

**MORE ABOUT TIME**

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### Of the ineffable suspension of time

What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know; but if I want to explain it to the one who asks me, I do not know. What I do say without hesitation is that I know that if nothing happened there would be no past time; and if nothing happened, there would be no future time; and if nothing existed, there would be no present time. But those two tenses, past and future, how can they be, if the past is no longer and the future is not yet? And as for the present, if it were always present and did not pass into the past, it would no longer be time, but eternity. If, then, the present, in order to be time, must pass into the past, how can we say to you that time exists, whose cause or reason for being is in ceasing to be, so that we cannot truly say that time exists except insofar as it tends not to be?

St. Augustine of Hippo. Cf. Confessions. XI, 14, 17.

In this speech, St. Augustine clearly unravels for us something as difficult to explain as time. He, who reflected with depth and clarity on time, distinguished with precision between the time of nature and human time.

Regarding the time of nature, he speaks of "the experience of succession, by which things appear and disappear and therefore pass", which is time as duration, and he speaks of time as "magnitude by means of which durations can be compared", which is measurable, controllable, manageable time. It is the time of the sun and of clocks.

Regarding human time, which is more difficult to delimit, he proposes the concept of "distentio animi", the extension or dilation of the soul, to which belongs the "suspension of time" that we would like to achieve for architecture. It is a time that cannot be measured, controlled or dominated so easily. It is the time of the soul.

The time of nature, the physical time, the time of succession, the one that passes, the one that can be measured mathematically, the one that slips through our fingers, the one that slips through our fingers, is the "tempus fugit" of the Greek philosophers. It is the time of the clocks. It is an unstoppable, inexorable time.

On the contrary, human time, which is the one that interests us creators, is a time capable of being stopped. St. Augustine, as a good scholar of time, calls it human time to distinguish it from that of nature. Human time is that which has the capacity to be stopped, to be suspended. It is the time that physically can be very long and pass in an instant. Or that physically is very short and becomes eternal. That is the time that interests us creators, architects. It is the central theme of creation and also of architecture.

When a creator, an architect, is able to stop time in the spaces he creates, then what he has created is truly worthwhile.

When in a creation, in a work, time stops and the "distentio animi" of which St. Augustine speaks is produced, then it is when we can say that this creation is truly valuable. What others aptly call the suspension of time.

Sometimes I catch myself trying to understand how I can be so moved by an abstract painting like the one by Mark Rothko that presides over the triptych of the Phillips Collection in Washington. Or how in front of the small character, the aposentador, who, against the light, stars in the background of Velázquez's *Meninas* in the Prado Museum in Madrid, I feel that time stands still. One or the other: one or the other. In both cases there is an ineffable sponging of the soul, a "distentio animi", and time is suspended.

But, what is an architect doing talking about a subject that could be more proper to Philosophy or Art? I understand more and more clearly that time is the central theme of architecture. And that an architectural space, a work of architecture, is truly valuable when time stops there, when that desired "suspension of time" is produced, the Augustinian "distentio animi". That suspension of time that I have so often repeated occurs in the Pantheon in Rome. And the fact is that, if in painting or with music or with literature this stopping of time occurs, with much more reason, in a very special, more intense way, it occurs in architecture.

## COINCIDENCES

When we work in depth on a subject, this subject appears in each and every thing we do. It seems that the stars conspire for this to happen, because it does. Well, since I began to reflect on time, everything comes to talk to me about time. And with coincidences that are more than surprising.

Thus, after quoting and reciting lately, in order to talk about time, the first of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, I returned to Jorge Manrique's couplets on the death of his father, and I discovered - what a discovery! that not only was time talked about there, but even the order in which it was done, and the spirit, was the same as in the English poet. One would think that Eliot would have read Jorge Manrique before writing his *Burnt Norton*. Because the other coincidence that I discovered in those same days, that of the same coincidences in Fina García Marruz's poem, is more explicable. A cultured Cuban poetess could only have read Jorge Manrique. And, of course, so does Shakespeare in his sonnet CXXIX.

