthetics. Aesthetics, a term introduced by Baumgarten in the 1700's, popularized during the Enlightenment, and incorporated into

the Ecole des Beaux Arts, eventually filtered through all schools of architecture. This is not to say that all considerations of beauty via aesthetics is not valuable. But the assumption in the universities that aesthetics is the primary way to study beauty has led to a less than comprehensive understanding of beauty in contemporary times and quite a different focus than offered by the Greek philosophers. In addition, the contemporary view of aesthetics is distinctly different from the early Enlightenment view of aesthetics. Hegel's "Aesthetics" presents a good example of the early view. Hegel was interested in drawing the world together, sensually and spiritually, and for him beauty was perceived as a connector between these aspects of our world. However, contemporary aesthetics does not view beauty as a way to draw the world together and instead concentrates on the object, the physical aspects and the self referential nature of the thing made. In the crudest terms, through the current view of aesthetics, it is believed that beauty can be broken into its instrumental and finite parts. These parts can be comprehended, and reassembled through the application of concepts. Such concepts for architecture are proportion and scale. We come to believe that these activities of aesthetics, by way of the assembly of their components, result in beauty. Beauty, we believe, can be made out of these parts because aesthetics, as a study, addresses only the senses. The student of architecture is trained to understand aesthetics, and the creation of beauty, as so many pieces of material glued together "so as to be pleasing to the eye." But there are problems determining what these parts are. The university instructor does not know how or what to instruct the student of architecture in for the creation of beauty. In order to answer these inherent questions we must also ask ourselves if beauty in architecture is only that which is pleasing to the eye?

Beauty is not only an issue of concern for misdirected academic instruction. Beauty, and our comprehension of it, bares directly upon how we exist in the world; the fulfillment of our lives. As Plotinus said, "Without beauty, what would become of being?" The loss of understanding how one makes beauty is exhibited in the waning exemplars of human made beauty. Aesthetics, by addressing only the object and its material properties, does not successfully find beauty in its work.

An Alternative Voice

Jacques Maritain² offers an alternative way to understand beauty, and its relation to the world and our making. By examining the relationship of poetic intuition, beauty and art Maritain makes clear the intent of beauty, and the artist's relationship to beauty. He claims that intellectual activity is inextricably bound to creative activity, and that the relationship of humankind to the natural world is required for beauty. Poetic intuition, which everyone has, is at the heart of these activities. It is rooted in the spiritual unconsciousness, while being another aspect of the intellect,³ Maritain contends that creative activity in the form of creative intuition, responds to the natural world, and by way of the intellect poetic expression is conceived and made legible by the artist through a particular medium: words, rock, paint. A poetic expression is the object from which beauty is its transcendental correlative. We do not make beauty, but

we make poetic expression. Maritain claims that poetic expression is most purely manifest through poetry. Poetry is most pure in its expression because it creates without the necessity of material. Poetry is a direct translation from the intellect into the world through words. Words, being purely human figural constructs, can be selected for their most exact communication, and lack the worldly bounds of materials such as availability and cost. As an expression of one's experience in the world, poetry does not rely on the transfiguring of the material. However, beauty is not made from the mere assembly of words or material. Beauty, is transcendental, and does not lie in the material of the product. Recall a poem which has moved you in some indescribable way, in a way that makes sense of the world in its few specific words. I recall a poem by W.S. Merwin⁴:

*I want to tell what the forests
were like
I will have to speak
in a forgotten language*

