

RELENTLESSLY SEEKING BEAUTY

PUBLISHED IN

Rewriting about architecture. Ed. ACB. Madrid, 2020

RELESNTLESSLY SEEKING BEAUTY

Quid est ergo pulchrum? Et quid est pulchritudo?

"Do we perchance love anything but the beautiful? What then is the beautiful? And what is beauty? What is it that allures and unites us to the things we love; for unless there were a grace and beauty in them, they could not possibly attract us to them?"

Saint Augustine, Confessions. IV.13. 44

PURPOSE

After many years working as an architect, teaching as a university professor and putting my ideas on paper, the reason why I pursue my work, I must confess, what I truly seek with all my heart and with all my soul, relentlessly, is beauty.

Can an architect confess this so overtly? Can any creator state outright that what he is seeking is beauty? That is what poets and musicians and painters and sculptors, all artists, do.

But I am convinced that by achieving beauty in architecture with this *"art with necessary reason"*, as the classics used to say, we succeed in making a happier place for mankind.

Beauty, Venustas, together with Utilitas and Firmitas are the three principles whose fulfillment Vitruvius demanded from Architecture. Achieving Venustas, having previously fulfilled the requirements of Utilitas and Firmitas, is the best way of making people happier, which is not only the aim of Architecture but that of all creative work. Sáenz de Oíza explained it better than me in "The Dream of Paradise" when he said:

"I declare that the works of Architecture are instruments for transforming reality into a splendid and regained Paradise from which through our own fault we were expelled and which we have again been readmitted to thanks to the powers of transformation of Architecture".

Venustas, beauty, as a means to regaining Paradise lost, happiness.

Similarly Carvajal spoke of *"orderly beauty"* and his *"desire to create efficiency and beauty at the same time such as only true architects seek to do"*. *"The beauty that we contemplate, being ours, we can use to engender beauty, operatively, in our works. Thus beauty becomes a driving force and not just a consequence"*.

Over the past number of years I have written about many of the masters of Spanish contemporary architecture and, in attempting to summarize all that seemed to me most substantial in them, I developed a collection of texts under the heading of beauty. Bald beauty for Sota, volcanic beauty for Oíza, chiseled beauty for Carvajal, rebellious beauty for Fisac and beauty itself for Barragán. It was my understanding then that beauty was the cause and the aim of the creative work of the masters. And now, with the passage of time, I see it with ever greater clarity. Beauty!

REASON. CERVANTES, GOYA, GOETHE.

Beauty in architecture goes hand in hand with reason. I have defended and still defend reason as the architect's primary and principal instrument to attain beauty. Although this may be true for all the arts, it is imperative for architecture.

Cervantes. Those who have read *Don Quixote* do not usually pause at those exceptional pages in which Cervantes prefaces his universal work. And Cervantes himself confesses that he wrote the prologue later. He also confesses that it is the piece of writing to which he devoted most time. Thus he wrote: *"Idle reader: thou mayest believe me without any oath that I would this book, as it is the child of my brain, were the fairest, gayest, and cleverest that could be imagined"*. So, having made it clear that reason was his principal work tool, he declares his unshakeable desire to capture beauty with it.

When I wrote that architecture is a built idea, I was merely making the claim that architecture, and any creative work, must be the product of thought, of reason, and of understanding, as we read in Cervantes.

And when that reason is missing, then bizarre architectures appear which, being so often *"against nature"*, produce the amazement and the adoration of this ignorant society of ours that bows before these works as if they were the temples of a new religion.

Goya. *"The sleep of reason produces monsters"* Goya tells us in the marvelous aquatint that presides over the office of the President of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando. It is number 43 of the 80 etchings that make up the series of Los Caprichos published by Goya in 1799. Goya also wrote a lesser known text, in the form of a list of comments, the original of which is conserved in the Archive of the Prado Museum. In that text, commenting on etching 43, Goya writes: *"Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters"*, but goes on to say that *"united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels"*. In other words, reason needs imagination to open the doors to beauty. How could we not agree with Goya!

