

# ***The Important Role of Spatial, Cultural, and Psychological ‘Distancing’ in Profound Experiences of Architecture. Reappraising Classical Aesthetics.***

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## **Introduction**

Classical philosophers (Kant, Schopenhauer, Stolnitz, etc.) argue that ‘distancing’ plays an essential role in making aesthetic experiences possible —events that are essentially perceptual, non-rational, and associated to beauty. For them, ‘distancing’ means to take a psychological positioning of ‘disinterestedness’ in which ...

*“... the aesthetic spectator does not relate the object to any purposes that outrun the act of perception itself ... the aesthetic interest is in the perception alone and ... indifferent to the causal and other relationships which the object has to things beyond itself.” (Stolnitz, 1961, in p.134)*

In contrast, Modern and Postmodern philosophers (Wittgenstein, Danto, Nehamas, etc.) consider aesthetic appreciation as grounded in the meaning or performance of a work in terms of its functional, ethical, ideological or cultural dimensions. They still see ‘distancing’ as necessary but directed to remove the feelings and sensations that impede the clear (i.e., rational, symbolic) interpretation or judgment of a work.

The fact that Classical, Modern and Postmodern approaches all agree that some type of ‘psychical distance’ is necessary for aesthetic phenomenologies to occur is important and reassuring. However, we are left wondering which aesthetic view is correct and, more practically, which is the most productive mode of ‘distancing’. Should we suspend belief, expectations and intellectual rumination so perception rises up to the forefront of consciousness or, instead, cleanse our minds from sensual and emotional noise in order to allow critical reading and evaluation?

## **Surveys on Extraordinary Architectural Experiences**

The results of two recent surveys cast light on this matter (Bermudez 2008, 2009). The polls (one in English and the other in Spanish) took place over the internet in the course of one year (April 2007-April 2008) and sought to uncover the psychological and embodied phenomenology of ***Extraordinary Architectural Experiences*** (or EAEs) defined as:

*“encounters with a building or place that **fundamentally alter one’s normal state of being**. By ‘fundamental alteration’ it is meant a powerful and lasting shift in one’s physical, perceptual, emotional, intellectual, and/or spiritual appreciation of architecture. In contrast, an ordinary experience of architecture, however interesting or engaging, does not cause a significant impact in one’s life.”*

The questionnaires were designed to be completed in about 10 minutes and guarantee participants’ confidentiality.

The surveys received 2,872 responses (**1,890** in English and 982 in Spanish) —the largest of its kind ever. Since participation was totally voluntary, open, and unsupervised, the result does not constitute a scientific sample of any particular population. In fact, the survey participants are skewed versions of their general populations. Respondents predominately have an undergraduate or graduate college education (**90%**, *90%*) and report architecture as their field of study (**55%**, *69%*). Although skewed representations may be problematic for certain studies, it serves the purposes of this investigation quite well. Having a well-educated population whose majority understands architecture is positive because we are dealing with issues very hard to grasp, measure, and describe. In any rate, the very large number of responses obtained by the surveys supports studies with statistical significance within the responding populations.

Note: Percentages related to the English Survey will be formatted in **bold** whereas the Spanish statistics will be in *italics*. Percentages followed by an asterisk (\*) represent the compounded results of both populations.

### **Phenomenology of EAEs and ‘Distancing’**

EAEs were reported to start *suddenly* (**51.5%**, *58.5%*) and *surprisingly* (**74.7%**, *83%*) and involve high levels of *spontaneity* (**78.5%**, *91%*) and *awareness* (**92.7%**, *77.7%*). They were also described as *introspective/silent* (**87.1%**, *87.1%*), *non-talkative* (**61.9%**, *56.8%*), and provoking “*strong body reactions*” (e.g., goose bumps, heart pounding, shivers) (**56.3%**, *43.4%*) and occasional *weeping* (**17.9%**, *28.7%*). The top four qualities reported to define EAEs were the same for the Spanish and English populations: “*emotion*” (72.3%\*), “*sensuality/perception/physicality*” (64.4%\*), “*timelessness*” (45.9%\*), and “*pleasure*” (40.3%\*). The quality “*analytical/intellectual*” was ranked in a low **6th**, *5th* place (**35.5%**, *34.5%*).

These statistics show that the intellect plays a secondary role when experiencing the architectural extraordinary. This is particularly evident when we consider the reported high emotional arousal along with “*strong body reactions*” and *weeping*. We find out our body reactions and feelings as they happen and, only after becoming aware, we are able to deal with them intellectually.<sup>1</sup> In other words, thinking operates as a derivative of coming to term to what is going on. And while the setting of a silent and introspective state may encourage reflection, the surprising, spontaneous, and sudden unfolding of EAEs in combination with their very high level of awareness suggest instead a mind focused on what is happening moment by moment (i.e., perceptions) rather than thinking.

When we add that these experiences did not serve any purpose except their own occurrence nor dispense goods suitable for concrete gain but instead delivered ‘*insight*’ (**55%**, *54.5%*), ‘*beauty*’ (**49%**, *54.5%*), ‘*joy*’ (**43.5%**) or ‘*satisfaction*’ (44.5%), and ‘*peace*’ (**40%**, *33%*) to the individual, we must conclude that the Classical tenets of ‘disinterested distancing’, perception-centered experience, and beauty match the phenomenology of EAEs much better than those of the Modern-Postmodern model.

### **‘Distancing’ in terms of Knowledge, Space and Culture**

The surveys requested participants to (a) name the building or place that elicited their EAE and (b) how far they lived from the location at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> This interpretation is consistent with the growing body of research in neuroscience indicating the existence of a measurable delay between neural activation and conscious experience. This is often referred to as the ‘neural processing time factor’ (Libet 1999).

