

Sacred and Real: Instrumental and Transcendent Writing About Architecture and the Built Environment

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Summary Statement

This project is meant to open a discussion about the range of forms and the potential of writing about architecture. The principle objective is to survey and characterize the literature of the spiritual-architectural imagination with the aim of expanding architectural discourse in meaningful ways. While there is considerable critical and theoretical academic writing about spirituality and architecture other possibilities have been undervalued or ignored. Literary nonfiction and journalism, for example, are areas ripe for discovery and explication. Critical studies of environmental literature suggest a parallel endeavor and a point of departure for this study.

Spiritual-architectural literature would describe spiritual transcendence by way of an architecture that is not inert, where life beneath the artifice of architecture sustains community and individual identity. For thinking about transcendent experience of architecture, other forms, or hybrid forms, may get at the issues and questions more effectively than critical and theoretical academic writing, and nature writing provides a particularly potent example. By considering all possible forms, we can facilitate discussion about the pedagogical, social, and professional value of a range of texts and expand approaches to writing for design.

The practical result of this project is an expanded bibliography of relevant texts, with particular emphasis on writing about architecture that is informed by nature writing. A long-term prospect is an edited volume or anthology bringing together a range of writing that illustrates, expands, and defines what might best be called *numentectonical* literature.

Topic

This is a basic research project on writing about the relationship between architecture and spirituality, with particular emphasis on nature writing.

Scope

My interest is in evocative writing that explores the relationship between architecture and spirituality. The project first requires some definition of genres. Without getting overly caught up in contested definitions and claims of hierarchy, some distinctions might be made between academic critical and theoretical writing, journalism, literary nonfiction, essay, various forms of memoir, fiction, poetry, and other texts.

As a preliminary framework for all genres, I identify a spiritual-architectural text as addressing the experience of transcendence, the belief that material is living, not inert, and the hope that architecture sustains community and individual identity. This preliminary framework may be added to or altered after a full exploration of examples leads to expansion of the bibliography.

Through the course of the project I intend to entertain a range of questions, such as:

- How might we define numentectonical literature—that is, literature concerned with the relationship between spirituality and architecture?

- What is the pedagogical, social, and professional value of various kinds of spiritual-architectural texts?
- Is there a canon, or at least a bibliography, of spiritual-architectural literature?
- With respect to spiritual experience, what common characteristics are there among writings about nature/wilderness, landscape, city, building, and architecture?
- Does architecture or thought instrumentalize spiritual experience, and what might thought in the form of writing say about this?
- Where is the line between rational-theoretical and so-called literary writing about architecture and spirituality?
- Do distinctions between kinds of writing about architecture matter, and why?
- Is it possible and valuable to expand the forms of discourse about spirituality and architecture?
- What implications might a numertextonical literature have for other areas of discourse in architecture, for example, community engagement and sustainability?
- Is there a legitimate role for such literature in the scholarship of design?

Case Studies/Examples

Underlying themes in environmental literature comprise what Lawrence Buell calls “the environmental imagination” and offer valuable lessons and analogies for writing about the relationship between buildings and spirituality.¹ Environmental writing is rife with examples of transcendent experience—the momentum given the genre by American transcendentalism practically guarantees this. In general, environmental writers consider the idea that nature has agency. Overall, environmental writing has a redemptive, ecological humanistic aim. It seems reasonable, then, to expand the term environment to include *built* environment, to recognize that nature contains building, and to borrow some of the premises of the genre.

After Buell, the following themes might characterize the literature of *the architectural imagination*:

1) Transcendence. A mark of spiritual-architectural literature is transcendent experience, and transcendence in some ways refers to scale. Sometimes it is an apparently sublime experience through which a place subsumes the human, as in Joan Didion’s essay, “At the Dam,” but even sublimity requires scalar reference. Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City*, keeps the transcendent moment at a human scale even when the overwhelming spirit of the city begins to engulf the youthful protagonist. In any case, a range of scales situates the human and makes clear the relationship of the human character to the cosmos. A central character—in nonfiction it is often the character “I”—relates to architecture by way of the near at hand and the far away, from the bronze doorknob to the gilded ceiling.

2) Living material. Spiritual-architectural literature regards architecture as if it is composed of living, rather than inert, material. Seeing life beneath the surface of material gets past the signification of architecture. Theoretical and critical texts such as Christopher Alexander’s *A Timeless Way of Building*, and Michael Benedikt’s, *For an Architecture of Reality*, view material this way, as does Alain de Botton’s popular text, *The Architecture of Happiness*. Other forms of writing, such as lyrical memoir, afford rich description of material in the phenomenological moment.

3) Sustaining community and individual identity. Spiritual-architectural literature suggests, implicitly and explicitly, that the ultimate aim of architecture is the care and sustenance of the position and relationship of individuals in community. To value such humanistic concerns in architecture writing requires subtlety, as exemplified by Jun’ichirō Tanizaki’s, *In Praise of Shadows*. At the other end of a spectrum, Annie Dillard’s lyrical coming of age memoir, *An American Childhood*, contains a culminating transcendent moment that snaps into perspective

the relationship between individual spirituality, religion, and community. Barbara Hurd's essay, "Finding and Making," set at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, grounds communal experience in metaphor.

Intended Conclusions

Different kinds of writing explore numentectonics, but none provides a more apt model than nature writing. Awareness of the range and potential of different genres leads to a better understanding of the relationship between architecture, culture, and spirituality and the possibilities for writing about it.

Endnote

¹ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).