God forbid that I should wish to compare myself with Cervantes or Goya, but it is with this spirit that I have wished and still wish to build all my works: trying to conquer beauty with all my soul, with the weapons of reason and of imagination. With the dour desire to endure as the primary impulse of creation, as Paul Eluard tells us. With the intention of remaining in the memory of humankind. Or as Federico García Lorca said with such simple and lovely words: *"I write to be loved"*.

Goethe. And it would seem that Goethe agreed with Cervantes and Goya in defending reason as the best pathway to beauty when, referring to the painters of his time, he said that *"they must dip their brushes into the bottle of reason"*. Of course, he then adds: *"and architects into Winckelmann"*. Tired of the unreasonable digressions being produced around him, Goethe, with these emphatic words, strongly advocated the recovery of reason.

REASON. PLATO AND SAINT AUGUSTINE.

Reason as man's primary tool in achieving beauty. But what is beauty?

In "The Banquet", Plato proposed beauty as *splendor viri*, the splendor of truth. Over the centuries further nuances were added to this proposal by other thinkers who, carrying on from Plato, fine-tuned his words with the most interesting of accents. Jacques Maritain sums it up very well: *splendor veri*, said Plato, *splendor ordinis*, said Saint Augustine, and *splendor formae*, said Saint Thomas". However, coursing through the veins of all these formulas is an irrepressible ambition to discover deeper explanations. If truth must be at the heart of all architectural creation that aspires to beauty, how could we consider order and form to be less important? Truth, and order and form. "*Form, as we well know, is not something superimposed; it is generated by the very material that reveals itself in it*", as José Angel Valente so wisely wrote when honoring Chillida. How could we as architects not subscribe to form as the "*material that reveals itself in it*" in achieving beauty?

And I cannot resist mentioning here Saint Augustine's considerations in identifying beauty with the Supreme Maker:

*"Late have I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new: late have I loved you.
Lo, you were within me and I was in the external world
and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into the beauty of your
creatures .
You were with me, but I was not with you.
They held me back far from you, which if they did not have their existence in you, had
no existence at all.
You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness.
You were radiant and resplendent, you banished my blindness.
You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you.
I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you.
You touched me, and I am on fire to attain the peace which is yours."*

INVESTIGATION, PRECISION AND TRANSCENDENCE.

Let us not, however, go off on intricate philosophical or theological tangents but return to the route that leads to beauty via architecture.

And indeed, the motto on the shield of the *AA Architectural Association London* says: "*Design with Beauty, Build in Truth*", which is an accurate summary of what we are discussing right now.

On the occasion of his Doctorate Honoris Causa conferral by the University of Oporto, I was asked to write a text on Alvaro Siza in which I enlarged on what I consider to be his three principal qualities as an architect – as a factor of beauty more than anything else – being the three characteristics that I consider as inherent in all architecture that participates in that longed-for beauty: an investigative nature, poetic precision and the capacity to transcend.

Investigative nature. One reaches beauty in architecture in the wake of rigorous, profound work that can and must be considered as a true work of research. Beauty is something profound, precise and concrete that rocks the very foundations of human civilization, which makes time stand still and ensures that the created work remains durable in time and in the memory of man. For beauty in architecture is not something superficial, vague or diffuse, but the work of real research.

Not one of my projects has ever been just “another one”. In each and every one of them I have given my all. Each new project has been and is for me an opportunity to seek and find beauty. Each and every one of them has been conceived and designed and built with maximum intensity. With the intense conviction that architecture is the most beautiful work in the world.

I have said ‘no’ many times to many projects in which I wasn’t given enough freedom or which I considered were not interesting enough to devote my time to them. Some may call this pedantic. But I believe this is the only way that one can create, that one can live creating, living with the intensity that makes this life worthwhile. All creators understand this very well: poets and writers, musicians and painters and sculptors worth their salt.

