

SUSPENDING TIME

On time. On the ineffable detention of time

PUBLISHED IN

Principia Architectonica. Madrid, 2012

Cuadernos TC, no. 112. Valencia, 2014

La suspension del tiempo. Diario de un arquitecto. Madrid, 2017

Sharpening the scalpel. Madrid, 2019

In this text, I would like to analyze why some architectural spaces are able to stir up such an inner commotion within us. Although it may seem an abstract concept or theme more properly pertaining to poetry or philosophy, this concept of suspension of time occurs with an especially real and palpable force only in architecture. When we stand before or inside certain architectural spaces, time seems to stop, suspend itself, and become tangible to human beings.

There is no denying the profound emotion –the suspension of time– one feels on entering the Roman Pantheon. There time stands still and we are moved. I still shed tears every time I go back. I often mention to people the deal I've made with my students for many years now. When they visit the Pantheon they have to send me a postcard, a cartolina illustrata with a picture of the inside, telling me whether or not they cried. All of those who have written have cried. I've amassed a good collection.

This metaphysical time that poets, musicians and philosophers express so well is the same time that those of us dedicated to architectural creation seek to capture. It is a central theme of architecture.

“Burnt Norton” is the first of the Four Quartets, one of T.S. Eliot's key works. In its first five lines, the word time appears seven times with surprising reiteration:

“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.”

The Spanish poet Jorge Manrique ineffably claimed in the following lines:

“Beholding how each instant flies
So swift, that, as we count, 'tis gone
Beyond recover,
Let us resolve to be more wise
Than stake our future lot upon
What soon is over.

“Let none be self-deluding, none,
Imagining some longer stay
For his own treasure
Than what today he sees undone;
For everything must pass away
In equal measure.”

And the Cuban poet Fina García Marruz, also expressed it so well in a poem inspired by Pindar:

“Become who you are, who is the one that you were,
On yesterday and not tomorrow time insists,
Become, knowing when you are no more,
What you wished shall remain.”

And we could continue with quotations from countless poets who have understood that time, past, present and future is the central theme of artistic creation. From Poetry to Architecture.

I will never forget how, when my building for the Caja Granada headquarters had just been inaugurated, one of the people who worked there recalled having wept on entering the central space for the first time. Right there, at that very instant, time stood still. I must confess that, years later, every time I return there and enter that space, my heart still skips a beat, and even more so if the sun, up to its usual tricks, alights upon and strolls over its alabaster walls.

These experiences exemplify, each in unique ways, the suspension of time that I'm speaking of here.

Architects must deepen their understanding of the architectural mechanisms that make these results possible. Suspending Time and finding Beauty. I'm still trying to hit upon that perennially elusive Beauty itself that every artistic creation seeks to embody, and most especially architecture since it is a form of high art.

It might be helpful to consider how architecture, in comparison to other art forms, is the only one whose creations are capable of physically enveloping man, its protagonist. The experience of being able to stand inside a work of art in flesh and bone pertains solely to architecture, and is impossible to produce in the other arts.

If a space built with gravity, with materials possessing an unavoidable gravitational weight is tensed by light –light which itself builds time– so that we are moved through the physical, beyond the physical, then we can properly say that we have attained architecture. Architecture happens when we succeed in stopping time in the constructed space: entering within dreams-come-true.

I will not tire of repeating that time is a central theme of architecture: time that is structured by light; capable of stopping our hearts or tying them in a knot, much more than the forms of a passing style or the exquisite adornments of the best construction. Utilitas and Firmitas only acquire their full meaning when Venustas is attained.

Time in Architecture can be analyzed from many perspectives: the time of Utilitas, the time of Firmitas and the time of Venustas. Not forgetting the time of Memory.

THE TIME OF UTILITAS. FUNCTION

There is a time that refers to the capacity of ensuring that the function for which the building was erected will endure. A time relative to function: use, utility, utilitas. Time of utilitas insists that a building carries out the functions for which it was commissioned and, moreover, that it be adaptable to different functions over the long haul. When I was a student we learned this in terms of the architecture of boxes and the architecture of cases.

