

Space in Architecture: A Reinterpretation of Its Essential Role

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One of the most influential theoretical positions defining the predominant conception of architecture in the twentieth century has been the conception that architecture is the art of creating and defining space. However, though prevalent, the formulation of this theory has contained no centralized singular manifestation. Consequently, this multiplicity of views on the subject has produced a multitude of contradictory statements concerning the meaning and value of the concept of architecture as space.¹

The beginnings of the theory of space as a central idea within architectural discourse emerged in the late nineteenth century concurrent with the appearance of the Art Nouveau movement. It was in this movement that the tendencies to merge the notions of construction and ornament into a unified aesthetic sensibility emerged, as well as the development of a new type of spatial awareness that was more highly abstracted than its predecessors. As a result, the central role that the notion of space played within the foundational theories of this early form of modernism was indicative of its later theoretical emergence as the intrinsic attribute of modern architecture.²

This emergence of the idea of space as of the essential aspect of architecture also coincided with the prevalent aesthetic theories of the nineteenth century as defined by Hegel's system of aesthetic understanding. Two prevalent ideas within this system stated that true art attained the fullest expression of pure idea and that the hierarchical order of the fine arts was to be circumscribed in relation to the ability of the methodology of expression of the specific art form to manifest the metaphysical properties of spirit. Consequently, as Cornelis Van de Ven asserts in his article on the role of space, "The identification of space with architecture in the early 1890's promoted architecture, unquestionably, as the *ars magna*, because space is, by definition the most immaterial of all means of artistic expression."³

Despite its prevalence throughout much of the present century, this theoretical stance has not been without its critics. A more recent example of this criticism can be found in a text by the philosopher Roger Scruton. In his book, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*.⁴ Scruton sets out to discover the essential qualities of the aesthetic understanding involved in the architectural endeavor. Scruton asserts that the modern conception of space embodied by the statement of one modern architect as; "the most difficult aspect of architecture, but it is its essence and the ultimate destination to which architecture addresses itself"⁵ is essentialist by nature and cannot possibly describe *all* that we appreciate in architecture. In fact, he contends that the concept of space as a central factor in our understanding of architecture is suspect, because most theorists advocating this premise utilize architecture to illustrate the meaning behind spatial experience. Due to this fact, Scruton dismisses this reasoning as vacuous, circular, and fundamentally a functionalist argument masquerading as an aesthetic one.⁶

In attempting to search for the essential nature of this art and

before validity of Scruton's criticism can be assessed, there are several questions that must be addressed. Only after the issues that these questions raise are explored will it be possible to illustrate the true role that the notion of space plays in this endeavor. In the first instance; what is one describing fundamentally, when one is speaking of "space"? The second is two fold; what is the essential aspect or intent that separates architecture from the other arts and why is it necessary for humans to attempt its creation? Finally; how does humankind's interaction with this attribute affect the human condition in both the physical and imaginative sense? It is the assertion of this paper that after exploring the issues endemic to these questions, Scruton's conception of space will emerge as being rather limited because of its reliance on the scientific depiction of absolute space. Once a more encompassing view of the nature of space is investigated, it will be possible to uncover its true relation to the architectural endeavor.

II

Our starting point for the exploration of the theory of space in architecture will commence with an examination of two statements made by Scruton in the opening paragraphs of the section investigating its role in the creation of architecture. In the first, the assertion is made that such a theory marginalizes much of the architect's activity into the useless practice of creating a decorative container devoid of both utility and meaning. A second assertion follows the lead of the first, in its insinuation that one can experience all the spatial qualities of an edifice such as St. Peter's in Rome by standing in an open field. The only difference lies not in the change in the spatial configuration, but merely in the absence of the material envelope designed by Bramante and Michelangelo.⁷ Though he immediately plays down the significance of what each statement implies on the grounds of its literal nature, they nevertheless underlie his criticism of the notion of space as an intrinsic component to the essential nature of architecture.