When Xavier Zubiri was awarded the National Research Prize in 1982, in his acceptance speech he thanked the Spanish people for being capable of understanding that philosophy is a true labor of research. On many occasions I have recommended to my students that they replace the word philosophy with the term architecture in that illuminating text and they will discover that the result is surprisingly close. Because architecture is a true labor of research. And as Zubiri himself advised in his address, quoting Saint Augustine: *“Seek as those seek who still have not found, and find as those find who are still seeking.”*

Poetic precision. And the beauty we are talking about comes to architecture hand in hand with precision – that same precision with which poetry is chiseled. When I defend the poetic nature that all architecture in search of beauty must have, I am not defending something vague and diffuse. I am looking for the precision required in poetry to achieve beauty, which is the same precision that I look for in architecture.

María Zambrano defined poetry as *“the word in harmony with the number”*. What better way to define the precision inherent in poetry. A word, which in one position says nothing special, when placed in the right place is capable of moving us and making time stand still right there. The same is true, with the same precision, in architecture. Because if poetry is words conjugated with precision, capable of moving the hearts of men, so too is architecture with its materials.

Capacity to transcend. Beauty in architecture appears when it is capable of transcending us. Architecture that achieves beauty is an architecture that transcends us. The true creator, the true architect, is the one whose work transcends him. Stefan Zweig explains this so well in “The Secret of Artistic Creation”: *“There is no greater delight or satisfaction than recognizing that man too can create imperishable values and that eternally we remain united to the Eternal through our supreme effort on earth: through art”*. Zweig, like Saint Augustine, links beauty with the Supreme Being.

Moreover, that beauty that transcends us is not something unachievable or simply reserved for a few geniuses. I always try to convince my students that to achieve beauty is a possibility. It is possible to achieve works that are caressed by the “*sound of a gentle whisper*” with which the Divine Presence was confirmed in the sacred scriptures and which in architectural creation is the sign that beauty is present.

In Chapter 19, 11-12 of the *Book of Kings* we read: “*The angel said to the prophet Elias: “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. And Elias went out. And behold, a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper”.* And there in that gentle whisper was the Lord.

So it is that same gentle whisper, the *silibus aurae tenuis* as Saint Jerome writes in the Vulgate, that we architects yearn for our works of architecture, and what all creators long for. It is a clear sign that there is beauty in our works when they are worthwhile.

UTILITAS, FIRMITAS, VENUSTAS.

How could architects not understand that the truth of the idea generated by the fulfillment of function and construction is essential if we are to achieve beauty in architecture? As Vitruvius famously stated: reaching Venustas demanded the prior and exact fulfillment of Utilitas and Firmitas.

Utilitas. “*When it is said that Architecture must be functional, it stops being functional because it only attends to one of the many functions it has*”, Oiza wisely stated.

Ósip Mandelstam at the beginning of his superb “*Dialogue on Dante*” says, referring to poetry: “*Where a work can be measured by the yardstick of narration, the sheets have not been used, that is to say, (if I may be allowed the expression) Poetry has not spent the night there*”. So, in this very pedagogical way, Mandelstam explains the crux of the question in artistic creation. The narrative elements must never be central, nor should they be in architecture. The Utilitas demanded by Vitruvius as a primary condition, the function, must be fulfilled and well accomplished. But architecture is something more, much more, than merely the perfect fulfillment of function. Function in architecture is the narrative.

When Bernini reveals the white marble of the ever so beautiful Proserpina kidnapped by Neptune, above and beyond the description of the scene and beyond the loveliness of the sculpture, the essence of what he is doing here is demonstrating his capacity to make the hard Carrara marble appear soft, morbid. He manages to dominate the material, to bend and tame it; something so much more universal than simply representing a scene. The strong hand of Neptune grips Proserpina’s delicate thigh and this is what is most interesting about this sculpture, how he manages to make what is hard appear soft. Once again the creator is conveying a universal theme that goes far beyond the mere narration of a story, something more than just a sculpture. In each and every one of his architectures Bernini seeks and finds something more than the mere perfect fulfillment of a function or the mere perfect construction. He seeks and finds beauty.

Firmitas. And if in order to achieve beauty in architecture the timely fulfillment of function, Utilitas, is important, no less important is its good construction, Firmitas.