Jorge Manrique in the couplets to the death of his father, his best verses, tells us:

Well, if we look at the present  
as at one point it is gone  
and finish,  
if we judge wisely,  
we will give what has not come  
for the past.  
No one should be fooled into thinking that it will last.  
what awaits

more than lasted what he saw,  
for all things must come to pass  
by such a way.

What is present is PRESENT, what is gone and finished is PAST and what has not come is FUTURE.

And Fina García Marruz, our Cuban poet, expresses it very well in her poem that starts from the hand of Pindar:

Be who you are, which is to be who you were,  
to yesterday, not tomorrow, time insists,  
I know knowing that when you are nothing  
what you wanted will remain of you.

What you are is the PRESENT, what you were is the PAST, and tomorrow and nothingness is the FUTURE.

To top it all off, William Shakespeare in his controversial sonnet CXXIX writes

HAD, HAVING, AND IN QUEST TO HAVE, EXTREME  
[Extreme if had, has, or craves].

Once again the three tenses: past, present and future.

Although, for me, the one who best expresses this blending of past, present and future is T. S. Eliot at the beginning of *Burnt Norton*, the first of his *Four Quartets*.

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past

Time present is PRESENT, time past is PAST, and time future is FUTURE.

It is very curious that the four poems, written in very different times, coincide in almost everything, even in the order of the words. For this same present, past and future time is the central theme of the *Architecture*.

## THESIS

On the occasion of the direction of an interesting Doctoral Thesis on time in *Architecture in Literature and Cinema*, by the Portuguese architect Paulo H. Durao, I have once again reflected on the subject of time. I have always defended that when you are teaching, you learn more than you teach. And this is a good example.

Time is a central theme in architecture. I have so often repeated the axiom that light builds time in architecture that sometimes it seems to me a tautology. But we must also value the capacity of architecture, of the best architecture, to remain in time, to remain

in the memory of men. What I have so often quoted, the "hard desire to last" that Paul Eluard speaks of.

Last year, during my sabbatical year at Columbia, I wrote a long text on the "suspension of time". There I delved into how Architecture has, when it is worthwhile, the ability to stop time, to stop it, and make us move and reach that desired suspension of time. There I quoted the poems of Jorge Manrique and T.S. Eliot and Fina García Marruz that I have not resisted to reproduce again in this text that I would like to be a continuation of that one. I have brought Shakespeare to me at the last good hour.

## TIME AND ARCHITECTURE

When I say that in architecture light constructs time, it is because it is evident that the passage of sunlight through the architectural space gives reason for time. The building thus becomes a kind of clepsydra where, if it is well constructed and articulated, something ineffable will be produced by the passage of light, as when the air passes through the musical instrument and the miracle of music is produced.

Of course, I would like to dominate time by dominating the light as it passes through my architecture.

A few years ago I was commissioned to build the pavilion for the Verona fair, for Pibamarmi, an Italian marble company, and I decided to try to make that movement of light, that passage of time, visible there. And for this I applied a simple trick, an elementary architectural mechanism. After drilling the appropriate holes in the upper trihedron of the box that was that pavilion, we built a mechanical device capable of reproducing the movement of the sun from above. But with a slightly higher speed than the real one. In such a way that the spots of light on the floor and walls moved, slowly but in a perceptible luminous dance. We managed to make the movement of light visible by increasing its speed a little. The central theme, I insist, was to try to dominate light, to dominate time. And by golly we succeeded.

When for my first solutions for the MIA in New York, and then for Porta Milano and lately for a sports center in Zurich, I proposed a large double translucent box with precise perforations for sunlight to enter through them, what I was trying to do was to trap time, summoning that kind of light there, as if it were a cloud. A sort of luminous rain, A sort of illuminated drizzle, as Henry James describes it very well when he writes how the sunlight enters the Pantheon in Rome, when they find there, in the center and on his knees, Count Valerius in a masterful scene of *The last of the Valerii*, a beautiful story of the great American writer.

## CONCLUSION: THE OTHER TIME

Because what really interests me, what every architect should be interested in, is not so much the control of physical time but, above all, the mastery of the other time, human

time, and achieving the "distentio animi", the suspension of time. This is summed up well in the Christian doxology with its "as it was in the beginning, now and forever". An architecture for eternity. Nothing more and nothing less.