

ARCHITECTURE AS POETRY
On Precision. For an essential architecture

PUBLISHED IN

Cosa Mentale 6. Paris, junio 2011

Memoria de curso 2011-2012, ETSAM, Madrid, 2012

Principia Architectonica, Madrid, 2012 (1º ed)

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On Precision. For an essential architecture

I wish to propose an essential architecture that limits itself to an indispensable number of elements. Architecture that is precise and well-founded, logical and simple.

And because I wish to highlight the importance of precision in Architecture I dare to compare it to Poetry. Architecture is poetry, but would anyone dare propose architecture as poetry? If so, it would have to acknowledge a conception of architecture that goes to the very heart of the questions that the discipline itself poses.

This is exactly what I propose to do here. I will propose that architecture as poetry, without adjectives, is an “essential architecture”, as essential as poetry is to literature as a whole. I'd like that my architecture be poetic, in the deepest sense of the word, so when I propose architecture as poetry, I mean that architecture arises neither from sudden impulse nor fit of ecstasy.

Good poetry, like good architecture, is implacably precise. It not only requires an idea of what we want to say with it, but that its generating idea be expressed –translated– with very accurate words which, moreover, are judiciously placed in relation to each other within the verse and stanza. Once constructed, besides representing its meaning with the utmost naturalness, the poem's delicate verbal precision must be able to move our hearts –to rupture and suspend time. That is poetry, and likewise architecture.

Should someone remark that John Ruskin already wrote a text entitled *The Poetry of Architecture*,¹ I would reply that, except in name, it honestly has little to do with my own conception; its contents are in fact very diverse. The text in question, from the same author who penned *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, is largely a meditation on some of his favorite architectural works of his time. His book, which was very influential in Victorian times, is a collection of articles (previously published in *London's Architectural Magazine*) on villas by architects like Wordsworth. However, he did not really delve into the deeper meaning of



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the relationship between architecture and poetry. Notwithstanding in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*,² Ruskin puts forward the proposal that “*Architecture and Poetry are the great enemies of oblivion*”, while defending Memory as their common ground.

Sometimes the most essential architectures are dubbed as minimalist. Although I hear continuous talk about minimalism in architecture, I think we would be hard pressed to find a single soul who would accuse poetry of “literary minimalism”. In fact, everyone understands that poetry is a distillation of literature itself. The best writers of literary prose have turned to poetry when they wanted to distill their ideas and refine their words, as Shakespeare³ and Cervantes did. Both were prolific writers, but equally poets of the highest rank.

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The quality of Shakespeare’s sonnets is in every sense on a par with the immortal verses pronounced by Hamlet. Nor could he be considered minimalist. The same is true of Cervantes who, apart from providing us with his renowned Don Quixote, delights us with the charming sonnets of *La Galatea*. Writers of universal acclaim, they both reached the pinnacle of literary creation as sublime poets.

Most of the time, poetry appears in relatively short individual poems, of which we could call numerous examples to mind. The same occurs in architecture. It is good that architects also test themselves with small works, with little architectonic poems. There is no architect worth his weight in salt who has not made some small work of high quality, as if it were a poem. Bernini in his Baldacchino in St. Peter’s, Palladio in the Villa Rotonda and Mies Van der Rohe in his Tugendhat House, are as brilliant as when they produce some of their larger works.

At other times, writers choose verse for dazzling, epic texts, such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, or Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. I insist however, that neither Homer, nor Virgil nor Dante are the greater poets on account of the size of these works. They are masters because of their capacity to invoke Beauty in each and every verse.

I think something similar happens in architecture. The quality of Architecture is not measured in terms of the large dimensions of certain works. It is measured by their capacity to stop the hands of the clock, to hold time in suspension and in their expression of Beauty.

PRECISION

When I compare or identify architecture with poetry, I do so for reasons that lead me to defend what I called above “essential architecture”. I do not just label it this way abstractly, it actually is essential. I try to go to the heart of the question, as much in the ideas that support it as well as in its forms of translation. What architecture and poetry have in common is the achievement of beauty by means of no more than the bare essential number of elements from which they are constructed. As Octavio Paz astutely observed, “*poetry must be a bit dry so it can burn well, and so enlighten and warm us*”.

On numerous occasions, I have also quoted the Spanish writer María Zambrano when she said that poetry is “*the word in harmony with the number*”. What better definition for architecture, which is precisely that: materials in harmony with measure? It is fitting because both types of creators, architects and poets, must be precise and accurate by virtue of the craft itself.

Osip Mandelstam expresses this concept so well: “*Everything in Poetry is measurement; everything derives from, rotates around and through measurement*”. In architecture it is the very same: measurements and numbers are central.

Edgar Allan Poe, in his essay *Philosophy of Composition*⁴ recalls to mind the creative processes and progressive steps in the creation of his most famous poem *The Raven* and how it attained its ultimate point of completion: “*no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition ...the work proceeded step by step, to its completion, with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem*”. Not a bad definition of the importance of precision in artistic creation.