The case meets the requested function exactly, but it can't be used for anything else. A knife sheath can't be used for a spoon; nor is a spoon holder appropriate for knives. If the question is changed, the answer is no longer valid. It tends to happen when, in addition to the specific nature of the function, the dimensions are also strictly bound

within certain settled parameters. A low income housing building, even if it is well-resolved to the last millimeter, will most certainly not serve for anything else.

The box, in contrast, can admit many different functions over time. Obviously, the larger the size of a space, the greater the number of different functions it can allow. Boxes endure the test of time better than cases do.

Time is kinder to boxes than cases. And kinder still to larger boxes rather than smaller ones. Berthold Lubetkin, architect of the penguin ramp in London, was right when he said that he did no more than build boxes, shoe-boxes in concrete.

THE TIME OF FIRMITAS. CONSTRUCTION

There is another time that speaks of physical duration, of the effective combination of materials that culminates in the most perfect construction of architecture. The word *firmitas* means strength, and a well-constructed building will be able to last many years and will remain on solid footing for a long time. All of the great masters of the past have been, furthermore, very good builders whose attention to *firmitas* allows us to admire their words in flesh and blood today.

THE TIME OF VENUSTAS. BEAUTY

The time of *Venustas* is that which can be suspended, that stops when we encounter the particular beauty of an artistic creation. It is the most difficult to control, but for that reason it is what most interests us.

All of architecture's treatise writers have sought to come up with a few universal rules that would not only serve to transmit certain forms or styles, but also emit a beauty always capable of moving men deeply.

It is a difficult enterprise. Just as happens with many excellent cookbooks in which nothing is spared to provide every last detail and consideration regarding a recipe, the exquisite dish still requires a skilled and passionate chef. No recipe can guarantee the quality of the cooking. The same thing is true in architecture; one needs a good head, a good hand and one has to have a talent for it.

THE TIME OF MEMORY. PERMANENCE

Another thing is the time that the building is capable of remaining in men's memory: a built work's resistance to oblivion, or in other words the thing that secures its trajectory into architectural history, which has little to do with current fashion or passing fame. Those of us who are no longer children have seen lofty names and works that mean nothing today. The phenomenon, controlled and exaggerated by the press, still works at full strength. Many of the names that make up today's architectural A-List are sure to disappear tomorrow, their fame short-lived. They will never remain in men's memory.

But there are other, quieter sorts of architecture that are much more eloquent and capable of transcending our tendency to ephemerality. Above and beyond fashion and vanity, our aim should be to erect more profound architecture for history. Such architecture has a different rhythm, and belongs to truth and beauty in fullest sense.

The time of memory –of permanence– is “the difficult desire for duration” (le dur desir de durer) which Paul Eluard spoke of poetically and which is so profoundly rooted in the will of every creator: the will to transcend. Drummond de Andrade put it so eloquently: “I am tired of being modern. Now I want to be immortal.”

And it is Memory that enables us with the passage of time to value more highly those works of architecture that are truly worthwhile. In that wonderful volume *War of Time* by Alejo Carpentier, time passes simultaneously backwards and forwards. Carpentier manipulates time in such a way that only the novel, imagination guided by memory, can achieve; so it is that on his death, Don Marcial at the feet of Ceres, starts going back in time, living his life backwards to his birth. Sentences such as “the furniture was growing taller” and “when the furniture had grown a little taller still” and then: “but now time passed more quickly...”, are Carpentier’s tricks of the trade to explain this backward progression of time.

Doesn’t something similar occur when we return after a long period of time to some of the best artistic creations and suddenly we understand them perfectly? Not only that, they seem even better than they did before. So it is that like Marcial in *War of Time* I read the poems of Horace and Virgil with so much more pleasure than I did when obliged to read them as a child. I used to learn and now I learn too. And I enjoy. And here and now, just like that, time appears to stand still.

