

ON INTELLECTUAL ENJOYMENT IN ARCHITECTURE

PUBLISHED IN

Domus, no. 1006. Milan, 2016

Textos críticos. Madrid, 2017

Sharpening the scalpel. Madrid, 2019

ON INTELLECTUAL ENJOYMENT IN ARCHITECTURE

I want to focus on Intellectual Enjoyment in Architecture, that feeling of enjoyment that presents itself with every discovery, with every new project conceived and, above all, and in a very special way, at the outset of every new work.

How can I express in words the overpowering feeling of intellectual enjoyment that has occasionally possessed me in recent times? Time and again, something related to Architecture touches us in such a special way that we are possessed with that intangible quality that I have termed intellectual enjoyment. Many architects reading these words will understand perfectly what I am speaking about.

As this very special *je ne sais quoi* has been happening to me lately, I decided to write down my thoughts on this none too original discovery. And I discovered that what we call intellectual enjoyment, intellectual satisfaction, intellectual pleasure, tends to happen more frequently and more especially as one gets older. The enjoyment I get from reading Homer's *Odyssey* is quite distinct from the joyful wonder I felt the first time I came across it. And that deep and profound feeling happens with a frequency that quite surprises me. It is like a joyous radiance that quite takes your breath away.

Plato said to a young apprentice in philosophy:

“The burning impetus that propels you towards the reason why is beautiful and divine; but while you are still young, practice and train yourself in those philosophical efforts that do not appear to serve a purpose and are what the crowd calls idle talk; otherwise, truth will escape your grasp”.

That very stage of renewed youth is where I would like to be when speaking of the intellectual enjoyment.

MEMORY

I know well that all this is largely due to memory. As the years go by, our memory fills up in such a way that relationships often occur between things and events, which becomes a reliable source of this intellectual pleasure. And, like a well, this memory needs to be replenished with the water of knowledge, which requires time and deep study. That devotion to study, considered an obligation in our youth, becomes a pleasure in later life.

Saint Augustine speaks of the enormous space of memory, the *aula ingenti memoriae*. The memory that is not only able to accumulate new knowledge but, better still, to bring it all together. Who has not been surprised on recognizing common themes or ideas in authors that would seem to have nothing in common? To recall —to re-call— is to travel to the heart, to put the heart back in someone or something that happened.

And St. Augustine is so clear when he speaks of memory that we have only to transcribe his wise words:

“And I enter the fields and spacious halls of memory, where are stored as treasures the countless images that have been brought into them from all manner of things by the senses. Men go forth to marvel at the heights of mountains and the huge waves of the sea, the broad flow of the rivers, the vastness of the ocean, the orbits of the

stars, and yet they neglect to marvel at themselves. Nor do they wonder how it is that, when I spoke of all these things, I was not looking at them with my eyes—and yet I could not have spoken about them had it not been that I was actually seeing within, in my memory, those mountains and waves and rivers and stars which I have seen, and that ocean which I believe in—and with the same vast spaces between them as when I saw them outside me.”

TIME

I still remember the frisson of excitement on reading “Burnt Norton”, the first of T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets, when Jorge Manrique’s Songs on the death of his father came into my head and into my heart. When I put the poems of Eliot and Manrique together before me, even the order in which they spoke about time, past, present and future, were the same. And the same desire was there.

And while Eliot writes:

“Time present and time past / Are both present in the future time / And time future contained in time past. / If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable.”

Jorge Manrique had previously written:

“And so we see the present / as if at some point absent / and finished; / if wisely we judge, / we’ll know the not yet now / is past.”

It seems as if Eliot had read Jorge Manrique’s couplets on the death of his father and was feeling something similar to the intellectual enjoyment we are talking about. Past, present and future.

And it has finally dawned on me that the doxology of the “Glory be to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” that we Christians frequently repeat closes with “as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end”, which is the same way of understanding the poets’ time past, present and future.

I must admit that I have since searched and found poems and poets that work with the same structure on time. Even Shakespeare has joined the encounter with poems like his Sonnet 129: “Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme”; And those encounters are the reason for the intellectual enjoyment we are talking about. Any poet reading these lines will understand perfectly.

The universality of the human being in time and space is so clear that unsurprisingly on reading the beautiful poem “The Three Oddest Words” by the wonderful Polish poetess, Wislawa Szymborska, I was rendered speechless by the words: “When I pronounce the word future, the first syllable already belongs to the past.” With less material than architects, with almost nothing, how is it that poets can have so much strength?

ARCHITECTURE

In Architecture we find intellectual enjoyment in many moments, the three principal ones being, in my view: the moment of recognition, the moment of conception and the final or nearly final moment.

