

Architecture as “Wild Being”

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The rise of western culture has been marked by an ever-growing urge and ability to turn our backs on the world’s material presence while we seek to understand things through language and intellection. Thus the means of understanding wherein body and mind act in concert has given way to a disembodied rationality in which the body has no legitimate place. Architecture has not been immune to this phenomenon, and we have long been producing buildings to be read and interpreted rather than experienced. Rationality has at its core a desire to control and predict, and consequently to suppress things that escape or exceed our conceptual confines. The world’s materiality is one of the things that constantly escapes and exceeds these confines; with the body denied as a means for understanding, material presence is nonsensical excess. French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who died prematurely in 1961, developed a philosophy that subverts rational attempts to conceptually circumscribe the material world. This paper examines architecture’s materiality through Merleau-Ponty’s idea of “wild being” and argues that ex-urban settings—where the cultural landscape is overwhelmed by the natural one—may be the most appropriate venues to explore and experience the wild being of architecture.

Merleau-Ponty does not construe the world as objects defined in relationship to a human subject. He posits instead that the human subject is one subject among a host of other, equal subjects. We exist within a continually fluxing web of interrelationships called the Flesh, and our own subjectivity is defined by relating ourselves to, not by distinguishing ourselves from, the other parts of the world. We are open circuits, completed in sensory contact with the world, and this relationship is not one we can fully control.

According to Merleau-Ponty, to experience an object¹ is to partake of its interrelationships within the complex and dynamic web of phenomena that make up the world. Merleau-Ponty contends that a visible entity points constantly to a host of other things, visible and invisible, that support and are related to it: “every point is a pivot, every line a vector” into the larger world.² Yet objects are also recalcitrant. They reveal only a certain amount about themselves and about the invisible structure that supports them, and at any moment they conceal more than they reveal. Objects have fathomless depths; they point and reveal while simultaneously remaining autonomous and uncommunicative. David Abram, in *Spell of*

the Sensuous, speaks about the “enigmatic, hidden dimension at the very heart of the sensible present, into which phenomena may withdraw and out of which they continually emerge.”³ Merleau-Ponty refers to this uncontrollable dimensionality, this revealing-while-holding-back, as “wild being.”⁴

Abram illustrates the wild being of an object with a simple description of a clay bowl. In his description, as he views the bowl from one side, the other is withheld from him. While examining the outer surface, the inner is withheld. From any vantage point, it is impossible to see the body of the bowl contained between the inner and outer surfaces without breaking the bowl, destroying its integrity. Abram writes:

There can be no question of ever totally exhausting the presence of the bowl with my perception: its very existence as a bowl ensures that there are dimensions wholly inaccessible to me.... Even a single facet of this bowl resists being plumbed by my gaze once and for all. For, like myself, the bowl is a temporal being, an entity shifting and changing in time.⁵

Yet, while withholding aspects of itself, the bowl is constantly pointing to its interrelationships within the larger world. We can see the marks of the potter’s hands, scratches and stains accumulated from daily use. We can feel its weight and solidity and its low center of gravity as it balances in the hand and distributes itself stably on a flat table top. The density and color of the clay call forth the density and color of the earth. Textured areas in the bowl interact with moving sunlight to delineate changing patterns of light and dark. Our fingertips can feel them, tracing along their bumps and hollows. The sensuousness of the bowl is the medium for communicating these relationships.

To experience architecture is to partake of its interrelationships within the same complex and dynamic web. Architecture is a vector that points outward in all directions—to the movement of the sun, to the effects of moisture and atmosphere, to the bounty of the earth’s resources, to the hands and the processes that prepared and assembled it, to the mobile, sensate human participant. Its medium for pointing outward is its own materiality and the capacity for that materiality to affect our senses, that is, its sensuousness. We understand what is being revealed through receptive sensory

experience that connects us not only to a piece of architecture, but also to the larger world.

