

THE SUSPENSION OF TIME

On time. On the ineffable detention of time

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“Burnt Norton” is the first of the Four Quartets, one of T.S. Eliot’s key works. In its first six lines, the word “time” appears seven times with surprising reiteration:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

And Benedetto Croce seems to sum it up even more concisely: "all history is contemporary history, it is the past seen through the eyes of the present".

This time that poets and philosophers express so well, the time of Eliot and Croce, is the time that architectural creation wants to capture. Because this time is the central theme of architecture.

In this text, I would like to analyze why some architectural spaces are able to stir up such an inner commotion within us. Although it may seem an abstract concept or theme more properly pertaining to poetry or philosophy, this concept of suspension of time occurs with an especially real and palpable force only in architecture. After all, architecture is the only artistic creation that surrounds us, that we enter into and that we move around in. When we stand before or inside certain architectural spaces, time seems to stop, suspend itself, and become almost tangible.

There is no denying the profound emotion—the suspension of time—one feels on entering the Roman Pantheon. There time stands still and we are moved. I still shed tears every time I go back. I often mention to people the deal I’ve made with my students for many years now. When they visit the Pantheon they have to send me a postcard, a cartolina illustrate with a picture of the inside, telling me whether or not they cried. All of those who have written have cried. I’ve amassed a good collection by now.

I will never forget how, when my building for the Caja Granada headquarters had just been inaugurated, one of the people who worked there recalled having wept on entering the central space for the first time. Right there, at that very instant, time stood still. I must confess that, years later, every time I return there and enter that space, my heart still skips a beat, and even more so if the sun, up to its usual tricks, alights upon and strolls over its alabaster walls.

Architects must deepen their understanding of the architectural mechanisms that make these results possible. I’m still trying to reach that perennially elusive beauty that every artistic creation seeks to embody. And this is what architecture is all about.

It might be helpful to consider how architecture, in comparison to other art forms, is the only one whose creations are capable of physically enveloping man, its protagonist. The

experience of being able to stand inside a work of art in flesh and bone pertains solely to architecture, and is impossible to produce in the other arts.

If a space built with gravity, with materials possessing an unavoidable gravitational weight is tensed by light –light which itself builds time– so that we are moved through the physical, beyond the physical, then we can properly say that we have attained architecture. Architecture happens when we succeed in stopping time in the constructed space: when it seems that time itself is suspended.

Time is a central theme of architecture: time that is structured by light; capable of stopping our hearts or tying them in a knot, much more than the forms of a passing style or the exquisite adornments of the best construction. *Utilitas* and *Firmitas* only acquire their full meaning when *Venustas*, Beauty, is attained.

Time in Architecture can be analyzed from many perspectives and that is what we are about to explore.

THE TIME OF UTILITAS. FUNCTION

There is a time that refers to the capacity of ensuring that the function for which the building was erected will endure. A time relative to function: use, utility, *Utilitas*, of making a building carry out the functions for which it was commissioned and, moreover, of being adaptable to different functions over the long haul. When I was a student we learned this in terms of the “architecture of cases” versus the “architecture of boxes.”

The case meets the requested function exactly, but it can’t be used for anything else. A knife sheath cannot be used for a spoon and vice versa. If the question is changed, the answer is no longer valid. This tends to happen when, in addition to the specific nature of the function, the dimensions are bound within certain settled parameters. A social housing building, even if it is resolved to the last millimeter, will most certainly not serve for any other purpose.

The box, in contrast, can admit many different functions over time. Obviously, the larger the size of the space, the greater the number of different functions it can allow. Boxes endure the test of time better than cases do.

Time is kinder to boxes than cases. And kinder still to large boxes rather than smaller ones. Berthold Lubetkin was right when he proudly proclaimed that he did no more than build boxes, shoe-boxes in concrete. Boxes, little boxes, big boxes.

THE TIME OF FIRMITAS. CONSTRUCTION

There is another time that speaks of physical duration, of the effective combination of materials that culminates in the most perfect construction of architecture. *Firmitas* means firmness, strength, and a well-constructed building will be able to last many years and remain on solid footing for a long time. All of the great masters of the past have been, furthermore, great builders.

