

The Cultural Significance of Architecture: In Memory of Dalibor Vesely

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Thresholds

In chapter two of *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, Dalibor paid a brief visit to Chartres cathedral. It was the west portal that caught his interest, with its lavish sculptures of biblical prophets and patriarchs. One of the wonderful things about this portal is the way the sculptures somehow merge with the columns – becoming, as Dalibor wrote, “their more articulate equivalents.” (p. 96). He traced the various layers of meaning present in the portal; its iconography, topography, and orientation, its role as an emblematic gate to heavenly Jerusalem, and finally its ceremonial function in the religious life of the church. “In such a situation it is not clear where the line between the different modes of representation can be drawn”, Dalibor wrote, pointing to the seamless way that sculpture, architecture, religious practice, and historical memory come together in the portal.

To me, the passage aptly sums up what I learnt from Dalibor over the four-five years I worked with him, namely to start (I will undoubtedly never finish) understanding the rich and complex relationship between cultural meaning and the built world. The piece also sums up what the Cambridge program was, at least to me, namely a threshold to architecture – an architecture that was infinitely richer than the one I knew from architecture school. I had studied architecture and philosophy for many years before arriving to Cambridge, and yet it was there that the pieces came together, for me and for so many others. Cambridge became – to use Dalibor’s words – our “more articulate equivalent”.



I was thinking about Dalibor's Chartres portal reading recently, when I was writing on quite a different kind of a threshold – namely Sverre Fehn's *Storhamarlåven* – a modern museum set in what was once a medieval palace, and later, for centuries, an agricultural building. Fehn's intervention is structured as a walk; an architectural promenade through space and time. At a particularly poignant moment in the walk, a concrete ramp extends towards you, landing lightly on the medieval cobble floor with a pointy concrete corner. The transition is palpable. From standing with your feet firmly on the historical floor, surrounded by half-excavated ruins of the former arch-bishop's palace, you are suddenly brought up to a new vantage point. From the smooth but slightly wobbly medieval cobblestones, your feet now traverse rough but dead even twentieth century concrete.

In lifting the museum visitor off the historical ground, allowing him or her to observe the past from above, Fehn is obviously – and quite literally – walking a thin line between participation and aestheticization. The old critique of the museum as a deadening distancing device seems temptingly close at hand. Yet if you look more closely you may conclude otherwise, for the Storhamar museum promenade is a participatory one, both in a bodily and a visual sense. Peek into one of Fehn's exhibition chambers, for instance, and see how the low-hung wooden Madonna establishes an earth-bound counterpoint to the ascending Christ – the latter visible only as a pair of feet. It is as if the movement of your body continues in the movement of your eyes, as the gaze inevitably follows the Christ figure up towards the skylight. The corporeal movement aligns with the metaphorical movement of the display; an ancient story of the movement from matter to spirit and from earth to heaven. Just like the portal in Chartres, the Storhamar thresholds work by means of eye, body, and memory to establish a multivalent nexus of meaning. The gaze at work here is not passive or distanced, but corporeally engaged and culturally informed. The seer is 'immersed in the visible by his body', as Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it so beautifully.



“Only to humanity”, writes Georg Simmel, “has the right to connect and separate been granted”. We weren’t really allowed to read Simmel at Cambridge, but sometimes he is onto something. The west portal of Chartres is such a connector, as is – on a smaller scale – Fehn’s museum threshold. Both strive to connect the past to the present and the earth to the sky, aiming thus to situate human action in a rich and meaningful way.

One of the things Dalibor taught his students at Cambridge was to recognize this striving: to appreciate the extraordinary work that goes into building a human world. The west portal at Chartres is a testimony to such a work, but so is Dalibor’s description of it, without which the whole drama might have gone unnoticed. “Architectural embodiment”, wrote Dalibor, “manifests itself in the vertical organization of the portal, in the spatial arrangement of the iconography, and *even in the language that I am using now when I discuss the portal*” (p. 96, my emphasis). Like the way the sculptures take the place of columns at Chartres, language can sometimes be brought to serve as architecture’s “more articulate equivalent” – not to replace or construct, but to reveal and articulate. By opening the possibility for such articulation, Cambridge was indeed a threshold to the world of architecture.