Architecture is also recalcitrant. It is precisely its materiality and spatiality that make it “wild,” indecipherable, and ultimately unmanageable. When conceived in terms of human projections, such as geometry or composition, architecture becomes domesticated and intellectually consumable, as an understandable whole comes forward to unite its disparate parts. But when experienced corporeally, architecture unfolds little by little, each moment presenting a new and different experience, while it stubbornly resists intellectual consumption.

Ancient, oral cultures founded their activities in a sense of relationship between themselves and a living, natural-transcendent world. An awareness of their shared subjectivity with the world deepened this relationship. Martin Heidegger, in “The Age of the World Picture,” contrasts the ancient and modern modes of relationship between human beings and the world in terms of subjectivity. In the ancient mode, the subject of experience is a world actively revealing itself to receptive human beings. In the modern mode, the lone subject is the human being, at the center and in control, and the world is relegated to peripheral and subservient status. Abram characterizes oral cultures as “enveloped, immersed, caught up *within* the sensuous world.” In contrast to the world of rational cultures, the “breathing landscape” they inhabit is not “just a passive backdrop against which human history unfolds, but a potentized field of intelligence in which our actions participate.”⁶

Heidegger contrasts the participatory ancient relationship to the modern one, with its lone human subject. In the modern relationship, truth or significance no longer resides within unfolding phenomena, but depends on human valuation. We assume a projective stance and an attitude of domination in which conceptualization is more valuable than experience. Heidegger characterizes the modern era as “the age of the world picture,” referring to the way we have conceived of the world as a tableau composed from the perspective of our central vantage point. From this vantage point, “what is, in its entirety, [exists only] to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth.”⁷ The vista from here forms a marked contrast to oral cultures’ experience of a breathing, intelligent landscape.

The immediacy of the world for us, according to Merleau-Ponty, is predicated in the imperceptible lag between our corporeal response to a situation and our conceptualization of it. Architects can draw out this interval by focusing on the immanent and deemphasizing those elements that are most readily subsumed into mental constructs. An emphasis on the material and temporal qualities in a space—surface, light, variations in color, and repetition, rather than on form and figure, delays conceptualization and allows us to recognize that the architecture is communicating with us synaesthetically. In this relationship, architecture is an unfolding phenomenon, continually emerging, communicating its significance to receptive participants. It responds to the intelligence of the landscape, adapting to its rhythms and existing in active relationship to it.

The walkway in Macon, Mississippi connecting the Corpus Christi Catholic Church and its parish hall, designed by David Lewis (Fig. 1), unfolds through corporeal experience and responds to the material presence of its site. We approach the walkway straight on, from the west, while the south wall of the church and a row of mature cedar trees about the path and occupy the periphery of our experience. Seen from the street, the walkway both withdraws and emerges. The white uprights of the balustrade catch the sun at intervals, and present a luminous, intermittent surface. The narrow intervals between the wooden uprights set up a rhythm of light and dark that is overlaid by wide intervals of light and shadow cast by the robust cedar trunks. Dappled light filtering through clusters of cedar needles adds to the complexity of the pattern. The white church wall, the ground, and the cedar trunks catch their own patterns of light and shadow. All these elements contribute to the experience of a bounded exterior space that interacts with sun and wind to be created anew in each changing moment. The variability and flux of an emerging world is played out on the surfaces of the entire space. At the back edge of the space, the geometry of the walkway is regular and strong, yet a geometric understanding of the walkway is overwhelmed by corporeal experience of the place it inhabits.

