

What *is* the cultural significance of architecture?

In his Gropius Lecture at Harvard, April 1990, Rafael Moneo argued that architecture was surrendering its cultural importance to the ephemeral media, from films to the internet. There is no question that we experience a flattening of meaning – we know the last name of sub-atomic particles but we live in a confused ethical milieu dominated by concepts like ‘fairness’ or, at best, ‘social justice’. By contrast, it is possible to see that for traditional cultures the important events of life were manifest in ritual and ceremony and therefore required appropriate architectural settings. Until the gods were “declared ridiculous”, in Schiller’s words (well before Nietzsche), human history was secondary to divine temporality; and these settings oriented themselves to the cosmic conditions, providing the constant measure – especially ethical – for the human drama.

For Dalibor, these conditions were still the measure for modern life, even if the cosmos had been declared a phenomenon of astrophysics and even if buildings seem to have succumbed to what, towards the end of the last century, had become the dominant metaphor for the whole – economics...the idea that the whole was a result of myriads of exchanges (Hayek). For those architects not persuaded to market form as the signature – or brand – of the architect’s contribution, the counter-response generally looked to modesty, derived either from Rossi’s typology (Moneo’s response) or involvement with so-called ‘informal’ cities and their opportunities for redemption through collaboration.

In holding to the authority of the cosmic conditions, Dalibor did not advocate reverting to a culture of priests and princes. Indeed I do not recall any of the programmes for his studios directly raising the matter of ‘sacred space’ (possibly excepting the cemetery of the 1979 AA studio), despite its prominence in his book (e.g., Chartres cathedral, Zwiefalten abbey church) and thinking. Probably inspired by Gadamer’s argument that the effect of bureaucratization, technology and so forth was to “elevate our adaptive qualities to privileged status”, Dalibor understood this attenuation of our obligation to the fundamental conditions as a manifestation of what he termed ‘latent’ order.

It is likely also that the term ‘latent’, or ‘hidden’, responds to Heidegger’s ‘forgetting of Being’, whose concept of ‘worldhood of world’ provided a formulation that re-awakened the claim of the cosmic conditions. However, despite some attention to architecture by Heidegger and Gadamer, their main concern was to clarify the claim of the concrete conditions upon language and the formation of concepts, and, in Gadamer’s case, to clarify what he termed ‘social reason’. Dalibor took this claim of the concrete conditions more seriously than did they; and, in a fundamental contribution to phenomenological studies, argued the depth of the embodying order well before explicit language. I would suggest that the opening response of participants in Dalibor’s studios or graduate seminars to Moneo’s concerns would gravitate around ‘embodiment’, insofar as architecture provided the embodying conditions for praxis – the ‘earth’ always in strife with ‘world’, in Heidegger’s terminology.

It is the cosmic conditions which are hidden in the latent order, in at least three ways. The first resides in the deeply familiar – the typical situations of praxis – whose very familiarity (Heidegger’s ‘nearness of Being’) obscures the profound richness harbored in their constant negotiation between conditions and possibilities. Something of the ceremonial, or at least the dramatic, content of these situations were restored to architectural configurations when Dalibor recognised in Aristotle’s “mimesis of praxis” (in which mimesis was understood as interpretation, hermeneutics) a primary orientation for design. If praxis may be summarised as action and reflection – conforming to Heidegger’s description of *da-sein* as ‘being-in-the world as understanding’ – the paradigmatic aspects of situations/praxis offered the basis for communication between possibilities in history and the cosmic conditions.

This in turn was marshaled against the second aspect of latency, familiar from Husserl, Heidegger and Ricoeur: the priority European culture seemed to accord scientific understanding. It is occasionally said of Dalibor that he disliked science and technology; but whilst he would not deny the Romantic roots of some of his thinking, he maintained a lively interest in leading scientific research in several areas, often in dialogue with his brother Drahosh, a physicist. Indeed a similar problem prevails in the arts, of which architecture may no longer be the mother but might be regarded as the basis for communication between them. It is more true to say that Dalibor sought to reconcile the sciences with the hermeneutics of praxis. Many of the briefs for studio projects set scientific research in cultural contexts, favouring institutes or block configurations in which this confrontation might be fruitful. Curiously, this ambition was not utterly distant from Latour’s notion of the politicization of nature – bringing together the adherents of ‘fact’ (science) with those from ‘value’ (morality, politics) – although I don’t believe Latour was ever mentioned. For similar reasons, Dalibor resolutely avoided transforming his insights into an instrumental theory, preserving the integrity of the questions which praxis has always faced (orientation in history), although the vehemence of his rejections could make one wonder if he didn’t secretly harbor a right and wrong. Dalibor’s premature death prevented him from finishing *The Modernity of the Baroque*, the book which sought to identify the common cultural ground in divided representation (between, for example, theological and actual, mathematical, infinity).

The third aspect of latency concerns a more fundamental condition of hiddenness. Granting our contingent participation in the agon of earth and world, how is one to make sense of the ocean of cultural fragments floating in the freedom offered by the concept of ‘space’? Supposedly able to accommodate everything from non-Euclidean geometry to individual psychology, the radical generality of ‘space’ occludes, or renders latent, hierarchies of reference; and one is obliged to declare the fundamental assumptions for each work (thus also ensuring the agency of the designer, a legacy of Lomazzo’s *disegno*). In many respects ‘space’ became a substitute for ‘culture’, itself under threat of dissolving into ‘embodied information’. What Dalibor brought with him from Prague – an ancient city manifest in a praxis both theological and philosophical, the themes of ‘continuity’ and ‘ontological movement’ (from Patocka), the mythical aspects of Surrealism as receptacle for the communication of positive fragments, the

analogical spatiality of Mannerist and Baroque architecture, the importance of spatial sequences (and even the sizes of rooms) – served as a memory theatre for his vast inquiry and itself served as a framework in which ‘culture’ had meaning. Indeed the relative independence of the graduate seminars (words/’world’) and the studio (design/’earth’) established a reciprocity which bore similarities to the Baroque and Mannerist *concetto*.

The short answer to Moneo is that the earth is never just earth, it is always already architecture, it cannot be escaped. However it is probably also necessary that this be disclosed through discussion and design, collages and city-trips, dense reading, equally dense smoke, the intelligence, inspiration, anger, kindness and wit of the immortal Dalibor and the wonderful cast of characters inspired by him.

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