Maritain would claim that this indescribable way, is the experience of beauty. Is the poem's beauty found in the words: forgotten or forest? No. These words lose this particular experience of beauty when not in the product of the poem. Beauty is not achieved through an assembly of parts: words, paint, stone. In the same way a poet's medium are words for the art of poetry; we must recognize that function and structure, in addition to building materials, are the primary medium for the art of architecture. If this is so, then where is the beauty? The beauty is made present in the material of the product, by way of the poetic intuition, required for both experiencing and making. The poetic intuition is what drives one to make poetic expressions. Beauty transcends the material. It is "connatural" to poetic expression, but not contained in the material expression. Maritain claims that "[b]eauty cannot be attained except as in a mirror...Poetic intuition is not ordained to beauty as to a specifying end or object, it only wants to manifest the inwardness of the poet together with the things which resound in it - and if poetic intuition is really expressed it will inevitably be expressed in beauty, even without meaning it, for any real expression of poetic intuition derives from integrity, consonance, and radiance....In other words the work is a product; but its beauty is not a product that impregnates it as with a perfume or invests it as with a garb or an armor; the beauty of the work, which inherently results from its very production, is in its very being a particular mirroring of a transcendental or an infinite and a gift from the spiritual source- poetry - in which the production originates...that art engenders in beauty, produces in beauty, not that it produces beauty."⁵ From this explanation we can understand that to direct activities toward the achievement of beauty in a material product or as an assembly of parts is to misunderstand the nature of beauty. The maker must work through poetic intuition to arrive at an integrated product. Maritain, as have previous philosophers, calls the integrated product art. Work developed from poetic intuition, results in poetic expression, and subsequently we are provided the experience of beauty. This is quite a different way of understanding how to work and make architecture. It is distinctly different from the scientific method. Through Maritain's philosophy, we can understand that although making and beauty are naturally related, beauty can not be

achieved through the current understanding of aesthetics or scientific methods. Beauty, rather than an ingredient of a successful building, is a product of an inseparable expression. It is the mirroring of poetic expression. Without poetic intuition preoccupying the making there will be no beauty. We must look anew at the issue of beauty, our relationship to the sensual world, and ask ourselves what have we forgotten. We must find a new way to teach about beauty, “we must forget to remember.”

The case for being

Through the senses we experience and come to know aspects of the things in our world. We train students of architecture to be keenly aware of their sensual experiences. But we must also encourage them to be aware of their spiritual experiences. Because beauty, when experienced, is the simultaneous experience of the spiritual and sensual. This is the reason that Maritain claims that beauty is both aesthetic and transcendental, both sensually experienced and spiritually known. In other words, beauty’s capacity is both specific and universal. By beauty’s necessity we make through the creative intuition, which produces art, because “the more it [the intellect] becomes acquainted with the works of human art, the more it becomes aware of the transcendental and analogous nature of beauty....drawing us toward the sources of being.”⁶ By way of poetic expression; the art makes evident the spiritual nature of *being* in the world. The making is necessary, for without making, the maker floats in the world, as if in no place. The thing made is the marking of the maker’s relationship to the world.

In order to address the wholeness of being and beauty, architects must address metaphysics. However, being is rarely addressed in classes of architecture nor are philosophy classes integrated into the curriculum because metaphysics has been dismissed as an aspect of the world that need not preoccupy the minds of those whose product is material. But architecture, as has been explained here, is not wholly physical. We must address the metaphysical side by side with the physical. We must consider both spiritual and sensual through their correlating systems of thought and experience. How we are in the world, how we *be*, is critical to our relationship with one another, and the rest of the world. *Being* is the moment we live, both physical and metaphysical, sensual and spiritual. Being, our sense of belonging and connection to the world, is the critical reason that architects must strive for beauty in their work.

Material Transfiguring

As stated previously, Maritain believed that poetry is the purest form of art, because it’s product does not rely on the material of the world for its making. The medium of poetic expression for architecture, the collage of materials we call architecture, creates dual problems for architecture. Materials belong not only to the physical world but also to civilization’s constructs. This duality creates endless problems by means of an infinity of compromises to poetic expression. Architecture has a unique problem because it is used as