Viollet le Duc in his *“Entretiens sur l’Architecture”* defended the construction, Firmitas, as the fundamental basis of architecture. He called for the judicious and adequate expression of materials in order to attain beauty in architecture. Beauty emanated from a well conceived and well constructed structure. *“Any form that does not adapt to the structure must be repudiated”*. It is the structure which, as I have repeated so many times, in addition to bearing the load and transmitting it to the ground, establishes the order of space; that establishment of the order of space, which is a central theme in architecture.

Venustas. And finally, of course, after the precise fulfillment of Utilitas and Firmitas, as prescribed by Vitruvius, necessarily comes Venustas, beauty.

PANTHEON, ALHAMBRA, BARCELONA PAVILION.

Let us now take a look at some buildings that in the history of architecture have clearly materialized the ineffable beauty that we are discussing here.

Few buildings in history have the quality of making us lose the notion of time like the Pantheon in Rome. Not only does it fulfill its universal function to perfection, not only is it extremely well constructed, but it is also of undeniable beauty. All the great creators have acknowledged that on visiting it. Suffice it to quote Henry James describing the memorable scene of Count Valerio kneeling inside the Pantheon illuminated from above by the light of the moon. The scene is quite beautiful. In that marvelous story, *“The last of the Valerii”*, the Count states: *“This is the best place in Rome. It’s worth fifty St Peter’s”*.

The Pantheon in Rome is an extraordinary container of beauty, of total beauty. If we stand with our backs against the wall inside the Pantheon, we feel that the space still fits inside our visual angle and therefore, inside our heads. Its 43 metres in diameter make possible the miracle that is the result of the application of precise measurements by Agrippa’s architect, Apollodorus of Damascus, to whom it is attributed. The same dimensions were wisely used by Pedro Machuca in the courtyard of the Palace of Charles V in the Alhambra many years later. And the very same dimensions I myself, having discovered the secret, used in the white elliptical patio of my Granada museum.

In terms of Utilitas the Roman temple is universal, so universal that it still remains a space for the future. There is no other architecture in Rome so future-oriented.

And in terms of Firmitas, it is so firm, so well constructed that it always emerged unscathed from the onslaughts it suffered. After its construction by Agrippa it suffered such a great fire that Hadrian had to reconstruct it. And even Domitian and Trajan were involved in it. And nothing happened, as Douglas Adams said of buildings destroyed and built again: *“it is always the same building”*. And indeed the Pantheon, its beauty, is an idea, a built idea, precise in its dimensions and in its proportions and in its light. An enduring and eternal beauty. It is always the same building.

And if we were to speak of the light in the Pantheon we might never finish. Suffice a reference to Chillida embracing the column of light that entered through the oculus, who described the sensation: *“the illuminated air was lighter than the rest of the room”*. Perhaps what he felt, what he touched, was the breath of that *“gentle whisper”*.

Another paragon of Beauty is yet another architecture that was constructed, destroyed and reconstructed so many times while still remaining *“always the same building”*: the Alhambra in Granada. Built by Yusuf I, reconstructed by Mohamed V, and restored by Leopoldo Torres Balbás in the last century. What could I at this stage add to what has been said about the Alhambra? We have to go back to the lyrical passages that those vizier-poets of the emirs of Granada recorded on its walls. Ibn Zamrak puts the words in the mouth of the Alhambra itself, in the decoration of the fountain in Daraxa’s garden, such lovely words as these: *“And he has granted me the highest degree of beauty, so that my shape causes the admiration of the sages”* and without the least hesitation he continues: *“for never have any eyes seen a greater thing than myself, neither in the East nor in the West and in no time has any king, neither abroad nor in Arabia”*. And we would never finish if we were to continue with the beautiful inscriptions of the Alhambra. Beauty speaking about beauty itself.

