

**ON THE WISDOM OF THE ARCHITECT**

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Sharpening the scalpel. Madrid, 2019

“Wisdom is a reflection of the eternal light, untarnished mirror of God’s active power, and image of his goodness. Although she is alone, she can do everything; herself unchanging, she renews the world, and, generation after generation, passing into holy souls, she makes them into God’s friends and prophets; for God loves only those who dwell with Wisdom. She is indeed more splendid than the sun, she outshines all the constellations; compared with light, she takes first place, for light must yield to night, but against Wisdom evil cannot prevail.”

Wisdom 7, 22-28

T.S. Eliot makes an accurate distinction between information, knowledge and wisdom. First in his poem *Choruses from the Rock*, written in 1934, and later in his paradigmatic essay *What is a Classic?*, the text of the keynote address before the Virgil Society in London on October 16, 1944.

In *Choruses from the Rock* he writes:

“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

And in *What is a Classic?* he writes:

“In our age, when men seem more than ever prone to confuse wisdom with knowledge, and knowledge with information.”

I am an increasingly fervent admirer of T.S. Eliot. Maybe for the same reasons that Octavio Paz gives us in his acceptance speech for the T.S. Eliot Prize:

“The magnet that attracted me was the excellence of the poem, the rigor of its construction, its depth of vision, the variety of its parts and the admirable unity of the whole.”

Besides being a wonderful poet and a wise one at that, T.S. Eliot was a true sage. Because I must confess –a daring confession indeed– that what I, who only know that I know nothing, would like is to become a wise architect, as my teachers were. And when talking to my students about Beauty, in the same way that I tell them that they, as architects, can also achieve that Beauty which is not reserved for exceptional beings, I also tell them that they can become wise, that they can attain Wisdom. Let me explain.

Being equipped with all the information is very good, because if we filter it and order it judiciously, we can achieve knowledge. That is a very knowledgeable person, we sometimes say. But that is not enough. Because afterwards, if you are unable to process that knowledge, it is of no use. But if we cook it, if we develop it for a specific purpose, it becomes activated, it becomes truly useful. Which is what the wise do.

I am convinced that, like Beauty, Wisdom is not reserved for a mere few. All the sages I have met have turned out in person to be normal, simple and direct; in a word, humble.

## INFORMATION

Today we have more sources of information than ever thanks to IT resources. I have never known where those thousands of people are, who produce and order and put such a quantity of information at our disposal. Google and its fellow-search engines are

admirable. They provide and make available to us comprehensive and orderly information that makes some people think that libraries are no longer essential, although this can never and should never be so. But if the Library of Alexandria was on fire, all that would be required to remedy the disaster is for someone to have taken the precautions and have had the patience to store all that digitalized information that occupies so little physical space.

I remember my last sabbatical year at Columbia University in New York. Every day I spent a long time studying, in its marvelous Avery Library, which is where the School of Architecture is located. I was the only one who had books on my desk and who wrote by hand, hastily filling up my notebooks. The others were buried in their computers, in sepulchral silence, isolated by their headphones and illuminated by the divine light of their screens. I never saw anyone get up to consult a single book or write anything by hand.

And all that overwhelming information is now available to the millions of users, people who more often than not waste their time with nonsense on their iPads, iPhones and iPods.

Because information is still simply information. If it is not processed, it remains like an inert material. It might help to turn someone into a scholar. On the scale of being informed, knowing and understanding, they remain on the first steps of the ladder.

## KNOWLEDGE

But if information is processed, ordered and developed, one gets to the next stage, which is knowledge.

Whenever I'm writing a text, the first thing I do is prepare a script. Of course, before that I have to find a good excuse to tackle a particular topic. In this case, it was reading the wonderful text of T.S. Eliot's *What is a classic?*, which quite by chance I happened to receive as a gift twice in the same week, in a delightful little edition by the National Autonomous University of Mexico in 2013.

When we take on board a considerable amount of information and store it in our memory, it can later be studied and related to a topic with the result that we attain a certain amount of knowledge of the subject in question –what we have always understood as studying a subject.

