
Transcendental or Rhapsodic Architecture Beyond Function and Culture

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A dimension of architectural thinking overlooked for quite some time is that which takes its roots in the imagination. Rhapsodic imagination is an aspect of the human mind that has been put aside — except perhaps by proponents of non-rational or humoristic architecture — by pragmatic utilitarianism during the heavy industrialisation phase of Modernism. The human spirit yearns for deliverance from reductionist logic and simplistic functionalism within the insecure and tiresome catching-up process which glossy magazine coverage seems to stimulate month after month. Seduction tends to smother tentative new shoots of imaginative thinking with such overwhelming attention that they happily shrivel up.

In the past, architects have always been the “undangis” [traditional Balinese architect or giver of order] of their societies. It is only in the modern period that we have become more specialised and therefore more narrow. We must regain the special position in society wherein we served the role of mediator between the mundane and the sublime as we create form and ambience imbued with meaning and hope. We must insist that our essential role is to project a vision of life's special potentialities, giving wholeness and healing the rifts in contemporary life's compartmentalised conveniences. We must connect people to time, to nature and to other people in the spaces and places we build with care and with wit. That we engage people imaginatively in the environment through what we build is our sacred and special task. Only when we see such a role for ourselves can we regain our lost seat in

that special position reserved by society for the “undangi” — the divinator of place and time.

To propagate the role of the architect as “problem solver” is to short change our role. The architect thus defined must ultimately lose, as more and more experts undertake the solving of problems with much more ability than the architect. The architect's unique role is to be the poet of space and form. In this there is no other.

Thus, I give you the concept of “transcendental architecture” or if you choose “rhapsodic architecture”. In this regard, I want to remind you of that sagacious remark by Geoffrey Bawa when he said that no line be drawn until the totality of the site, the scheme and all the factors of the users, the culture and the client are thoroughly understood — it matters not whether this understanding is conscious or unconscious. In rhapsodic architecture, the totality is the message. The totality flows from the internal reality of the designer in terms of what he is as thinking; encoded biological order, which is not discontinuous with the external reality, forming one continuum punctuated only by the practical strategies needed to temporise and concretise such a consciousness, to imbue a place for whatever intended purposes, within the specifics of place and time with magic.

Transcendental or rhapsodic architecture is, therefore, the design approach which aims at creating a bridge to transport the imagination from here to there, to the past, the present or to the world of wonder. The specifics need not be predicted or restricted. Each design situation has its own ingredients for magic. As Asians, coming from a highly developed intellectual and cultural heritage, much of which is still alive and well, we should be more able to handle the mental shifts required in achieving a thought process wherein a new balance between the tyranny of monopolistic rationality and the world of the spirit, of intention and of

primary aesthetic response is possible. As Asians, our intellect ought to be able to range from Zen to Kebatinan, from transcendental meditation to mystical Sufism to Yoga, Taoist Naturalism, etc. etc. The extent and depth of rigour of the Asian intellectual and spiritual disciplines are no less than those of modern science and modern philosophy, with which we ought also to be familiar. It is only because of the lack of publicity of the Asian intellectual and spiritual heritage, a result of colonialism and the continued economic and cultural dominance of western industrialised cultures, that Asian epistemologies pale in contrast. A dialogue between the two intellectual traditions will do a lot to inform and enrich our intellectual life and therefore influence our architecture, and can make a contribution to the development of world culture. An Asian architecture can only emerge from the specifics of Asian thought. Anything less is just surface treatment for propaganda purposes.

Obviously, we have to rediscover our intellectual roots and reflect on them in the contemporary context. We will of course have to review the myths of modernity itself, its mythic images and its methods. The simple certainties of materialism and pragmatism which make it so easy to sweep aside human intuition and wonder become less certain when the promises of these myths are examined. As with the certainties of material existence when viewed at the level of particle physics. All certainties dissolve except the notion of propensity to exist in the mysterious sub-atomic world of transmutability between energy and matter. While as architects we can never hope to penetrate the particle, we can take courage from the fact that we are like everybody else in that crucible so-to-speak of the “uncertainty principle”. A word of caution, uncertainty need not mean licence or the lack of purpose or intent. Those wild dimensions of the human mind which have been controlled by civilisation and

rationality lurking in the dark recesses need to be vented with caution and with control. In design this makes the difference between the crude and the enigmatic. The wild and the wonderful. The non rational dimensions and the deep structure programmes can easily be defeated by superstition, sentimentality and nostalgic indulgence and be sugar coated to death. To be alive, the memory has to be vigorously refused solidity so that preferred ideas of the past do not freeze into formulas for mindless reproduction. Formula is the death of creativity. That is why all comprehensive religions have injunctions against idolatry and are against "taking the name of the Lord in vain" or the worship of words and concepts in themselves. But it is nonetheless a human predicament in that consciousness is not possible without iconic language systems. Yet these in themselves constrain true knowledge if clung to rigidly. Knowledge has therefore got to be a dialectical process of a constant conceptual renewal process.