Then there are the words dedicated by Barragán:

“Having made my way through a narrow and dark tunnel of the Alhambra, I was delivered to the serene, still, solitary and delightful courtyard of the myrtles of this ancient palace. It contained what a well crafted garden ought to contain: nothing less than the entire universe. I have never forgotten that memorable experience and it is not by chance that from the first garden I did in 1941, all those that have followed humbly attempt to echo the immense lesson of the wisdom of the Alhambra of Granada”.

Of course if we are to discuss contemporary architectures full of beauty, capable of resisting time, physical destruction and their reconstruction, then we must speak of the Barcelona Pavilion of Mies van der Rohe, which appears to have been built only yesterday. Or tomorrow.

The Barcelona Pavilion is not only a synthesis of the principal conceptual achievements of modern architecture, but, in addition, a prodigy of beauty. A simple podium in Roman travertine, at just the right height to transport us into another world. A light slab for a roof, perfectly tensed, and supported by cruciform pillars – like dancers en pointe – which, on account of their form and brilliance seem to vanish. Exquisite walls of extraordinary onyx that serve as an epigraph to time with abstract signs moving with the freedom that the continuous space affords. And all with the precise measurements and proportions: nothing over here, nothing over there, and the miracle takes place. Architecture that has conquered beauty forever.

These three examples of architecture are capable of resisting time and reconstruction while always remaining *“the same building”*. Not only that, in all of them time stands still. In all of them past, present and future are there, suspended: time suspended for beauty to emerge. In all of them we observe what Michael Bockemül expressed so well when referring to Rembrandt: *“he converts the conceptual understanding of the canvas into its*

visual perception". These three works of architecture convert so well their conceptual understanding into visual perception.

The three architectures cited here corroborate to what extent architecture is a built idea whose beauty remains forever, it is indestructible.

MIES VAN DER ROHE, LE CORBUSIER, WRIGHT

But I could not end this discourse without mentioning, albeit very briefly, the words of some of the great masters of contemporary architecture, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, who, of course, constantly alluded to beauty as the ultimate goal of architecture.

Mies. Mies van der Rohe spoke prolifically about beauty. In a well-known text of his titled "Build in a beautiful and practical way. Enough of cold functionalism!", he tells us:

"It seems completely clear to me that, on account of our modified needs and the appearance of new mediums that technology has placed at our disposal, we shall attain a new class of beauty...I do not think that we will ever again accept beauty for itself".

And emulating Plato and St. Augustine, he repeats: "Beauty is the splendor of truth".

And he goes on to ask:

"And what in reality is beauty? Most certainly, nothing that can be calculated, nothing that can be measured, but rather something ineffable. In architecture, beauty – which is equally necessary in our time and continues to constitute an objective, as it has been in previous ages – can only be achieved when something more than the mere finality is taken into account."

How could we not agree with him?

LC. And Le Corbusier was not to be outdone in his defense of beauty:

"The architect, by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit. Through forms and shapes, he affects our sense to an intense degree and provokes plastic emotions. Through the relationships which he creates he wakes in us profound echoes, he gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world, he determines the various movements of our heart and our understanding. And it is then that we experience the sense of beauty".

FLIW. And of Frank Lloyd Wright so many things could be said concerning beauty. But let us here just echo the final sentences of the manuscript found on his desk on the day of his death. In it he tells us: "Architecture, the greatest of the arts, begins there where mere construction ends and the dominance of man is imposed". And he goes on to say: "The human being appears dependent on inspiration from a higher source. Because neither through legacy nor instinct does man attain beauty". And he continues: "only when the spirit of man becomes conscious of the need for the benediction of beauty", "beauty attends and architecture appears, the greatest of mankind's arts. And in the same way, sculpture and painting and music." And he finishes with the very explicit

statement: *“When man proposed that beauty would enter his buildings architecture was born”*.

MELNIKOV, BARRAGÁN, SHAKESPEARE.

However following this incursion into the idea of beauty in Mies, Le Corbusier and Wright, for very personal reasons, I cannot leave out three other figures: two architects and a poet.