And so I view a School, in my case a School of Architecture, as an instrument not only for the transmission of information but also for its development. It is an instrument for the creation of knowledge, and for its transmission. Like coffee beans that need to be selected, toasted, ground, and filtered with hot water in order to achieve that final delicious potion. And, perhaps, having tasted that splendid coffee, the neurons awake and even lead one on to wisdom.

I have been studying the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius for several years, the text that our stoic emperor wrote in Greek. I already have 44 different editions in several languages, and it goes without saying the enormous enjoyment it gives me every time I go there. But I assure you that I still know nothing about this amazing person, or about

his work, although I have dared to publish something about him and the numerous editions of that wonderful text.

I remember as a child I always saw my father studying. And with all that he knew, I wondered why he was still studying? My father was a surgeon and he was for a time Assistant Professor of Anatomy at the Faculty of Medicine in Valladolid. His record was brilliant. And he was a true sage who was an example to us all his life, never ceasing to study. This is what I, now, try not to stop doing.

“Knowledge is science, the know-how provided by many data, combining induction and deduction, which does not tell me what it is, but what I can do. Science tells me what I can do, but not what I should do.” This is what Emilio Lamo de Espinosa has to say in a clear article on information, science and wisdom. It is wisdom that deals with the ultimate meaning of our existence. Without wisdom, science is no more than an archive of instruments. And he concludes by saying that: “we are swamped with information, with solid scientific knowledge, but almost completely starved of wisdom”.

## WISDOM

According to T.S. Eliot, after information and knowledge, comes wisdom. But what is it really to be wise? To know everything about everything? To know everything about something? Because once we know a great amount of things relating to a particular subject, we surely could take one step further, we should attain something more.

Maybe it would be something like a doctor’s diagnosis. Having gathered all the information on the patient, which is then filtered by the doctor’s knowledge, everything should lead to an accurate diagnosis, capable of solving the problem.

In The Book of Kings, we are told how the young King Solomon asks God for his listening ear and how God grants him the gift of Wisdom.

“Now, O Lord my God, you have made me king instead of my father David. But I am but a boy, and I barely know how to behave. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.”

God was pleased that Solomon had made that request, so he said to him:

“Since you have asked for this, and not long life or riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the death of your enemies, but for discernment in administering justice, I will grant you what you have asked for. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, as no one before you has had nor will ever have again.”

That is why, when we speak of wisdom, we have to quote King Solomon, the wise Solomon. Wisdom as the capacity of discernment.

Of course, in addition to the wisdom of the learned doctor in his diagnosis, or the wisdom granted by God to Solomon, I am reminded of the wisdom of my friend García Márquez in his wonderful text that is always worth re-reading, “The Cataclysm of Damocles”, in which he proposes that “for the cost of a single nuclear warhead, one could reach out, if only for a Sunday in autumn, and perfume the Niagara Falls with sandalwood”. If this isn’t wisdom, may God strike me down!

## ON THE WISDOM OF ARCHITECTURE

Of course, some of you will say: what is an architect doing talking about wisdom? Why? What for? I am doing it because, among other reasons, I think that to make the best architecture possible, it is necessary to be wise. "He who knows only medicine doesn't know medicine", said Marañón. Well, he who knows only architecture, doesn't know architecture, say I.

I remember well my teachers, the architects who were my teachers at the School of Architecture of Madrid, who were truly wise. How discerning they were about architecture. They combined professorship with being extraordinary architects. They were true teachers. Their project critiques were classes where one talked about everything. Philosophy or History, Music or Poetry were all topics that emerged in the most natural way from their rich pool of wisdom. This was more than information and more than just knowledge. This was wisdom.

And those teachers were wise. Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oíza in his apocalyptic classes, Alejandro de la Sota in his quiet classes, Javier Carvajal in his precise classes, Julio Cano Lasso in his delightful classes and Miguel Fisac in his classes without classes. All of them were true sages. They all had a capacity of discernment about architecture, and about life. Of each of them, it could be said that they were a fountain of wisdom. I would like to be like them.