Compiling the responses to request (a) generated a list of buildings well known to architects and the public that was relatively consistent for the Spanish and English populations.<sup>2</sup> When we consider this list in relation to the survey participants' recognition that the EAE had permanently changed their understanding and appreciation of architecture (**81.4%**, *80.2%*), we face a puzzling situation. How could respondents be totally surprised and changed by buildings that they most likely knew (at least intellectually) beforehand (e.g., history courses, travel books, word of mouth)? As provocative, how could just one experience have caused a transformation of their whole view of architecture —something well established in the majority of the participants?<sup>3</sup>

Before answering, let us look at the survey entries regarding survey request (b) above. The average distance reported for the top 10 cited buildings was **3,428 miles**, *3,912 miles*. This finding proposes that considerable spatial distance is a determining factor in attaining EAEs. Reasons underlying this phenomenon are not hard to find. Negotiating such distances is not trivial in terms of the physical, temporal, and economic efforts placed on the traveler. As, if not more, important is the cultural distance implied: a thousands-of-miles journey means that subjects most likely had their EAEs in another country with a different society, culture, and language (if not ethnicity and religion as well). Immersing ourselves in an alien environment is the ultimate type of 'distancing' that can be externally produced and, in the short term, very hard to bridge using rational, semiotic and performative interpretations or evaluations. In such conditions, many of our assimilating structures of cognitive operation are rendered ineffective, de-facto causing a phenomenological reduction (Husserl 1931). Only direct perception, emotion, and intuition remain fully functional in consciousness, at least initially —a psychical positioning consistent with Classical aesthetics.

At the same time, considering the architecture provoking the EAEs makes evident that people made the long trip at least partially motivated by their interest towards these places. This challenges the 'disinterestedness' principle advanced by the Classical view: strong interest would discourage the aesthetic experience. Establishing a 'psychical distance' would be hard because it would demand to bracket the world of knowledge gained prior and brought to the situation. This brings us back to the questions earlier posed and tabled until now.

Something we know is within our realm of cognitive-emotional operation and therefore, upon encountering it, demands little or no attention from our part. In order to surprise and change us, the known must be somehow apprehended anew, which means that it has to be repositioned at a significant distance from our original familiar frame of reference. But what are talking about here goes much beyond a 'surprising' situation involving some minimal psychical change. Rather, the reported transformation involves the very framework of reference itself! The only way to account for such fundamental change is that the experience has to be powerful enough to break through existing preconceptions, ideas, and constructs. We are talking of a phenomenology alike to paradigm shifting (Kuhn 1970) or spiritual conversion (James 2004) — an extraordinary situation rarely encountered. And if any good skeptic should rightly doubt the possibility of such events at all, he or she would have to concede that the combined effects of a long-sought experience, a taxing and committed 'pilgrimage', a strongly encroaching and alien socio-physical-cultural milieu, and the sheer presence of masterful architecture may indeed create the ripe conditions for an exceptionally transformative phenomenology. In fact, this is what is found in the written testimonies freely offered by survey participants that, unfortunately, are impossible to include

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<sup>2</sup> For example: the Pantheon (Rome), the Sagrada Familia Basilica (Barcelona), the Chapel of Ronchamp (France), La Alhambra (Granada), Machu Pichu (Peru), the Pavilion Barcelona (Spain), the Parthenon (Athens), the Salk Institute (California), Fallingwater (Pennsylvania), the Giza Pyramids (Egypt), The Guggenheim Museum (Bilbao), the Chartres Cathedral (France), etc.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, those in architecture reported the highest level of transformation at **85.3%**, *82.6%*.

here due to space limitations (for some, see Bermudez 2009). This is also consistent with respondents' descriptions of their experiences as very "*intense*" (80%, 88.3%), "*profound*" (89.2%, 91.7%), and "*vivid*" (85.3%, 84.5%). We are witnessing a type of involved experience far from the analytical, performative, or critical detachment demanded by Modern and Postmodern approaches. Instead, the survey results on spatial and cultural distancing support Classical aesthetics in a very clear even if initially non-obvious way.



*It often takes considerable effort and preparation to attain the necessary 'distance' to invite the architectural extraordinary. In turn, such exertion would not be undertaken unless there exists a strong interest in the place to visit. Yet, too much expectation and interest would boycott the greatest potential for the encounter. There is a paradoxical and subtle play between distancing and disinterestedness that must be reckoned with.*

## **Conclusion**

We can conclude that the most powerful encounters with architecture involve a psychical distance favoring 'disinterestedness', perception and the insightful realization of beauty, principles and methods advanced by Classical aesthetics.

At the same time, let us also acknowledge that the polls only focused on unique phenomenologies: Extraordinary Architectural Experiences. At other, more familiar levels of experience, semiotic, performative and critical appraisals based on 'intellectual distancing' are normal and useful ways to appreciate architecture. Of course, we all have had experiences of this type. In these cases, Modern and Postmodern views better describe the aesthetic situation. It follows that, depending on the depth and plane of experiential operation, different types of

aesthetic approaches may apply. This is not trying to politically resolve a seemingly contradictory situation but respond to what is actually encountered in real experiences. Very much like we cannot speak of one unique model to describe all phenomena in Physics (Quantum, Newtonian and Relativistic paradigms work perfectly fine at different space-time scales), one type of aesthetics cannot address the inexhaustible realm of experiencing architecture. An integral approach coordinating these aesthetic models would permit us to carry out a much wider range of inquiries than is possible today.

In the end, however, what is most important about the survey findings is that they give theoretical and phenomenological currency to Classical aesthetics whose teachings have unfortunately been denied, censored or forgotten by Modernity and Postmodernity for way too long.

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