

Senses of Architecture

MH Editors

Architecture is first the art of light and of ease, and then of dwelling and belonging. As architecture joins form and inhabitation, its practice involves ideas of style, personal presence, and cultural participation. Probably the most complete tangible art, architecture encompasses the astonishingly simple and the formidably complex or grand, and joins the sensible and intelligible aspects of prosaic life in a single form. The basic movement of architectural work is to gather and open space, giving form to our places of living together meaningfully. In this sense it affects the ways we dwell personally and in common. Although architecture helps to define the time in which we live, the gifts of its forms differ from those of literature or cinematography, for instance: while these open up new realms of tonality and rhythm, architecture uniquely addresses the texture of form.

This is due in part to the special way in which architecture combines creativity with craft: it involves both the anchoring, pivotal foundations of our dwelling places and the personal craft or technique specific to making building which house or shelter human lives and artefacts. The craft of architecture requires a certain tempered spirit of creative construction: art, craft, math, and physics are all involved in the planning and making of a building, and in architecture above all other arts both the process and product must partake of its environment: in no other craft is making tempered so starkly by material and concrete conditions. More completely than the other arts or crafts, architecture gives enduring form to our ways of belonging and being together, and therefore to our sense of intimate and communal meaning. This means that architecture palpably shapes our ways of understanding and participating in community, festivals, worship, study, celebration, initiation, ceremony, relaxation, and enjoyment. Clear examples of this may be seen in the history of Canadian prairie immigrant communities, for whom the primary loci of cultural meaning (gathering places for feasting, commemorating, and worshipping) were among the first things established, just after or even while individual food and shelter were addressed. In conjunction with this immigrant experience in Canada, varied architectures of community and ceremony among First Nations ought to be considered as they continue to inform contemporary cultural life, especially in terms of tradition and negotiating past and present.

Regarding the desired balance between past and present, one might point in particular to the Japanese, who have made of the rapport between building and dwelling an art that informs a long, rich architectural tradition extending in an uninterrupted continuum into the contemporary moment. A deeply-ingrained ethos committed to shared communal existence continues to resonate in every aspect of this culture, and this ethos animates every building block and cell of the social organism that is Japan. In this sense, architecture is understood to be more than art or craft. It is an engine of historical continuity—a way of incorporating that enduring ethos of communal existence into an ongoing process of self-construction and reconstruction. In the West, a strange attitude has been adopted in the face of the modernist revolution initiated in architecture at the dawn of the 20th century. While the philosophy which animated this revolution has been nearly universally panned and discredited by contemporary architectural orthodoxy, its innovations have been just as nearly universally co-opted by a seemingly unstoppable economic machine that threatens to transform architecture from building as a site of dwelling into building as a site of financial profiteering.

In Japan, architects like Ando Tadao have taken up the challenge issued by modernist pioneers Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright, and have instead attempted to retrace the philosophical implications of this modernist narrative of architecture in bringing it into deeper harmony with the long-established history of Japan's building traditions and its ethos of shared communal existence.

To draw our focus closer to home: in Toronto, meaningful articulations between building and dwelling are increasingly jeopardised by *real estate*, which ultimately considers lived space only in terms of market value. Not specific to Toronto, this trend threatens the cultural, social, and political networks that make possible Jane Jacob's concept of 'eyes on the street'. But the historically-important fight for walkable, livable cities has, in a way, become its own worst nightmare, where fetishised lived spaces are traded for profit. This creates an atmosphere of uncertain habitation—whether palpable as homelessness or precarious shelter, proximate as indefinite dwelling, or more general as living space becomes commodity—and a *formlessness* that could be associated with a certain *nihilism* (see our June 2017 issue). New and adaptive approaches to tradition, heritage, conservation, and preservation are tasked with addressing the forces that shape the architectures of our daily experience. To complicate matters, crafting spaces ought not be too heavy-handed at the risk of falling into the trope of the *master planner* and precluding (or at least proscribing) open interaction and dialogue with one's environment. In this light we may consider not only cultural representations of architecture ('In the Skin of a Lion', 'Goin' Down the Road', 'That Time I loved You'), not only the way culture shapes a landscape (Drake's '6'), but also the architectures of culture and the ways in which the built spaces of film, music, literature, theatre, and dance, for example, can become dwellings in their own right.

In each case, architecture renders palpable the most intimate and ultimate registers of cultural meaning in an integrated whole. In his authoritative work *Space, Time, and Architecture*, S. Giedion considers architecture precisely as an art of integration. He states that he is 'concerned with contemporary man's separation between feeling and thinking', which touches 'the unconscious parallelism of methods employed by art and science'. For Giedion, architecture is a prime avenue for considering 'how to bridge the gap between inner and outer reality by reestablishing the dynamic equilibrium that governs their relationship, a matter played out in the way that architecture addresses the 'relation between constancy and change'. In this sense, architecture draws the past into the present, offering a concrete measurement of how meaning endures in time and continues to change our comprehension of historical achievement and vitality.

In all these matters, architecture can claim no innocence. Form and meaning are one in architecture, and therefore architectural form may be evaluated in terms of its ethos: how is the integrity of aesthetics and ethics manifested in a building or made space, and how does this inwardly form personal and traditional modes of being? This matter of form has been addressed by particular writers in their own ways which nonetheless often converge to touch the matter at hand: Dostoevsky emphasises that an *obraz* (form/image) always conveys an ethic; and for Gombrowicz form is not only one of humanity's essential proclivities but also may become a person's idol, an alibi which removes one from the elemental relationships of life and encloses individuals rather than gathers persons in common. On this ground, it would seem that the question of appropriate form arises wherever form itself is involved. In terms

of architecture, one might say that although it is not life itself, it provides the space in which life may flourish or founder, and ought to be considered in these terms. Given such depth and scope, architecture becomes a revelation or barometre for the ethos and spirit of an age; indeed, Hermann Broch accords it such epochal significance when he writes that ‘the essential character of a period can generally be deciphered from its architectural facade’.

Writing several decades prior to Broch, Oscar Wilde seems to concur in his apprehension: he writes that ‘the more abstract, the more ideal an art is, the more it reveals to us the temper of its age. If we wish to understand a nation by means of its art, let us look at its architecture or its music’. By ‘abstract’ or ‘ideal’ here, Wilde means something like what Broch later terms ‘the essential’, something construed not in terms of impalpability but rather as a ‘counterbalance to the hypertrophic calamity of the world’ and ‘this epoch of disintegration’. One might, without much adjustment, partake of Broch’s spirit and see the ills of our own epoch in terms of inflation and confusion—the antidote to which, as Broch intimates, must involve a kind of recovered or rearticulated integrity, a renewal of our sense of appropriate form. In this matter we may be well advised to attend carefully to the work of Robert Bresson. In his *Notes on the Cinematograph*, Bresson presses us to linger with the ‘one single mystery of persons and things’, to ‘treat [forms] as actual ideas’, and consider artistic creation as that which ‘tie[s] new [or renewed] relationships between persons and things which are, and *as they are*’. In our case this affirmation of both renewal and presence involves drawing together and drawing near to the gifts of community and its realization in architectural form.