I am particularly interested in the duration of the foundations of some buildings throughout history. The ruins, the worthwhile ones, are the traces of the architecture that was built there. And in them you can clearly read the architect's idea. They provide the ground plan of that architecture that has been able to remain in time.

THE TIME OF VENUSTAS. BEAUTY

The time of Venustas is that which can be suspended, that stops when we encounter beauty. It is the most difficult to control, but for that reason it is what most interests us.

All great writers on architecture have sought to come up with a few universal rules that would not only serve to transmit certain forms or styles, but also emit a beauty capable of moving men deeply on viewing their works.

It is a difficult enterprise. Just as happens with many excellent cookbooks in which nothing is spared to provide every last detail and consideration regarding a recipe, the exquisite dish still requires a skilled and passionate chef. No recipe can guarantee the quality of the cooking. The same thing is true in architecture; one needs a good head, a good hand and one has to have a talent for it.

THE TIME OF MEMORY. PERMANENCE

Another thing is the time that the building is capable of remaining in men's memory: a built work's resistance to oblivion, or in other words the thing that secures its trajectory into architectural history, which has little to do with current fashion or passing fame. Those of us who are no longer children have seen lofty names and works that mean nothing today. The phenomenon, controlled and exaggerated by the press, still works at full strength. Many of the names that make up today's architectural "A-List" are sure to disappear tomorrow, their fame short-lived. They will never remain in men's memory.

But there are other, quieter sorts of architecture that are much more eloquent and capable of transcending our tendency to ephemerality. Above and beyond fashion and vanity, our aim should be to erect more profound architecture for history. Such architecture has a different rhythm, and belongs to truth and beauty in fullest sense.

The time of memory –of permanence– is the "difficult desire for duration" [le dur desir de durer] which Paul Eluard spoke of poetically and which is so profoundly rooted in the will of every creator: the will to transcend. Picasso put it so eloquently: "I am tired of being modern. Now I want to be immortal".

And it is memory that enables us with the passage of time to value more highly those works of architecture that are truly worthwhile. In that wonderful volume *War of Time* by Alejo Carpentier, time passes simultaneously backwards and forwards. Carpentier manipulates time in such a way that only the novel, imagination guided by memory, can achieve; so it is that on his death, Don Marcial at the feet of Ceres, starts going back in time, living his life backwards to his birth. Sentences such as "the furniture was growing taller" and "when the furniture had grown a little taller still" and then: "but now time passed

more quickly...” are Carpentier’s tricks of the trade to explain this backward progression of time.

Doesn’t something similar occur when we return after a long period of time to some of the best artistic creations and suddenly we understand them perfectly? Not only that, they seem even better than they did before. So it is that, like Marcial in War of Time, I read the poems of Horace and Virgil with so much more pleasure than I did when obliged to read them as a child. I used to learn and now I learn too. And I enjoy. And here and now, just like that, time appears to stand still.

In a very special way this is what occurs with architecture. On my most recent visit to the Pantheon time stood still when that stream of light, travelled across the deep coffers of its bare dome at something other than physical speed and I felt it with much greater intensity than on the first occasion many moons ago. Thus, we architects must remind ourselves that the possibility of stopping time, of halting the sun as Joshua did, is something that we are capable of, just as we are capable of creating something that transcends us.

HISTORY

There are many buildings in History with that special capability of causing us to lose our sense of time.

The Roman Pantheon is the example par excellence. Well built, and a perfect embodiment of the universal function endowed to it by its creator, the Pantheon is also overwhelmingly beautiful. All of the great creators have understood that when they have been inside. Suffice it to quote Henry James when he recounts the memorable scene of Count Valerii kneeling inside the Pantheon as the sun struggled through the heavy clouds above with the rainwater making the light from on high material. Exquisite. Or Piranesi’s engravings of the Pantheon that should be in the libraries of all architects.

And if I were to give just one example of contemporary architecture, it would be Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House. A small, white, sublime piece, capable of giving continuity not only to space but also to the history of architecture. It belongs, with its radical beauty, to an architecture without time, capable of generating, like the Pantheon, the desired suspension of time.