These statements indicate a conception of space transposed by the philosopher onto the ideas of prominent spatial theorists such as Gideon and Zevi, in a potentially inappropriate manner. Scruton interprets their concepts as portraying the totality of our aesthetic appreciation and value that we place on architecture rests exclusively on our experience of the remaining void (space) between the constructed materiality of an edifice. In *Architecture as Space*; Zevi clearly states that this is not the intention:

To maintain that internal space is the essence of architecture does not mean that the value of an architectural work rests *entirely* (my italics) on its spatial values..... While it is incontestable that beautiful decoration will never create beautiful space, it is also true that a satisfactory space, if it is not complemented

by an adequate treatment of walls which enclose it is not sufficient to create an aesthetic environment.⁸

So, whereas Zevi is attempting to describe space as inherently multi-dimensional with a layering of aspects describing and defining it, Scruton bases his assumption of its character on the scientific notion of absolute space. This follows the Cartesian notion of space as extension. By this, space is identical with that which constitutes its spatiality, i.e., “length, breadth, and thickness.” It is that which can be divided, shaped, and displaced in any way, yet still retains its inherent nature through all such mutations.¹⁰ By this, space is considered the remaining void between the material nature of the physical world. This view is related to the negative perspective on space expounded by theorists such as Riegl and Wolfflin, who spoke of the “horrible vacuum” that surrounds our existence on earth. This theory of the intrinsic spatial apprehension of humanity arose soon after the “architecture as space” theory became prominent.¹¹ It sees the attribute of space in a similar fashion to both Descartes generally, and Scruton more specifically, where the idea of space is based on a reverse physicality that can only be measured in the negative. It is considered the unoccupied emptiness between the surfaces of the corporeal mass of the world’s materiality.

This conception of space seems rather limited due to its oversight in regards to an imperative characteristic of humankind’s imaginative interaction with it, i.e. the space of habitation. This interpretation of the spatial characteristics of objective world addresses the totality of its space inclusive of the subject’s imagination, value systems, and memories. It melds these characteristics to the more concrete materiality of our world which is comprised of such attributes as light, dark, material surface extension, and values of scale. All that our senses perceive in the present as well as memories of past encounters are incorporated to bring about a full experience of space as phenomenon. This notion of the space of habitation is described by Bachelard as; “Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination.”¹²

So, when the argument is presented for space as an essential component of architecture, to be successful, it must allow for both the idea of a geometricized spatiality as well as an imaginative one. It also calls for a balance between the influence of mass and space on our perception of architecture. Thus, the basis for this interpretation demands that the various aspects of building such as materials, decoration, and light are *all* intrinsic elements to the architectural realm. Volumes, structures, and walls then, are the constitutive elements serving as boundaries or interludes in the continuity of the infinite space of the world. Such constructs and spatial relationships function on several levels. The first is concerned with the notion of abstract geometricized space, the second involves our perception within the material present by our senses, while the third and final one involves the spaces interpreted by the imagination which fuses past, present, and future possibilities into a singular spatial experience.

To consider, as Scruton does, that by the utilization of the expression “space,” one is describing a “void” between several solids is a superficial view of a complex issue. The corporeal mass of the envelope and the “vacancy of matter” found between must be thought of in terms of its being a unified ensemble as inherently interdependent components. The aesthetic spatiality of a building must be judged in relation to both of these attributes simultaneously. These elements coalesce into an inhabitable environment that interacts with the faculty of the imagination. This subtle mixture of elements composes more than a geometrically measurable void, it constitutes a temporal, material, and spatial context where humanity can dwell. It is a necessary element for that existence, both in terms of a physical and spiritual survival. To interpret the theory of “space as architecture” as describing this essential attribute in reference

solely to its geometrically measured aspects is to miss Bachelard’s profound point that “Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.”¹³ The former interpretation dismisses the importance of the imagination, that attribute which speaks most to our aesthetic judgment.

III

To understand the notion of the creation of space as the potential attribute that separates architecture from other mediums traditionally associated with the fine arts, it is important to analyze the reasons why the definition and demarcation of space is such an imperative undertaking by humankind. Within this context several pertinent questions emerge immediately. What force drives the human race to construct material containers that manipulate or “carve out” spatial environments from the absolute space contained within the world? What is the force that drives the creation of edifices enclosing space that range from the modest nature of singular dwellings to the soaring sacred space found in cathedrals, mosques, and palaces comprising the built environment? A potential answer can seemingly be found in the aspect of *necessity* inherent to human existence within the world.

In the creative process of the conception of architecture, necessity contains a two-fold influence. The first, emerges as the need for the creation of habitable space serving as protection from the hostile forces of nature, while the second involves the human spirit’s need for artistic expression embodied in its attempts to manifest the concept of beauty. The former has been deemed in certain intellectual circles as “the inventor of the arts.” In a passage by Charles Batteux in his text, *Les Beaux-Arts Reduit a un Meme Principe*,¹⁴ this attribute of *need* is described as the most ingenious and best learned in the true life lessons of all the masters of mankind.