Melnikov. Konstantin Melnikov is the Russian architect and contemporary of those masters who best defines that beauty that some of us architects strive for: a bare, radical, essential beauty:

“Having become my own boss, I begged architecture in turn to take off her marble dress, remove her make-up and reveal herself as she is, naked, like a young and graceful goddess; and, as corresponds to true beauty, renounce being agreeable and obliging”.

And Barragán. And for similar reasons, once again I turn to the words of Barragán. The universal Mexican maestro expresses himself clearly in relation to beauty in his Pritzker acceptance speech, 1982:

“Mr. Jay A. Pritzker stated in a press release that I had been chosen as the recipient of this prize for having devoted myself to architecture as a sublime act of poetic imagination. Consequently, I am only a symbol for all those who have been touched by beauty. It is alarming that publications devoted to architecture have banished from their pages the words beauty, inspiration, magic, spellbound, enchantment, as well as the concepts of serenity, silence, intimacy and amazement. All these have nestled in my soul, and though I am fully aware that I have not done them complete justice in my work, they have never ceased to be my guiding lights”.

And Shakespeare. I have searched the poets for explicit references to beauty. And I have returned once again to Shakespeare, using a well-known bilingual edition. And when I found that the word beauty did not appear, as in that prestigious edition in Spanish only *“beautiful”* or *“lovely”* figured, I returned to the original English and there is hardly a sonnet in which the word *“beauty”* does not appear, that the traitorous translator did not dare to translate as beauty. Are they so afraid of the term beauty? How could Shakespeare not speak of beauty? He starts his first sonnet with *“That thereby Beauty’s rose might never die”*. And he ends his last sonnet, number 54, with *“O how much more doth Beauty beauteous seem”*. The term Beauty literally invades Shakespeare’s texts with its weapons. No wonder. Just as all of us would like beauty to invade our works.

HUNGER FOR BEAUTY

After all these observations one ought to consider if beauty is or is not necessary, if it is or is not useful. Nuccio Ordine, in his brilliant essay on *“The usefulness of the useless”*, defends the need for useless beauty. Of course we could defend the contrary: that beauty is useful to satisfy the hunger pangs of the soul, the hunger for beauty that is in everyone. Of course beauty is useful, indispensable. Man hungers for beauty. Venustas,

compatible and complementary to the usefulness of function, and good construction, is what really interests us.

Einstein summed it up rather well: *“I am in truth a solitary traveler, and the ideals which have lighted my way and time after time have given me new courage to face life cheerfully, have been Beauty, Kindness, and Truth.”*

BEAUTY, FREEDOM, MEMORY.

Is not memory the deep and inexhaustible well for recognizing where beauty appears? How could someone devoid of memory recognize the fact that something, especially architecture, is part of beauty?

How could an architect be blown away by a Mies van der Rohe if he had not previously known of Palladio, or the Pantheon in Rome, or the Greek temples?

How could a painter admire Rothko without having adored Velázquez and Goya?

Today, fully immersed as we are in the third millennium, we are in no doubt about the depth of beauty in the paintings of Rothko or in the architecture of Mies van der Rohe. It is clear that the concept of beauty has not only opened its doors, but with the guiding hand of understanding it will always remain open.

And evidently all this is largely true of architecture. Nonetheless it may be as difficult for society to understand Rothko well as to really understand Mies van der Rohe. One of the merits of the masters of modern architecture has been managing to convince society that beauty was to be found in their works, that they were the bearers of beauty. Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright knew this very well and tried to do so and almost succeeded.

In short, to capture beauty in architecture, and to be able to demonstrate it as such to society – beauty!

FINALE

In my architecture I have pursued beauty vigorously. I have sought beauty with tireless dedication. I have chased after beauty desperately. I have searched and still search and will continue to search for beauty unto death or until I kill her. To kill her with love when I find her because I have put my heart and soul into the endeavor.

The search for beauty always involves the search for freedom. Seeking in architecture the freedom arising from the radicalism of reason, in accordance with the desirable dream, always leads to truth resulting in beauty. The English poet Keats said it perfectly in the well-known lines of his Ode on a Grecian Urn:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty, –that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”.