

# TRANSCENDENT ARCHITECTURE

## A Pilot Study of Works, Conditions & Practices

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### **Abstract**

Starting from a spontaneous discussion about 'Transcendent' architecture and architects among 30+ ACS 5 Symposium attendees, five of us took on a year long study of the works, conditions and practices said to embody, provoke, and/or represent 'Transcendent Architecture' or TA. Our effort focused on the 'specifics' behind the spiritual quality of our built environment and how architects and designers may be able to invite its occurrence through the making and/or experience of buildings.

The first part of our effort was directed to establish the collaborative framework, investigation focus, definitions of terms, and methodology to follow. Regarding collaboration, we used a mix of asynchronous work and exchanges (emails, e-posting) with direct, synchronous (i.e., live) interactions (via SKYPE). We adopted a combination of Delphi method and jazz improvisation as productive procedures for our asynchronous exchanges whereas dialogue and debate were used during our direct conversations. Two members of the committee acted as leading agents of the exchanges and editors at large. Regarding definitions of terms, we agreed that architecture may pursue the transcendent: (1) symbolically, ritually and/or experientially (e.g., sacred buildings and landscapes, beautiful or contemplative lay architecture), (2) supporting services, practices and realizations that advance a transcendent cause (e.g., human dignity, health and wellbeing, all life), and /or (3) engaging in practices and/or results that go well beyond cultural, social, or professional conventions. We also agreed that the best way to conduct our inquiry into the specifics of TA, was through series of case studies, that is, '**works**' of contemporary architects noted for their capacity to seek, induce or present the transcendent. The architects had to be chosen from a list of 64 'Transcendent Architects' developed during the said ACS 5 meeting. Each paper co-author selected two or three architects and then picked two to four of their works for the investigation. The goal of each case study was to extract architectural '**conditions**' (i.e., attributes, features, or characteristics) that play an essential role in expressing and/or giving people access to the transcendent. Additionally, the committee decided to undertake a study of '**practices**,' defined as the techniques, strategies, procedures and/or rituals deployed by (1) an architect/designer in order to facilitate a frame of mind conducive for bringing forth their transcendent works; or (2) an individual to facilitate their engagement to something transcendent.

The second part of our work consisted in carrying out 26 case studies (by 13 architects) followed by a comparative analysis of the findings. This work led to the construction of a summary matrix listing 14 conditions that, if properly calibrated, may propitiate TA: *Context, Cosmos/Nature, Hidden/Manifest Experience, Light, Luminous Program, Materiality/Tectonics, Mathematics (Geometry), Motion (Access, Ritual, Path), Ontological Axis, Scale, Sound, Space/Form, Time, and Unity*. A quick review of writings in our discipline listing conditions for TA found substantial support for these findings. We concluded the study of 'conditions of TA' by offering two

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interpretations, one addressing a vertical or ontological considerations and the other a horizontal or more empirical dimension.

The third and last component of this effort was to find practices showed to be successful at either producing or receiving TA. For the productive mode practice we considered the architects whose work we used as case-study. In addition to discover patterns among their personal qualities and practices, we looked at these traits in the context of historic traditions of various world cultures and religions that nurtured and trained individuals for making art that possessed a transcendent quality (e.g., Sufism, Zen, and Western Chivalry). Regarding receptive practices, each paper co-author articulated two or three examples that they have successfully used to prepare themselves to gain access to a transcending experience of architecture. They include *Drawing, Meditation, Sadhana, Conversation, Prayer, Contemplation/Reflection, Ritual, Teaching, Observing Nature, and Constructing TA*.

We are presenting this work to the ACS membership in great humbleness as we realize that it is far from perfect or final. Rather, we see this contribution as being preliminary and in need of much more thought, study, participation, criticism and debate. In this sense, we hope that this pilot study sparks conversation, understanding, and its continuation.