Therefore, an architect must be precise, and to be precise he must know what he wants to make and how he has to go about making it. Architecture demands he be able to respond to its questions before he begins construction: what does he want to make? What idea can respond to all the requirements that design demands in each specific case? Vitruvius summed up the key terms of these questions so well in his three principles of architectural design, “*Utilitas, Firmitas, and Venustas*”. And he told us how to go about it, how to materialize such

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ideas, which requires precise knowledge of the materials and the techniques involved.

In architecture, as in poetry, the idea is not something diffuse. Both the idea and the means required to construct it, are tremendously precise. An idea is not a notion, a mere whim. In architecture, an idea is not valid if it cannot be materially constructed, just as an idea would not be valid in poetry if it could not be translated into appropriate words.

In this vein, while the invention of new technologies ensures that the architect can conceive of new ideas better, it is not valid to use an unproven technology that one has only dreamt about for constructing something that seems beautiful and radical. I guarantee that an endeavor violating function and structure, by means of unproven methods and materials, will likely fail in all respects. Precision in ideas and precision in their materialization go hand in hand.

METRICS

In poetry, precision starts with meter –the rhythm, rhyme, and beat of words, verses, and stanzas. This is self-evident by dint of the observation that should a poet even wish to break the rules of metrics that belong to his or her language and poetic genre, he or she must already know them very well. A poet with a deep learning of poetic meter has already gained the upper hand should he or she wish to turn the tables in experimentation.

An architect, likewise, has his own “metrics” that allows him to know when an architectural mechanism works with certain measures and proportions, but not with others. This has been the focus of the scholarly works of many great writers throughout history from Vitruvius in his ten books *De Architectura* to Alberti with his *De Re Aedificatoria*, from Vignola with his *Regola delle cinque ordini d’Architettura*, to Palladio in his *Quattro Libri dell’Architettura*.

When we ask ourselves what is so fascinating about Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, and what is lacking in Philip Johnson’s Glass House, we must return to this kind of consideration relating to the precision of measurement. Mies van der Rohe, with great skill, raises the main plane of the ground floor of the house to eye level (1.60 meters)

so that it floats, so that the plane becomes a line, almost disappearing. And he measures the precise distance between the ground and roof to achieve this exact horizontality. Philip Johnson, on the other hand, leaves that plane farther down almost at ground level, and fewer things happen. I would argue that the floor of Glass House ought to have been even with the terrain in order to achieve complete spatial continuity.

Again, at the crux of the matter is the issue of measure, or better yet, the knowledge of the effect of measure; with one set of measurements one thing happens, and with another set, yet other things. In short, it is a question of metrics in the poetic sense –measure not reduced to mere measurement in and of itself.

Thus, when Saint John of the Cross in his *Spiritual Canticle*⁵ writes: “*y dejame muriendo un no sé qué que quedan balbuciendo*”, not only does he bring the poem to its climax of feeling when he repeats in a sublime alliteration, “*qué que quedan*”, a stutter that precedes the verb in the gerund, but he does so with a maximum precision that profits from his deep dexterity with the Spanish language. It is the same wisdom and precision that Mies van der Rohe uses in Farnsworth House; the same precision that I want for my architecture.

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TRUTH

Plato defined Beauty as the splendor of Truth. And Saint Augustine echoes these sentiments centuries later. And yet again that indissoluble relationship between Truth and Beauty is reflected on the coat of arms of the AA,⁶ the Architectural Association in London, the most prestigious architectural school in the UK, with the motto: “*Design with Beauty, Build in Truth*”.

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If essential architecture uses but few elements, it is because all are necessary and all are true. Not a single one is in excess or deficiency, and each acts with the highest intensity and efficacy. In this way, essential architecture’s beauty comes from that truth.

The desired beauty of the greatest works of architecture must be a reflection of the coveted truth with which architects should work, focusing their efforts on ensuring that the truth of the conceived idea and the truth with which it materializes are capable of blossoming in the beauty of their works.

I want the beauty I envision in my works to be a reflection of the truth from which it derives as an idea and which, in turn, guides it in its materialization.

These two, beauty and truth, are inseparable, and furthermore, in architecture they will always come to fruition under the guiding hand of reason. Hence that Thomistic definition of truth that indeed suits Architecture so very well: “*Veritas est adecuatio rei et intellectus*” –truth is the correspondence between the thing and the intellect.



Josef Pieper⁷ recalls that the concept of “*the truth of things*” was obliterated by Kant when he identified truth with reality. But what in philosophy is disputable, in Architecture is very clear: all built architecture is real, not abstract and not metaphysical. On the other hand, evident and real presence in architecture does not necessarily mean that it is also true.