So with the necessary caution, I will now discuss the 12 transcendental design aspects which by permutation and combinations factorised into 479,001,600 alternative formulations. There may be more than 12 but these seem to me to be basic.

1. Complexity

Tantalisingly comprehensible but eludes full comprehension. Confusion or disorderly complexity does not achieve the same effect – it produces despair. Orderly complexity on the other hand induces wonderment and a pleasurable urge to seek resolution and completion. Complex geometrical patterns in the Arab-Islamic design tradition is a good example of the appeal of complexity. The same design principle informs Geoffrey Bawa's design of his own house – the delightful incomprehensibility of it.

2. Singularity

The enigmatic singularity of an object revealed in its own utterness is compelling. The minimalist approach has been widely exploited in modern architectural design as well as in Zen art, Zen architecture and Japanese landscape design.

3. Ugliness

The enigma of the contorted, the crude, the camp, the rustic, or knarled can be evocative if presented in its singularity. Hints of distortion or ugliness in a composition or form produces a tantalising irresolution of attraction and repulsion.

4. Luminosity and Glitter

Jewellery's appeal is universal and ancient. A world of wonder can be seen in the glitter and ever changing lights within a jewel. Jewellery is the most directly recognisable mediator between the mundane and the sublime. It is the perfect transcendental object.

5. Abstract Form

Representational forms or figurative renditions cannot hold attention for long as they are straightforward, descriptive and obvious. Non-figurative or near-figurative form can extend attention. The continuum-figurative, near-figurative, non-figurative to trans-figurative is a rich area for design exploration.

6. Dynamics in Composition

By shifting attention, focus and directionality, in form and composition will result in interest and involves the observer's attention. It counteracts the fatiguing tendency of singular focus of attention.

7. Surprise – Novelty

The quality of newness. The unexpected juxtaposition of forms or contexts or themes or events capture attention. It must however lead to other qualities before familiarity also depletes it of its interest.

8. Mystery – Anticipation

Vagueness, implied directions, implied spaces, expectations, multiple meanings can engage the mind and the senses. Heightened sensory and intellectual involvement results.

9. Rhythmic Narcosis

Sheer repetition of regular elements is designed to dull the senses – prepares the mind and the senses for surprise and change. It heightens other sensations. It calms through its regularity.

10. Discursiveness – Non directionality

Non-focused, wandering. It develops a no stress situation – it is the opposite of sequentiality. It also prepares the senses and the mind for rewards and resolutions. It presents a field of possibilities. It contains and acts as a backdrop to events in its field.

11. Ambiguity – Indeterminacy

The opposite of clarity. Duality and uncertainty, double meaning and double purpose creates wonder and sense of freedom and perplexity.

12. Numeral & Formal Permutations

It engages the mind in its perceivable orders of transformation. A reading of the underlying order of the form is satisfied, is rewarded through joy of comprehension of the nature of the concealed

order and the basis of the permutations.

Now all of the 12 strategies themselves, when repeatedly encountered, will produce fatigue and therefore boredom. To be effective, an overriding strategy of mutability, changing quality or differentiated and naturally changing sensory conditions of encounter should be anticipated in designs. Stimuli such as smell, sound, changing light, changing activity, can be anticipated, choreographed or enabled to happen spontaneously, to alter the perception of the 12 combined factors. Alterations in the mood of the observer including humour, quietness, expectation, heightened consciousness, gloom, cheerfulness, etc.. could also be considered as inputs in design. The scope is vast. Architecture need not become obsessed with historical, typological or stylistic assemblages when a more basic and free architecture is so widely possible. Consider some combinations. A complex pattern of shining and luminous dynamic masses set enigmatically in an undulating landscape, whose folds partly conceal the building, expressed in changing light to the sound of twinkling bells, etc.. Consider an ugly object – all twisted dark and contorted suddenly punctuating the geometrical order which is established by a field of rhythmic patterns incomprehensible to the eye..... have fun!