So too were those egregious professors under whom I studied a Selective course at the Faculty of Sciences, Madrid, in the 60s, which I will never forget. Enrique Gutiérrez Ríos, Salustio Alvarado and José Javier Etayo Miqueo were true sages in such complex subjects as Chemistry, Biology and Mathematics. They were so wise that not only had they acquired the knowledge of such topics, but they transmitted them to us with crystalline clarity, with convincing conviction.

I have recently published a text on "Project design is Research: a Project design is a work of research", because I firmly believe that it is so. I would like that text, like this one, to be like depth charges. In that text I describe how, more than 30 years ago, I dared to present a project of mine under construction at the time, the Library of Orihuela, as the Research Project for my candidature for the Chair of Design. And all the members of that generous tribunal, full of wisdom, with Oíza and Carvajal at the head, understood it perfectly and accepted it as a work of research.

## ON THE HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE

How can we not understand that the History of Architecture, with capital letters, is full of architects who were sages?

Ictinos and Callicrates (5th century BC), the Greek architects of the Parthenon of Athens were true sages. The Parthenon, and before it, the Acropolis, were creations out of time; they were of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Not surprisingly, both Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe were photographed in front of those ruins, as a testimony to their timelessness, and in recognition of the roots of their architecture, which is ours. As is Thassos Tanoulas (1947) today, the wise architect who is currently restoring the Propylaea.

And, was not Apollodorus of Damascus (50-130), architect of the Pantheon of Rome, a true sage? Definitely. The structural and building operation of this architectural marvel can only be the result of a privileged architect's head. Every time I go back to study and analyze the Roman Pantheon, I continue to learn.

And of Marco Vitruvius Pollio (80 BC-15 BC) with his *De Architectura*, what can we say? How many times in word and deed have we not used your *Utilitas*, *Firmitas* and *Venustas*?

Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) was so wise, that in addition to making first-class architecture, and writing the *Four Books of Architecture*, he has continued to influence architects to this day. And so, Mc Kim, Mead and White (1869) guided by the Italian, designed the most representative buildings of Columbia University in New York.

When Michelangelo officiated as an architect in the Campidoglio, he showed how wise he was, making the world visible, making it emerge in that unequalled space. And to crown it all, there he placed our Marcus Aurelius on horseback in the center of the world, to make that spatial operation even more visible.

And so great was the wisdom of Sir John Soane (1753-1837) that, to contradict the architect of the Pantheon, in proposing his lightness *vis-à-vis* the heaviness of the Roman dome, he makes the light of his suspended domes slide down the edges, causing them to float. If this is not wisdom, may God strike me down!

And Le Corbusier (1887-1965) and Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) what could we say of these two old sages? The two of them were proudly photographed on the Acropolis in front of the Parthenon, as if wanting to bear witness that they, the great modernists, have their feet, their roots, in history and in this way are revolutionizing the world and building new history.

And even Jorn Utzon (1918-2008), like an old druid, who withdrew with his wisdom to his house in Mallorca. We can still hear the echoes not only from his Sydney Opera House, or from Can Lis, but also from his *Platforms and Plateaus*, a key text published in 1962 that has influenced so many architects.

## FINALE

To do things in the best possible way in life, in all fields, and also in architecture, we should try to approach wisdom; we should try to be wise. This involves not only having all the information, developing it and acquiring knowledge, but above all, then, on reaching that attainable wisdom, always studying and discerning in order to make it the best, or better than the best.

And if we started out with T.S. Eliot as our guide, we're returning to him again now. Because in a nutshell, this business of being wise is nothing more than being able to bring together present, past and future time: what the poet proposes in *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. / If all time is eternally present / all time is unredeemable.”

## NOTA BENE

And these words by the Spanish author Baltasar Gracian, in his Art of Prudence: a companion for a man of sense, couldn't be more adequate to finish. He wrote:

“Man is born uncivilized. He is ransomed from the condition of beasts, only by good education. The more he is cultivated, the sooner he becomes man. In respect of education, Greece had reason to call the rest of the world barbarous. There is nothing so rude as ignorance; nor nothing that polishes so much as knowledge.”