POSTURE

by

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At roughly three-decade intervals architecture changes its reigning metaphors. Here are four familiar ones: Architecture as Machine, Architecture as Language, Architecture as Organism, Architecture as Landscape.[1]

Today, at least at architecture schools, the Architecture as Landscape metaphor is making inroads. At some schools it prevails. It prevails not just over buildings that derive their form from their natural site or that would disappear if they could (diving underground or dissolving in transparency), but that seek, themselves, to become hardly more than "condition-producers" for the activities that might occur in and around them. Like weather. There are no defined rooms or even spaces in such buildings. Rather, consisting almost entirely of ramps and sloped floors and diaphanous walls, they seek to create "zones" and "areas," "fields," "terrains," "occasions," and "junctures."

Both the Architecture as Landscape metaphor and the Architecture as Organism metaphor enjoy the authority of Nature. Because of that, they join together nicely—or can. Witness the renderings that grace the pages of *Evolo*: structures that "grow" or construct themselves, that gather rain like lilies, or that, reaching the clouds, become grown-over with vines, hanging gardens. Machine and Language: not so much.

There is a fifth metaphor, however. It contrasts the four I have mentioned, and it reigned until Miesian modernism took over from the Corbusian one. I'd like to call it the *Architecture as Being* metaphor. And I'd like to argue for its renewal.

The Architecture as Being metaphor operates still, but not openly. It produced what Geoffrey Scott called "the architecture of humanism" in a 1914 book of the same name. On this metaphor, buildings—or rather works of architecture—have *character*; they have presence; they have posture. They live and breathe and project attitude. They have rights and stake claims. They have feelings; they have souls.

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[1] Peter Collins in *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture* (1960) calls them "analogies," and lists four: mechanical, biological, linguistic, and gastronomic. Collins's now forgotten book is recommended reading.

And of course they have bodies. Indeed, it is mostly through their bodies—their stances, poses, physiques, and how they look (in both senses of the word "look")—that buildings tell us what their attitudes and feelings are about being *beings* in the world, "creatures" in the most general sense. This is why we can still ask whether this or that work of architecture is hostile or friendly, confident or shy, honest or disingenuous, generous or miserly, respectful or cheeky, indifferent or eager-to-please. We might see it as shorn or adorned, clean or dirty, tailored or disheveled, quiet or loud. We can ask: How (and why) is this building muscular and articulated and that one soft and smooth; why is this one delicate and that one rugged, this one loved and that one neglected. This building strains to hold a difficult pose; that one dances with ease. This building sits comfortably in its skin, that one squirms uncomfortably, as though trying to get out of its clothes.

All this is *projection*, of course, empathy, or *einfuhlung* (as Theodor Lipps called it). Building don't *really* do any of these things. But then so too are the other metaphors "projections," but with the following difference: thinking of building as Beings is fundamentally *ethical*.

Why?

Because there exists an essential, anti-reductive *rule* to ethical life as it is practiced by humans. And that rule, stated broadly, is this: to treat stones like plants, to treat plants like animals, to treat animals like humans; to treat strangers like friends and friends like family; to treat family like your own self and yourself as a sputtering flame of the divine, a bringer of greater life—elevation—to all participants in the great chain of Being.

All architecture produced in behalf of life is "ecological" to be sure. But nature's crowning achievement is human consciousness—the very consciousness that you and I look at the world *with*, and *through*, in order to realize humanity's special responsibility to, and increasingly responsibility *for*, all life. To address this responsibility requires that we find the energy to do so; and so we must address, first, the human spirit—ours and everyone else's. We can do this only when we uphold our own dignity and that others', and this involves, because we are architects, *making buildings whose character embodies the virtues and attitudes we would want everyone to have, including ourselves*.

Questions about the character, intention, values, and feelings conveyed/embodied by works of architecture—and thus the ones they promote—are, alas, almost as complex as they are in human psychology. This applies not only to Greek and Renaissance architecture (which is where the Architecture as Body/Soul/Being metaphor originates), but to modern architecture too. Certainly, you cannot understand Le Corbusier's architecture until you see his buildings as animal or human (mostly female) bodies. Nor can you understand many great modern architects' work, like Jim Stirling's or Louis Kahn's or Frank Gehry's, whose buildings so clearly strut, or stand witness, or swirl. One does not simply *look* at these buildings as abstract compositions. One feels what it would like to *be* them, standing, moving, gesturing, posing, posturing. (And I mean the buildings, not the architects). A handful of illustrations (see below) should get the reader of this short essay going.

It's OK to laugh in acknowledgment of the body-imagery consciously or unconsciously deployed by these architects. It's exciting and a bit embarrassing. Let that laugh settle. Let it settle into the Buddha smile that comes from realizing that it's the humanness of architecture's very Being that's first smiling at you. •

Statues on Easter Island

Salk Institute, La Jolla, Louis Kahn.

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *The Gay Divorcee,* publicity poster.

“Fred & Ginger” Building, Prague; Frank Gehry

Arnold Schwarzenegger circa 1975, publicity photo.

Leicester Engineering Building, Leicester; Stirling and Gowan, 1959.