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Grant Bauermeister

Iowa State University, gwbauer@iastate.edu

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AN ARCHITECTURAL NARCISSISM

Grant Bauermeister

I enjoy architecture.

Should I read only architectural literature?

I am, in fact, in the business of architecture.

I enjoy working in studio. Should I only work in studio?

I am, in fact, most productive in that space.

Reading about architecture does make my forms more beautiful, my spaces more responsive to human needs, my justifications more salient.

Working in studio does give me better spaces in which to draw and build and environment in which I can run ideas past peers.

Yet, trapping ourselves in these supposedly ideal creative spaces, physical or academic, can hinder our pursuit of good architecture, perhaps even cloud our vision of what “good” architecture is.

According to Alvar Aalto, *“The ultimate goal of the architect...is to create a paradise. Every house, every product of architecture... should be a fruit of our endeavor to build an earthly paradise for people.”* This quest is innately related to the human condition, which itself is an impossibly nebulous concept.

What is a Paradise?

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Karl Marx would say the means to such an end are perfected equality facilitated by careful societal planning.

Jack Kerouac is still trying to stitch a paradise together through a possibly endless journey. Even those lesser-known or less esteemed writers create beautifully valid snippets, murmurs of what it is to exist as a people.

Yiyun Li loses, finds, loses, and begins to reclaim the basic code of much of her existence through the creation of language arts in an adopted tongue, renouncing her previous identity.

Reuters, Politico, BBC, all provide written accounts of vital world events, analysis of notable rhetoric, or stories of influential people.

Satire, like *The Onion*, deconstructs social notions of interpersonal relations, turning them on their head, running them through a sieve, wringing out hypocrisy and illogical internalized social behaviors.

Non-architectural writing alerts us to globally salient issues, ones that may have the ability to be addressed through architecture. If an issue has been written about through an architectural lens, it has already been identified by the architecture community. Good architectural writing gives incredible examples of how to apply the cultural ideals of humanism to constructs, be they of steel and bolts, landscape taming, purely social manipulations, or of an academic nature. This is undoubtedly important! However, what is presented has already been run through the architect. The conduit. How are we to uniquely channel concepts of the human condition into planned constructs without a robust knowledge of what the human condition may consist of at all?

La Sagrada Familia is known by millions of architects and non-architects across hundreds of countries. The structure is one of the best-known works of Architecture in existence. And yet, there is nothing about this work that suggests its origins were from prevailing architectural literature of the time. Rather, Antoni Gaudi's work was deeply rooted in his interpretation of the culture of his time, particularly of religious matters.

Architects attempt to shoehorn La Sagrada Familia in to the trappings of style, highlighting its supposed adherence to noucentista, gothic, or, perhaps most validly, art nouveau formal rules. Yet, none of these academically architectural rules seemed to have had much weight in Gaudi's mind.

Gaudi had a defined drive throughout the design and build process of the church. By many accounts, this structure was a tribute, not to Architecture, but to Gaudi's understanding of faith and spirituality. Gaudi understood this spiritual culture to place emphasis on the natural world. "The straight line belongs to men, the curved one to God," he mused. Through this rhetorical drive, Gaudi imagined alluring curvilinear supports in abstracted natural

colors, impossibly holding the naturalistic masses above. He imagined a phalanx-like entrance, a grandly inviting yet mysterious threshold.

Other inspiration was more blatantly Christian in nature, such as the named facades telling the stories of the Nativity, the Passion, and the Glory. This method of using pure culture as a driver for design creates a wealth of poetic inspiration ready to be transformed from literary to physical. Regardless of the changing users' familiarity with or belief in the Christian source material, the adherence to distinctly human culture resounds equally with those familiar with architectural literature and those who would confuse Corbusier with the name of a small European city.

This is, of course, not to say that Gaudi entirely dismissed architectural thinking of the time. In order to realize the goal of the deeply cultural forms, Gaudi understood the use of the Golden Ratio, chiaroscuro, and structural considerations. These architectural aspects were extremely important tools in the creation of poetic works. And undoubtedly Gaudi's interpretations of the source material in an architectural sense were enhanced or at least guided by Architectural literature of the time. Yet most importantly, Gaudi understood the existence of a truth greater than Architecture, perhaps not explicitly in the teachings of Christianity but in the submission to culture as a driver of built spaces instead of vice versa.

As architectural author Joan Bassegoda writes: "Looking toward the future, the lesson of Gaudi is not to copy his solutions but rather to look at nature for inspiration ... nature does not go out of fashion." This conclusion moves towards a more pure understanding of Gaudi's success, yet loses itself in a purely architectural statement of nature's value. Gaudi didn't begin with nature as the inspiration, but rather a distinct cultural understanding of nature and its relation to human perception of the Heavens, and more nebulously, human existence itself. Simply following the predetermined architectural doctrine of naturalistic inspiration or styles is not sufficient to create lasting works. Art nouveau, supposedly based in nature, did in fact die, as all architectural styles eventually do.

There is an alarming trend among much of architectural academia, a misguided confidence in our line of creation as entirely self-contained, self-sufficient, their imposition righteous. Perhaps, no architect embodies this philosophy so completely as Peter Eisenman. His works "stand mute, like cold abstractions,

intellectual exercises far removed from the experience of the average person, and not so few intellectuals,” in the words of Richard Jocas addressing Stanford University. This analysis was meant as praise, yet to most rightfully sounds like a condemnation. How could this outcome possibly create an “earthly paradise for people?” It does nothing for the layman, and is at times too far abstracted to be used as useful guidance in academia. This is intentional of Eisenman.

“I think architecture ought to explore architecture.”

To Eisenman, Architecture is for architecture, by architecture. It overshadows material use or constraints (“I’m not interested in Peter Zumthor’s work or people who spend their time worrying about the details or the grain of the wood on one side or the color of the material on the surface”), accommodation (“I would never live in anything I design”), or even the very idea of evoking spatial response on an emotional level (“I have always been on the side opposed to phenomenology”).

Interestingly, Eisenman claims to value *“architecture as a conceptual, cultural, and intellectual enterprise.”* Following previous arguments, this should ensure a true Architecture. Except for one key issue.

Eisenman’s culture, intellect, and therefore concept, is trapped solidly in the realm of architectural thought, one devoid of political policy, the tangible and intangible needs of humans, or a search for purpose in life rather than purpose in form.

Creating truly immortal works lies not solely in following (or deconstructing) any sort of academically agreed upon architectural style or doctrine alone but rather in the creation of monuments to a greater, holistically human understanding.