Only when Architecture is true, in its conception, in its idea, and in its material expression can it gain access to beauty. It does this when it is the result of a specific and developed idea that is laid down in a coherent structure and remains consonant with logically arranged materials. In short, this architecture fulfills the Vitruvian principles of *Utilitas*, *Firmitas* and *Venustas*. Only when the idea, the development, the structure, and the construction are true can it arrive at the level of aesthetic beauty. We must remember that, for Vitruvius, the achievement of *Venustas* demanded prior and exact fulfillment of *Utilitas* and *Firmitas*.

For obvious reasons then, a great deal of the architecture we see put up today is of little interest. The vices of self-indulgence and superficiality have taken the place of the Vitruvian virtues, and the former are giving rise to a kind of contemporary architecture that crumbles and falls apart in our hands. To forge new paths for the future of architecture, we will have to return to the start.



How well Berthold Lubetkin⁸ put it in the closing of his speech to the RIBA when he was awarded the Royal Gold Medal in 1982:

“Goethe rejected the easy option of neurotic rhetoric, refused to share the fashionable enthusiasm for the inexplicable. Surrounded on all sides by anguish, turbulence, and shadowy dread, he challenges the folly of events by producing a reasoned grid of his poems, the very embodiment of classical calm, ordered logic and lucid clarity. He

advised painters to dip their brushes in reason, and architects to follow Winckelmann's instructions to aim at calm grandeur and noble simplicity. I have no doubt that it was for this humanist attitude full of confidence, his calm restraint and rational cohesion that Goethe wished to be remembered. And, mutatis mutandis, so I do."

WEIGHT

Words have no weight; they are not subject to the laws of gravity to which the materials of architecture are inexorably bound.

Though good writing uses words sparingly, it doesn't cost anything to use more words, as so-called "baroque" writers tend to do. It is preferable, however, to "*omit needless words*" as W.Strunk and E.B.White prescribe in *The Elements of Style*.

In architecture, however, simply from an economic point of view, the use of more elements than is necessary always turns out to be excessively costly. Moreover, it also entails an increase in weight which, because of gravity, would put greater stresses on the structure. With age and reason on his side, Fuller wisely asked the young Foster – "*How much do your buildings weigh, Mr. Foster?*"⁹ A very pedagogical way of speaking of precision.



TO TRANSCEND

Stefan Zweig once remarked during his 1940 Buenos Aires lecture, *The Secret of Artistic Creation*,¹⁰ "*I am not aware of a greater delight and satisfaction than in noting that it is also given to man to create lasting values and that we remain eternally united to the Eternal by means of our supreme effort on earth: by means of art*".



His words can serve as a suitable colophon to this text. If we were to replace the phrase "artistic creation" with architecture, both titles would make perfect sense.

Similarly Heidegger in his *The Concept of Time* calls for an understanding of historicity. And that is what we architects should strive to achieve: an essential, poetic work that will be capable of transcending

ourselves, capable of writing our names in the history books, capable of remaining indelible in time.

ADDENDA

In my lectures I explain how in order to bring the Museum of Memory in line with the existing Central Headquarters of the Caja Granada Savings Bank, “the Cube”, I merely had to align the podiums of the two buildings.¹¹ This alignment of the two facades onto the main avenue, coupled with the fact that their height is the same, means that they both echo one another in unison. And I explain to my students how, just like in poetry, I simply employ the same mechanisms as those of a poem when the words are in unison, when they agree with precision.

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And I tell them that the main building of the Granada Museum of Memory is like a “slice of the cube”, because it has the same width and height, immediately bringing the two buildings into line.¹² Like the words in a poem.

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I go on to relate how I endeavored, with the creation of a second building along with the existing one, to create the new city. Similar to a great epic poem composed of separate verses, this new city would be made up of many buildings arranged in harmony with one another. The Manhattan grid plan is a fine example of how to accommodate the verses of that great epic poem in a structure that combines freedom and order.

When I embark on the Lanzarote project in black concrete, made with dry volcanic lava as gravel, my aim is for the building to disappear as it melts into the volcanic lava terrain in which the great platform is embedded.¹³ With this arrangement I am simply producing harmony. Like free verse in poetry the great piece appears as if it was always there, and just like any poem, as if its words had always been so fine-tuned.

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Using the same kind of poetic device or architectural mechanism, I have devised a great platform for the House in Zahara, a large crate made of Roman travertine.¹⁴ On the one hand, the golden Flaminio travertine matches perfectly with the golden sand of the beach, with the same effect as the black color of the volcanic charcoal on the building in Lanzarote. In this case the travertine gives expression to the Roman presence in the area so many centuries ago, as borne out by the remains at nearby Bolonia.

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The ensemble of volumes in Granada, the charcoal concrete in Lanzarote and the Roman travertine in Zahara, what are they all but an attempt to establish a poetic harmony capable of evoking Beauty?