RECOGNITION

The moment of recognition in Architecture, on visiting a significant work for the first time, is the cause of great intellectual enjoyment. To recognize, on viewing for the first time a work of architecture that we had never seen with our own eyes but had studied so many times, in chapter and verse. This moment of intellectual enjoyment occurs when we witness at first hand something which was already familiar to us. We architects are very well acquainted with this. I shall never forget the first time I entered the Pantheon in Rome. I cried. This intellectual enjoyment produced by Architecture is somewhat akin to what is known as the Stendhal syndrome. Stendhal syndrome is an impulse provoking a rapid heartbeat when we are faced with a particularly beautiful work of art. It is named after Stendhal, who, on visiting the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence in 1817, wrote in his book "Naples and Florence: a journey from Milan to Reggio":

"I reached this emotional turning-point where those celestial sensations of Art are met with passionate feelings... Everything spoke so vividly to my soul. As I emerged from Santa Croce, I had palpitations of the heart. Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling to the ground".

CONCEPTION

The moment of conception, the moment an idea is born. This happy idea is no chance occurrence. Quite the contrary, it tends to happen when, faced with all the ingredients, the architect starts thinking, researching patiently almost always over a considerable length of time and produces an idea as a result. An idea capable of being materialized. In his book "A Beautiful Question", Frank Wilczek, Nobel prize-winner in Physics in 2004, refers to incarnate. Personally I prefer the term materializing an idea, which is what we architects do. The question is asked: does the world incarnate beautiful ideas? And my response is yes. For in that joyous moment when one knows that potentially everything is already resolved, the idea is so powerful that it is generally the cause of enormous intellectual enjoyment.

It is the moment that we have so often called inspiration. When following a battle in our thoughts, with our inner selves, in which we architects look for that added something capable of substantiating a new work, inspiration appears at a very precise moment, the vibrant instant we call inspiration; then everything is turned upside down, a thousand Handelian trumpets sound, and our being is invaded by that intellectual enjoyment so difficult to describe and so easy to recognize. And the idea is born that is capable of bearing fruit, of materializing.

NEARLY FINAL

The final or nearly final moment of a work that we have conceived and initiated very often produces that intellectual satisfaction.

There is no satisfaction comparable to what one experiences when the built work reaches the stage when those spatial operations conceived by the architect in his head, explained in his writings and expressed in his drawings, become reality. I must confess that I shall never forget the emotion I felt on seeing for the first time the sunlight shine

through the open skylights in the central area of my Bank of Granada. I cried openly like a child, like Ulysses on hearing the bard's song. Not only was I witnessing the entry of that solid, real, material light; it was something much stronger. That slowly moving light placed the whole area in tension and made it resound divinely, just as music does when the air comes in contact with a musical instrument. It was the very history of Architecture recalling other related episodes that I had studied so many times.

When my mother baked a flan, it was a time of celebration at home. And just before taking it out of the oven, where it lay in its bain-marie, we children observed the ceremony of introducing a knitting-needle into the almost set liquid. If it came out with even a touch of the mixture adhering to it one had to wait a little longer, as it was still a little too liquid. But if it came out clean –oh, so clean– then it was proof that it had set. And it was party time.

That is what happens to me with my works. And having mentioned the experience of the Granada box, which was built over 15 years ago, I must tell you of my latest, as yet unfinished, experience. Before me right now, a space that promises to be, that will be something marvelous: the main area of the sports pavilion for the University Francisco de Vitoria, which is just about to set. It is almost there, but we have to wait just a little longer for the needle to come out clean. The structure is beautiful, now entirely painted white. The two translucent northern walls give a marvelous light. The two southern walls, white inside and out, reflect and qualify this equally marvelous white light. A facade, inside and out. The remaining elements will also be white. I can imagine it, I can already see it, all filled with an extraordinary light. Just like a boîte à lumière, which is what it is. And I know that it won't be long now, not long at all, before the needle comes out clean, when the baked flan is set. And I know that right then that feeling of intellectual enjoyment will invade us all.

Because, as we architects well know, when a work emerges and receives the light, in the same way as a musical instrument receives the air and plays, it produces a feeling of intellectual enjoyment very difficult to describe.

And so I'd like to finish off on a musical note. The story goes that when Handel's servant used to bring him his hot chocolate in the morning, he often found the maestro sitting there with large teardrops on the paper before him, smudging his recently written notes and the servant would stand there stock-still while the chocolate went cold. I have absolutely no doubt that the maestro was in a complete trance, in a moment of sheer intellectual enjoyment. Perhaps that is why, when we listen to the "Rejoice Greatly" from Handel's Messiah, we cannot but feel that rejoicing, that jubilation, that intellectual enjoyment.