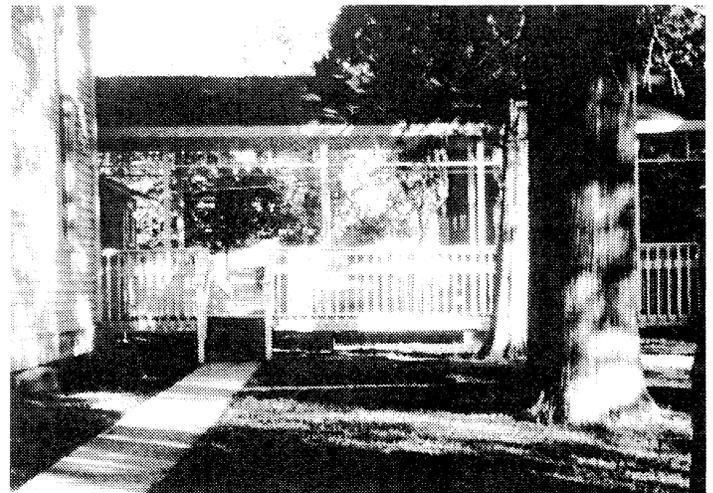


Fig. 1. Corpus Christi Catholic Church, Macon, Mississippi. Lewis/McCann Design Group, 1992. Front view (west façade) of walkway (author).

The goal of the path is the walkway, yet the figural character of the walkway is diminished by its relationships. The trees veil it partially, and its openness allows the space behind it to rival it as a figure. In the mornings it is backlit, existing as a dim shape against the bright area behind it; after noon its front surfaces receive patches of light. The walkway hovers above the ground, an area of profound shadow giving presence to the interstitial zone of the crawl space.

As we approach the walkway, it unfolds to reveal new experiences. From the street, the overall organization is apparent; the quick rhythm of the balustrade plays against widely spaced posts that support a solid roof. Close up, the trees, church wall, and walkway roof vanish into the half-perceived realm of peripheral vision, and our gaze goes through the entrance bay to focus on the open space beyond. Only when we are a step or two away does the interior

space of the walkway begin to open up, as the floor surface, the interior of the back balustrade, and the undersurfaces of the ceiling zone become visible, enclosing elements. Reluctantly, at the last moment, the walkway becomes more present than the space around it. The walkway's own materiality is revealed on the balustrade and posts, where the wood's directional grain rises through the reflective surface of white paint.



Fig. 2. *Corpus Christi Catholic Church, walkway interior, looking south (author).*

Once inside the walkway (Fig. 2), the experience recalls the rhythmic intervals of the line of cedar trees it intersects. It uses repetitive architectonic elements, none a figure in its own right, to measure out its distance. The ceiling plane is expanded into a perceivable zone by hanging lamps, intersecting metal tie rods, and open fascia panels. The sides of the walkway are open in the middle, allowing the walkway to bleed out into the space around it. Sunlight spills across the walkway from one side or the other, depending on the time of day, and is filtered by the balustrade and the cedar trees into discrete pockets, increasing the presence of the floor. Sunlight defines the posts, carving them into sharp, dark edges against brightly lit faces. Depending on our focus, we can be either enclosed within the walkway or part of the space outside.

The pragmatics that contributed to the walkway design are an integral part of its “wild being.” The openness of the walkway is responsive to the heat and humidity of Mississippi. The dark crawl space stems from three concerns: to allow cooling and drying breezes under the walkway floor, to keep the length of the wooden beams away from the damp ground and avoid rot, and to pierce the ground plane as little as possible to avoid disturbing the roots of the trees. Like a clay bowl, the walkway reveals the materials and processes of its making. The wooden construction reiterates the materials of the church, which itself attests to the abundantly forested region in which it stands. The process of construction is discernible, but speaks of relationships rather than forming a narrative in its own right. Every construction element in the walkway can be carried by one person and assembled by one or two. The size of the elements calls forth a bodily response—we can easily imagine lifting the wooden members of the balustrade and setting them into place. The walkway also reveals the ecology of its region and the effects of its climate: the strong Mississippi sun has caused paint in the sun to crack, and the wet heat has caused paint in the shade to mildew.