THE BLUE-EYED ROTHKO

Every time I enter the Olnick Spanu family home in Manhattan my heart skips a beat: there in front of me, I see a painting by Rothko, my favorite painter, in an unusual size and color. Its small dimensions and blue and green tones completely blow me away. A good friend of mine, with whom I often discuss this painting, tells me it is “the blue-eyed Rothko”. He’s right. I can testify that there, in front of this wonderful painting, time stops, it disappears.

It happens that painting, like architecture, shares this special capacity to carry us away and suspend time. I'll never forget my first visit to London when, with Sáenz de Oíza, my beloved teacher and Spanish master, we stood in front of Velázquez's Venus of the Mirror in the National Gallery. Time, space, desire –everything– disappeared. In that brief infinite lapse we stood as if in divine rapture.

MUSIC CAPABLE OF STOPPING TIME

Peter Phillips, director of The Tallis Scholars, in an interview he gave in early spring 2011, before performing Tomás Luis de Victoria's Requiem in New York, spoke of "suspended time".

In that interview, the words flowed from his mouth as if in a cascade: intensity, sobriety, profundity, precision, simplicity, clarity, but above all, suspension, referring to time. When asked where his musicians had sounded best, he replied: the Sydney Opera House by the master Jorn Utzon. It could not have been otherwise. Utzon's sublime architecture welcoming Victoria's marvelous music.

The concert, devoted entirely to Tomás Luis de Victoria, and commemorating the fourth centenary of the Spanish composer's death, was long, but I would say that for all of us who filled the packed church of St. Mary the Virgin in 46th Street, everything happened in a second. Time stopped there, in the way that only beauty can make possible.

SORT OF DISAPPEAR: CINEMA

And while we could survey all artistic creations and discover that the crux of the matter is always the same, namely reaching man's heart through his head, I am going to limit myself to a couple of examples of how film, the seventh art, is also capable of stopping time.

An unforgettable scene comes to mind: the white plastic bag floating in the air in the film *American Beauty* –something so elemental magically transformed by the work and grace of a young director, Sam Mendes, into a masterful piece. Given the supreme beauty of something so simple, we all cry with Wes Benly and Thora Birch. There, time disappears and our heart dissolves in five infinite minutes.

Of course, *Billy Elliot* expresses it still more clearly in that "sort of disappear" that he repeats twice when the panel asks him what it is that he feels when he dances. With a stroke of genius, Stephen Daldry summed up something as abstract as suspended time in artistic creation so precisely in that short phrase!

THE SECRET OF ARTISTIC CREATION

Architecture, painting, literature, music, and film are, in fact, no more than the creative works of human beings which redeem us and make this life worth living.

Edgar Allan Poe in his “Philosophy of Composition” captured this suspension of time so well:

I kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work universally appreciable. I should be carried too far out of my immediate topic were I to demonstrate a point upon which I have repeatedly insisted: that beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem.

Truth, in fact, demands a precision, and passion, a homeliness (the truly passionate will comprehend me) which are absolutely antagonistic to that beauty which, I maintain, is the excitement, or pleasurable elevation, of the soul.

That “pleasurable elevation of the soul” is precisely the suspension of time that we are referring to here.

Our works go on to “transcend material and limited life”. Stefan Zweig, in that essential text I have quoted so very often, *The Secret of Artistic Creation*, manifests this with such force: “there is no greater pleasure or satisfaction than recognizing that man is also capable of creating everlasting values”.

Works that are worthwhile transcend us; they transcend their creators and no longer belong to us. They already belong to the memory of men.

Paul A.M. Dirac, 1933 Nobel Laureate and one of the great physicists of our time, proclaimed, “Beauty and truth go together in theoretical physics.” Could today’s architects, instead of musing on vanities, concur with the poets, philosophers, and physicists in the primacy of the pursuit of truth, and attempt to actualize this all-too-possible miracle of the suspension of time?

Le Corbusier, in simpler language, spoke of the “unspeakable space,” and on other occasions, of how the “most useful” buildings were those that “fulfilled the desires of the heart.” The master was so very right.

And as we started with one poet, T.S. Eliot, we will conclude with another, William Blake. In his *Auguries of Innocence* he proposes:

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

Eternity, suspended time, is what we would like to achieve with our architecture.