In a very special way this is what occurs with Architecture. I must confess that on my most recent visit to the Pantheon time stood still when that stream of light, travelled across the deep coffers of its bare dome at something other than physical speed and I felt it with much greater intensity than on the first occasion many moons ago. Thus, we architects must remind ourselves that the possibility of stopping time, of halting the sun as Joshua did, is something that we are capable of, just as we are capable of creating something that transcends us.

HISTORY

There are many buildings in History with that special capability of causing us to lose our sense of time.

The Roman Pantheon is the example par excellence. Well built, and a perfect embodiment of the universal function endowed to it by its creator, the Pantheon is also overwhelmingly beautiful. All of the great creators have understood that when they’ve been inside of it. Suffice it to quote Henry James when he recounts the memorable scene of Count Valerii kneeling inside the Pantheon as the sun struggled through the heavy clouds above with the rainwater making the light from on high material. Exquisite. Or Piranesi’s engravings of the Pantheon that should be in the libraries of all architects.

And if I had to give just one example of contemporary architecture, I would recommend visiting the Burgo Tower by Eduardo Souto de Moura in Oporto. Not only is it impeccable in its function and its construction, but also in its radical beauty. Going in, out, and through it, and I speak from my own experience, is like escaping from time. This building clearly reflects its historical period, the third millennium that we live in today. Essential.

THE BLUE-EYED ROTHKO

Every time I enter the Olnick Spanu family home in Manhattan my heart skips a beat: there in front of me, I see a painting by Rothko, my favorite painter, in an unusual size and color. Its small dimensions and blue and green tones completely sweep me away. A good friend of mine, with whom I often discuss this painting, tells me it is “the blue-eyed Rothko.” He’s right. I can witness to the fact that there, in front of this wonderful painting, time stops, it disappears.

It happens that painting, like architecture, shares this special capacity to carry us away and suspend time. I’ll never forget my first visit to London when, with Sáenz de Oíza, my beloved teacher and Spanish master, we stood in front of Velázquez’s Venus of the Mirror in the National Gallery. Time, space, desire –everything– disappeared. In that brief infinite lapse we stood as if in divine rapture.

MUSIC CAPABLE OF STOPPING TIME

I will never forget the moment when Peter Phillips, director of The Tallis Scholars, in an interview he gave in early spring 2011, before performing Tomás Luis de Victoria’s Requiem in New York, spoke of suspended time.

In that interview, the words flowed from his mouth as if in a cascade: intensity, sobriety, profundity, precision, simplicity, clarity, but above all, suspension, referring to time. When asked where his musicians had sounded best, he answered in the Sydney Opera House by the master Jorn Utzon. It could not have been otherwise.

The concert, devoted entirely to Tomás Luis de Victoria, and commemorating the fourth centenary of the Spanish composer’s death, was long, but I would say that for all of us who filled the packed church of St. Mary the Virgin in 46th Street, everything happened in a second. Time stopped there, in the way that only beauty can make possible.

And if I were to mention a contemporary musician in this context, I would choose the American composer Thomas Newman, and author of *Dead already*. You need only to hear this music to understand at once what I’m talking about.

SORT OF DISAPPEAR. CINEMA

And while we could survey all artistic creations and discover that the crux of the matter is always the same, namely reaching man’s heart through his head, I am going to limit myself to a couple of examples of how film, the seventh art, is also capable of stopping time.

An unforgettable scene comes to mind: the white plastic bag floating in the air in the film *American Beauty*. Sam Mendes magically transforms something so basic from a novel into a masterful visual piece. Given the supreme beauty of something so simple, we all cry with Wes Benly and Thora Birch. There, time disappears and our heart dissolves in five infinite minutes.

Of course, Billy Elliot expresses it still more clearly in that “sort of disappear” that he repeats twice when the panel asks him what it is that he feels when he dances. With a

stroke of genius Stephen Daldry summed up something as abstract as suspended time in artistic creation so precisely in this beautiful little phrase!

“TEACHER: ‘What does it feel like when you’re dancing?’