Primitive humankind, having found himself cold, hungry, and exposed to the dangers of the climate, searched for a place of refuge under the branches of a nearby tree. After discovering the utility of these branches, he soon learned that by the bringing together or the joining of several trees in the formation of a primitive roof was more effective in protecting himself, his family, and his provisions. As time passed, these first observations and experiments were multiplied by others, which in turn were compiled with more sophisticated notions of taste and industry that added ornament and ideas concerning solidity in the formation of a body of fundamental principles. These canons came to be seen as comprising the essential parameters of architectural theory and the art of building. Therefore, at its essence, this art form was declared as the action of “making dwellings firm, convenient, and decent.”¹⁵ In other words, Batteux is describing the primary action undertaken in the endeavor of building conceptualized as the making of hospitable and formidable spaces for man to dwell within.

This description outlines an account of a view of the formation of this art claiming to have its origins in the mythical image of the “primitive hut.” This image served as the paradigm for a theory of architecture that held the necessity of shelter as the first and foremost driving principle behind the manifestation of all built structures. This intellectual lineage spawned a movement in the eighteenth century that advocated the return to the ideas of the great ancient authors on the subject such as Seneca, Lucretius, and most notably Vitruvius, in the development of a doctrine that refused the ideas of civilized progress in search of an essential nature of architecture grounded within the structural and spatial beginnings of the archetypes of dwellings and monuments.¹⁶ It saw a return to a theoretical foundation embedded in the mythical notions of the purity of spirit and the innocence of the “primitive savage.” This archetype stood as the symbol of the innate goodness of humankind before his exposure to the corrupting influences of civilization. This movement proposed a theory grounded in humankind’s intrinsically natural mores, one centering on an architectural morality that connected the necessities of function and symbolism.

This conceptual tendency found an ardent disciple in the historian and philosophe, Marc-Antoine Laugier¹⁷ who pressed the formulation of an aesthetic logic from the mythical imagery of the narrative of origins through the elimination of all material and social references from his manifesto. This process of elimination involving what Laugier considered the superfluous baggage of the architectural endeavor was assumed to have left only the natural instinct or "simple nature" of humankind to invent the most efficient and authentic means for the satisfaction of Human need. The figure of the "little rustic hut," as it was described by the author, depicted three archetypal elements of architectural intervention relating to this act of efficiency.

According to Anthony Vidler, these elements were: "those parts of the building essential to the composition of the orders, those introduced subsequently according to need, and those added simply by caprice."¹⁸ Laugier considered that the authentic essence of architecture could be found only within the first category and equated materially to three basic components: the columns, the entablature, and the roof. He went on further to claim that: "If each of these three parts is found to be placed in the situation and in the form suitable to it, there will be nothing to add for the work to be perfect."¹⁹ It was felt that the quest for the embodiment of beauty as well as the fulfillment of the need for shelter could be accomplished in architecture within the elegant simplicity symbolized in the vision of the "primitive hut."

Though claiming the opposite, this austere interpretation of the metaphoric nature of origins contains merit in its acknowledgment of the importance of necessity. However, its inherent single-mindedness ignores a paramount question pertaining to the creation of architecture: What truly accounts for the emergence of the aesthetic qualities or "art" of architecture if only pure material necessity is addressed?²⁰ A possible answer emerges within Abbe Batteux's claim of the impossibility of reducing architecture to a singular origin. He contended that it was and would always be an "art of necessity," but due to its intrinsic aspirations to reach a higher plane of meaning it was an inherently mixed art form.²¹

Consequently, architecture was to be seen as being at once useful and beautiful. It contained all the practical and societal requirements of solidity, commodity, and pleasure, which are all elements grounded within our perception of the guild related arts or crafts, but differs from them because it cannot be judged solely on the merits of its utilitarian nature. Nor could it be likened exclusively to what is generally categorized as the fine arts because it must achieve more than merely pleasing certain senses such as sight and sound. It forms a distinct third category, one which resides between these two categories of expression; the fine arts and the crafts of necessity. On one level, this endeavor is an art of convenience and comfort which is raised above this aspect of invention driven by need, through its development according to the attribute of taste which inevitably rests on the imitation of nature. Consequently, it seems that the essential nature of architecture either as space or any other element, pertains to more than the mere fulfillment of the human need for shelter or inhabitable space. It entails another element in the equation of necessity that drives men to push for a higher ideal in the creation of the spatial constructs of architecture.

In his seminal text on aesthetics, the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel describes an intrinsic need of the spirit that seems to relate directly to this secondary notion of necessity. This aspect drives humans to create works of art such as architecture that go beyond the mere fulfillment of material need and desire. It seeks to fulfill a universal "need of the spirit" through attempts at the material manifestation of the elusive concept of beauty. Hegel describes this spiritual quest as; "The universal need for art, that is to say, is man's rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self."²² The universal need described in this quote finds its origin in the inherent quality of the being of humankind as a reflective consciousness. Such a

consciousness or self-realization can occur in two distinct ways that are intricately connected.