Every piece of architecture interacts with natural elements and with the mobile human perceiver to reveal interrelationships such as the ones presented in the example above. But in most architecture today these relationships are overshadowed by figural maneuvers in form and image that call attention directly to the architecture as something we understand primarily through vision and language. Symbolism is present in the Macon walkway in crosses formed by the tie rods and in the three-to-one relationship of each bay and its constitutive members. But the deemphasis of outline and figure in favor of surface and repetition allows a corporeal relationship to flourish without being consumed by symbolism. This subversion of conceptualization strengthens our corporeal connection with the walkway by dragging out the interval between experience and conceptualization of which Merleau-Ponty speaks, and allows us to appreciate its wild being.

Since the preclassical Greeks, architecture's slow and steady development into the modern era has been one of increasing conceptualization. As we have increasingly laid bare the world as conceptual object, we have concomitantly made architecture into an object to be read and decoded rather than experienced. Current buildings all too often consist of an efficient structure covered with a thin, communicative veneer of symbolic images. Once these images are recognized and consumed intellectually, there is nothing to encourage awareness of our relationship with the larger world.

Openness to architecture's wild being can change our experience of any building, urban or ex-urban. Every building, no matter how theoretically derived, is, in the end, unavoidably material. It reflects sunlight and hides parts of itself in deep shadow. Its surfaces grow cold and hot, crack and become host to moss and insects. But the natural wildness of ex-urban settings is perhaps the most effective setting for communication by the wild, material aspects of architecture. In these settings, human invention does not dominate and enframe the field. The vast emptiness of Texas scrubland is

echoed in the sparse layout of its small towns, where buildings punctuate the landscape rather than define it. The wild and out-of-control, the patently undesigned, are constant reminders of an order and spatiality that exceed and envelop the human realm.

Abram writes about the inclination for Native Americans to know their landscape intimately by name. The names are densely distributed and reflect the sensuous properties of each place. He cites examples of Native American place names such as “big cottonwood trees stand spreading here and there,” “coarse textured rocks lie above in a compact cluster,” and “water flows down on top of a regular succession of flat rocks.”⁸ Architecture can be responsive to site in this same way, its forms and surfaces designed in celebration of the sensuous, natural properties of site. And in celebrating its own materiality, architecture retains a wild presence that beckons us toward a reciprocal relationship with it. The Macon walkway, dynamically and relationally defined, exists in a reciprocal, give-and-take relationship with its surroundings and with the moving inhabitant. Its ambiguous spatial qualities and discrete, tectonic parts resist labeling; instead, they engender qualitative descriptions that recall the complexity and sensuousness of Native American place names.

The world, in its complex beauty and wildness, lives, breathes, and communicates its intelligence through its sensuous aspects. By resisting conceptual control through its own material presence, architecture gives voice to a suggestion that we can find our way back into a relationship with this wild world by asserting kinship with nature rather than dominion over it—by letting it surprise us, delight us, confound us. The first step toward recovering a reciprocal relationship with the world is to acknowledge it as a dynamic sub-

ject equal to ourselves. The wild being of architecture resists consumption and points outward to the dynamic processes of a world that is continually emerging. In doing so, it illuminates the connected physicality of our existence and positions us in dynamic relationship with a host of other, equal subjects. Oral cultures, all primarily ex-urban, understood the dynamic and participatory nature of this relationship. Openness to architecture’s wild being can allow us to rediscover it for ourselves.

NOTES

I would like to thank David Lewis for discussing his intentions for the Corpus Christi parish hall and walkway.

¹I use the word “object” to denote a material entity, but the term needs some clarification. Although the relationship between self and other, subject and object, forms a continuum, the modern era has articulated a sharp distinction between them, classifying the sentient human being as subject and the surrounding world as a separate object, itself made of discrete objects. The word “object,” therefore, can connote the separateness inherent in the modern position, which I do not intend. I use “object” because it stresses the materiality of a thing, as opposed to the word “entity,” which stresses a thing’s existence and is silent about its materiality.

²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston, Ill., 1968, 218.

³David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, New York, 1996, 222.

⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 218.

⁵Abram, 50-52. The direct quotation is from page 51.

⁶Abram, 260.

⁷Heidegger, “World Picture,” 128-30.

⁸Abram, 155.