“BILLY ELLIOT: ‘Don’t know. Sorta feels good. Sorta stiff and that, but once I get going... then I like, forget everything. And... sorta disappear. Sorta disappear. Like I feel a change in my whole body. And I’ve got this fire in my body. I’m just there. Flying like a bird. Like electricity. Yeah, like electricity’.”

THE SECRET OF ARTISTIC CREATION

Architecture, painting, literature, music, and film are, in fact, no more than the creative works of human beings which redeem us and make this life worth living.

Edgar Allan Poe in his *Philosophy of Composition* captured this suspension of time so well:

“Truth, in fact, demands a precision, and Passion, a homeliness (the truly passionate will comprehend me) which are absolutely antagonistic to that Beauty which, I maintain, is the excitement, or pleasurable elevation, of the soul.”

That “pleasurable elevation of the soul” is precisely the suspension of time that we are referring to here.

Our works go on to “transcend material and limited life.” Stefan Zweig, in that essential text I have quoted so very often, *The Secret of Artistic Creation*, manifests this with such force: “there is no greater pleasure or satisfaction than recognizing that man is also capable of creating everlasting values”.

Works that are worthwhile transcend us; they transcend their creators and no longer belong to us. They already belong to the memory of men.

ADDENDA

I began this text recalling the capacity of the Caja Granada’s central space to move us. While this suspending time is one of the final purposes of architecture, I also know that I am trying to explain something that is beyond expression.

If one can speak of the profound impact of seeing the palpable light on the alabaster of the Caja Granada, I would describe what we feel when we walk through the extremely white ramp of the Museum of Memory of Andalusia, also in Granada next to the Caja, as luminous wonder. It is a moving promenade architecturale that I believe is indeed worthwhile.

In my houses, however, the sensations are very diverse: quiet calm in Gaspar House and Guerrero House, turned in upon their white courtyards; serene transparency at rest in nature, looking down from their podiums towards sought after peace in De Blas House in Madrid, the Olnick Spanu House in New York, and Rufo House in Toledo.

Suspending time is after all more closely linked to the slow pace of light and the vertical space than to the greater mobility of vision, to horizontal space and transparency.

Other projects of mine produce feelings of yet another kind. Such is the case with the building for the Advisory Council of the Regional Government of Castilla-León, in front of the Cathedral of Zamora. This is a box of powerful sandstone walls open to the sky, and we are stunned when we go inside and behold the extreme delicacy of the glass box constructed within it.

It is a similar operation to what I did years ago in Mallorca with the BIT Center. The marés stone box enclosed an ordered plot of alternating orange trees and white pillars which complimented a simple slab that protects the basic glass box. Both of the hortus conclusus projects, Zamora and Mallorca, strike us through the powerful contrast between the primitive stone walls and the intelligently deployed advanced technology. Both buildings, Zamora and Mallorca, moreover, lead us to an eloquent silence of contemplation.

If I were asked to divulge my trick or recipe, I'd say I have none. I manage to throw myself with my head and heart into each job I do, dedicating an enormous amount of time – thousands of hours– to each project. I want each of my works to unfold in the light of truth always, knowing, as we already knew, that beauty is the splendor of truth. John Keats beautifully encapsulates this metaphysical recipe in the conclusion to his Ode to a Grecian Urn: "Truth is beauty, beauty truth. That is all". Knowing, as we already knew from Plato, that "Beauty is the splendor of Truth".

Paul A.M. Dirac, 1933 Nobel Laureate and one of the great physicists of our time, proclaimed, "Beauty and truth go together in theoretical physics". Could today's architects, instead of musing on vanities, concur with the poets, philosophers, and physicists in the primacy of the pursuit of truth, and attempt to actualize this all-too-possible miracle of the suspension of time?

Le Corbusier, in simpler language, spoke of the "unspeakable space," and on other occasions, of how the most useful buildings were those that "fulfilled the desires of the heart." The master was so very right. And if we started with a poet, T.S. Eliot, we will conclude with another, William Blake. In his *Auguries of Innocence* he proposes:

"To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour."

This eternity is what we would like to achieve with our architecture.