The first method is *theoretical* in nature, while the second is embodied through *practical* action. In the former, there is an inherent drive to discover the intrinsic qualities that define such a consciousness. This entails attempts to translate the emotional state of humankind into a self-conscious image that defines its essential attributes and what it is related to within the objective world. In the latter, the needs of this consciousness are fulfilled through practical activity, which satisfy impulses to alter external things in ways that impress upon them the seal of humankind's inner Being. Such activity shapes this external material into forms that becomes manifest objects of an external realization of this consciousness. Such activity is endemic to all human labor, but practical activity in regards to the artistic endeavor pushes beyond the normalcy of this in the everyday sense and in doing so raises two expectations. Again, to quote Hegel;

The work of art, present to sense, should give lodgment to an inner-content, while on the other hand, it should so present this content as to make us realize that this content itself, as well as its outward shape is not merely something real in the actual and immediately present world, but is a product of the imagination and its artistic activity.²³

So, in terms of Hegel's argument, the essential quality of a work of art consists in the symbolic content of the sensuous material manipulated in reference to the interpretation of an event by the imagination. A form created in this fashion attempts to duplicate the parameters of the objective world in a certain way so as to improve ones' conscious understanding of it.

In terms of our argument involving the creation of space as the essential element that separates architecture from the other arts, several of the ideas put forth in both Laugier's and Hegel's texts could be combined and utilized to provide a description of this attribute that counters Scruton's claim against its central position within this endeavor. With such a combination, architecture could then be described as the distinctly human endeavor of creating inhabitable spatial environments in which to dwell. To be rightfully classified as such, it must satisfy humankind's needs in the material sense, through the provision of shelter, and in the spiritual sense, through the material manifestation of spaces semantically charged that challenge the rational powers of those residing within its enclosures.

In Ruskin's description concerning the virtues of architecture in *The Stones of Venice*, a similar point involving the duality of its intended ends is made quite eloquently; "It is not, therefore, that the signs of his affections, which man leaves upon his work, are indeed more ennobling than the signs of his intelligence, but it is the balance of both whose expression we need...."²⁴ Therefore, it serves to protect the inhabitants of its spaces from both enemies and harsh climatic conditions through the aptitude and strength of its enclosures, while simultaneously providing an outlet for the fundamental striving for the creation and admiration of beauty that the artistic enterprise fulfills. Architecture then, has the potential to be considered the creation of a spatially structured environment that enriches our experience of the world and is a necessary element which humans strive to create.

IV

The final question that must be addressed to fully lay bare the implications surrounding the notion of space as the essential attribute in the creation of architecture pertains to how humankind inhabits and interacts with it as a structured spatial environment. It is here that the nature of the reciprocal relationship of humankind and space emerges. This relationship entails humankind defining the spatial structure of an architectural edifice, which in turn, comes to

obtain a profound influence on the definition of his activity and even his nature. It is this interaction that separates the architectural endeavor from the other arts. Though other arts such as painting or sculpture can have a profound emotional effect and carry with them an incredibly charged semantic content, they lack the capacity to create or demarcate a place. For architecture essentially seeks to create spaces in which one can dwell, and it is the aspect of dwelling within such spaces that orders as well as bestows its sense of purpose and meaning. And it is this ability to dwell within the artifacts of this enterprise that gives architecture its unique character in relation to the other arts.

When one inhabits architectural space, the experiential qualities of this encounter do not consist solely of geometrically based relationships of substances or volumes, but of the occupation of such spaces by the faculty of the imagination. When this faculty inhabits the spatial boundaries of a place, it utilizes past experiences, dreams, future possibilities, and even latent fears in the constitution of the essential parameters that give meaning to its space. Such a faculty simultaneously reacts and constructs the experience of the space it encounters. Thus, habitation of architectural space is not exclusively a passive venture, but a rationally active one as well.

