

# Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality

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## *Phenomenology of the Architectural Extraordinary and Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy (Chapter 4)*

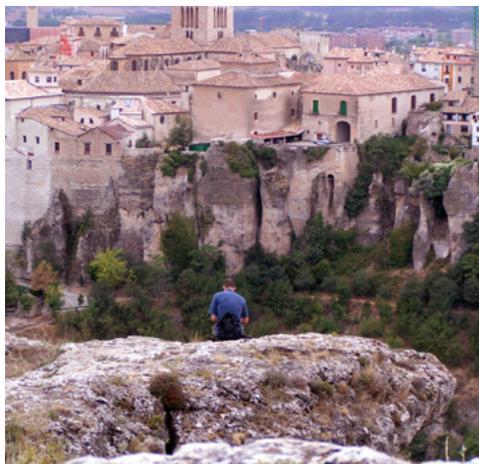
Julio Bermudez



*The architectural extraordinary usually presents itself in remarkable conditions.*



*The Salt Institute (La Jolla, CA) has been often cited to elicit profound experiences.*



*Overlooking the city of Cuenca, Spain. It is in moments like these when beauty changes our lives.*

Let us say that you have had one of the most profound experiences in your life. Let's further say that such an event was provoked by architecture. You were visiting a building when its presence unexpectedly overwhelmed you to the point of tears. For a few moments, something happened that you can't really explain but know was 'extraordinary.' You have been shaken to your core and, after giving yourself some time to 'digest' it (10 days, 10 weeks, 10 years), you are ready to seek some understanding. What was that? Was it beauty? How did it happen and what does it mean?

This chapter seeks answers to these questions by probing into the architectural discipline, philosophy, and investigations on 'non-ordinary' and 'peak' states of consciousness in psychology of religion, medicine, positive psychology, etc. The conclusion is that there is little understanding of these extraordinary aesthetic experiences beyond generalities and that, therefore, a more thorough investigation is in order.

After presenting the results of a survey designed to address this situation, a clearer empirical map of these events emerges. The implications of this finding are discussed in some detail. In particular, the insights advanced by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty are shown to fit the data best, thus validating his idea for a cautious naturalization of philosophy — a topic of currency in neuroscience and experimental philosophy today. Additionally, provocative similarities between the extraordinary architectural experiences reported in the survey and philosopher Edmund Husserl's philosophical reduction are discussed.

The most important contribution of this work maybe the application of science to understand the reality, rarity and relevancy of the architectural extraordinary. In so doing, this effort begins to dispel the doubts, silence, and ignorance that has surrounded the topic for far too long and allows for an open recognition and engagement of this area in architectural scholarship, education, and practice.