an economic and political agent for industrial and post industrial consumption. The fractured product of architecture, envisioned as a cultural tool, and without beauty, is devoid of spirit. Once reduced to a profane product architecture is primed for cooption into secular consumerism. Architecture, in the exclusive context of science and technology and through its secular role, becomes just another product for service to compete for greater shares in the consumer market. In addition to the problems brought on by civilization's constructs, there is the transfiguring that trees and rocks and other "natural" materials are put through in order to change them into commercially standardized and abstract items. Once abstracted these materials, stripped of their "naturalness" and world memory,⁷ become materials without animation or life, history and context. They are stripped of the perceptually explicit relationship to *being*. When we are surrounded by an artificial and abstract world, built from these materials, as we are today, we are all but anaesthetized from our world. In our contemporary structures we experience the world as secular fractured parts and pieces, without any comprehension of our connection to the natural and authentic world beyond the walls of our cities, and minutely held in the blades of grass disguised in orderly suburban yards. Not only have architects given up caring for our sense of *being*, architects have lost the understanding that architecture is to be the product of the creative intuition. In the end, the concentration on the secularly material aspects of the world, divorces architecture from any expression of the transcendental in our world. Our buildings are mere "shelters" for physical existence. We shut out our relations with the world that would rekindle these spiritual relations by shutting out things such as light, and wind. We disengage ourselves from the world by the industrial transfiguring of the materials of the world. In the end, architects use the world against itself, and humankind.

Alchemy

There has been a group who dealt with the relationship of the physical to the spiritual that architects may learn from today. The alchemists⁸ understood quite well the relationship of the body to soul, the sensual to spiritual in the world. They also understood that the divorce of the whole, creates a schism in *being*. For the alchemists, their concentration on changing matter from one body to another, hinged on a quest for proving that the universe is made up of one primary substance, and that it has both physical and spiritual components. Their experiments were about proving that we share the same world as the tree, and are bound to it physically and spiritually. The alchemists did not distinguish scientific study from spiritual enlightenment. They believed that both were a part of the same world, and should be considered equally in their explorations. For architects, the product of the creative intuition relies on the consideration of not only the material of the world but also the intrinsic spirit of the world. Without the consideration of the whole of the world, we perpetuate the schism of body and soul, subject and object, never comprehending or experiencing the wholeness with which we and the world are made. Maritain claims, that the experience of art in the world prepares us for being, that through experiencing poetic expression we grow with the desire to become more acquainted "with the works of human art", eventually becoming aware of the

transcendental and analogous nature of beauty” through art. If this is true, architecture, as an art, is socially responsible for providing beauty. Working through creative intuition and regaining the sense of the world’s wholeness is critical for the achievement of architecture and society’s well *being*.

In Conclusion

In order to rescue architecture from superficial relationships to the world, we must first understand that architecture, and subsequently beauty is not made without creative intuition. Secondly, we must understand, as did the alchemists, the great responsibility architects have when choosing to modify the nature of any preexisting thing of our world. The responsibility and care of the modification from one sense of being to another is critical for transcendental beauty and our communing, our own *being*. We can remember, from art history classes, that Michelangelo did not take any random piece of stone to sculpt, he considered the stones, selected the stone and comprehending its sense of being through poetic intuition took the responsibility to transform the stone’s being from one state into another. These stones spoke to him, and he knew what to make of them. This may sound like an absurd idea in today’s profession of architecture, and it is. It is absurd because we have built a civilization that in no way considers the world to be intrinsically sensual and spiritual. The careless transformation from one state to another has played a large role in the cultural condition of Western civilization, allowing the blatant conquering of the natural world, humankind’s domination, and the control and indiscriminate use of the world. It is an absurd idea because, predominately, the profession is not making architecture today, only buildings, not art. Once this distinction is understood, we comprehend that the product of architecture, as art, is not an absurd idea, but requires a careful transformation of material, inspired by the creative intuition, as a gathering together, a holding, required for the sheltering of our *being* with the *being* of the world.

¹ Desmond, William. *Art and the Absolute: A Study of Hegel’s Aesthetics*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986) PP. 123-125.

² Maritain, Jacques. *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953)

³ *ibid.* pp. 108-112.

⁴ Merwin, W.S. *The Rain In The Trees*. (New York: Knopf, 1992) “Witness” p. 65.

⁵ Maritain, p.173

⁶ *ibid.* p. 166

⁷ We understand the world and our relation to it by the continuous inherent history we and other things carry forth through our being. However, if our formal characteristics are stripped from our body, not only do we or the thing stand to lose its relationship to the world, the perceiver of the thing loses the understanding of it to the world, its inherent being.

⁸ Berman, Morris. *The Reenchantment of Art*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981) p. 100. Also see Redgrove, H. Stanley *Alchemy: Ancient and Modern* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1969)