Considered in this sense, the spatial qualities of a house are not experienced merely in terms of its being an inert box with six static sides. Humans intrinsically attach to such spaces values such as "protective" or "sacred," which carry both real and imagined connotations. With spatial perceptions of this sort, the spectator loses the detached analytical gaze of the cartographer attempting to scientifically measure space, and engages it in the same emotional and intellectual state that one interacts with art. However, unlike the other artifacts of art, the encounter with the space of architecture is within the context of the everyday, in fact, it comprises this very context. This is how, unlike other art forms, architecture is simultaneously ordered by and orders humankind's habitation of its spaces. Architectural space is experienced or "lived in," both in the material sense of an organism existing within the boundaries of a place and in the more spiritual sense as described by Bachelard in the earlier statement quoted above as being experienced; "with all the partiality of the imagination."²⁵

When we dwell within the space of architecture this way, connections are observed between its boundaries and many of the essential notions pertaining to our manner of perceiving, thinking, and feeling. Likewise, a spatial order can also be indicative of temporal passage, for it can have contained within its confines, remnants of significant past events that allow it to become a symbolic focal point representative of past histories, present events, and future possibilities simultaneously. Through its survival of the effects of dramatic past events, an edifice becomes the material manifestation of a historical mythology that lends added significance to the lives of both the individual and its culture within its spatial boundaries. It provides both the artifact and the metaphoric backdrop to the human imagination's experience of past and present events. The ordering of space endemic to the creation of our sense of place serves as the perpetual reminder of the world's temporal sequence. In doing this, it gives humankind a foundational knowledge in regards to what has been accomplished before, and in providing this link to the past, indicates potential avenues for the future.

This reciprocal relationship between the demarcation of place spatially and the definition of human nature occurs in a simultaneity of scales ranging from the individual domicile to that of an entire city. Architecture divides continuous or absolute space according to the scale necessary for the activities of repose, labor, worship, or recreation. In the constitution of such orders, a spatial reinforcing of the societal hierarchy perseveres and is handed down from generation to generation. No design, construction or experience of a building can be void of the cultural imagery and technological advancement of the society that created it. Architecture must con-

stantly modulate human activities endemic to our dwelling within an environment conducive to the definition of both personal and cultural identities simultaneously. Therefore, a spatial construct on an urban scale or a wall on an individual scale are not simply located by whim or caprice. Their form and location relate directly to the complex nature of humanity's spatial experience, which is at once both physical and spiritual. The spatial orders of architectural constructs define and serve as a backdrop to every individual perception of culture, emotional insight, and possible sense of fulfillment.

Hence, the concept of space, as an intrinsic element to the architectural endeavor can never be envisioned as merely being the "void" contained between the material nature of its enclosing structures. Space, in this sense, must be thought of more in terms of an environment or surroundings comprised of qualities such as light, sound, and materiality that influence human perception and spark the faculty of the imagination. It is the design and manipulation of these aspects in an intentional effort to transform our experience of space that distinguishes architecture from the other arts. Though the other arts can interact with or represent space, none can truly define it in a real sense, and it is this definition that impacts our lives within the context of the everyday both physically and spiritually. So, in the creation of architecture unlike any of the other fine arts, space is being defined and our experience of it is being enhanced. This act, in essence, speaks of the authentic and fundamental nature of architecture.

NOTES

- ¹ Cornelis Van de Ven, "The Theory of Space in Architecture" in *Companion To Contemporary Architectural Thought*, eds. Ben Farmer and Hentie Louw (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 357.
- ² Van de Ven, p. 357
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).
- ⁵ Denys Lasdun in *RIBAJ* (September 1977): 367. Scruton, op. cit., p. 43.
- ⁶ Scruton, p. 48.
- ⁷ Scruton, p. 43.
- ⁸ Bruno Zevi, *Space as Architecture* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 30.
- ⁹ This follows a description of Descartes's theory of space given by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1962), p. 123.
- ¹⁰ Heidegger, p. 125.
- ¹¹ Van de Ven, p. 359.
- ¹² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. XXXVI.
- ¹³ Bachelard, p. 47.
- ¹⁴ Charles Bateau, *Les Beaux-arts reduits a un meme principe*, 2d ed. (Paris: 1776), p. 24-26. Anthony Vidler, *The Writing of The Walls* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 7.
- ¹⁵ Vidler, p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Vidler, p. 7-8.
- ¹⁷ Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingals, Inc.).
- ¹⁸ Vidler, p. 19.
- ¹⁹ First quoted in Vidler, p. 19, from the original text by Laugier, *Essai sur l'architecture*, 2d ed. (Paris: 1755), p. 10.
- ²⁰ Vidler, p. 20.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 31; also quoted in Paul Crowther's article, "Art, Architecture, and Self-Conscious: An Exploration of Hegel's Aesthetic," *Journal of Philosophy and The Visual Arts* (1990): 66.
- ²³ Hegel, p. 635; also Crowther, p. 66.
- ²⁴ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1907), p. 38-39.
- ²⁵ Bachelard, p. XXXVII. See also, note 13 above.