

Transcending Temporality: Architectural Reimaginings of The Divine Comedy for Modern Experience

James Van Westen
South Dakota State University
james.vanwesten@jacks.sdstate.edu

Nesrine Mansour
South Dakota State University
nesrine.mansour@sdstate.edu

Keywords: *phenomenology, drawing, poetics, digital environments, artificial intelligence, transcendence, literature*

Introduction

Architecture and literature, two fields not commonly associated with one another in design practice today, are harmoniously combined within this study. The paper seeks to convey a compelling narrative that fosters self-reflection, transcendence, and spiritual awakening by intertwining architecture with the poetic and allegorical depth found in Dante's magnum opus, "The Divine Comedy." The research employs a variety of techniques: a) content analysis and annotative systems to understand Dante's spiritual journey; b) A combination of hand drawing, digital and physical modeling, ideation through artificial intelligence, and matrixing to translate the allegorical narrative into architectural speculative representations. A phenomenological perspective is also adopted. Literary elements like rhythm, sequence, and narrative structure are translated into architectural annotation to forge an environment that embodies the essence of Dante's narrative, offering a pathway to a spiritual discovery.

The Study's Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical inquiry of this study sets forth literature as a gateway to imaginary realms, offering fleeting escapism through tales of daunting journeys, captivating conflicts, and triumphs. Occasionally, it demands from readers a deeper investigation, prompting introspection, and the pursuit of redemption. It provokes a meditation on the human condition and propels us beyond the tangible confines of daily life, inducing transcendent experience. The "Divine Comedy" by Dante Alighieri epitomizes such literature, delineating the extent of the human soul through a variety of emotional and sensory stimuli that produce an immersive pilgrimage. This poetic journey is divided into three central segments or canticles, "Inferno," a hellish landscape of torment and terror, "Purgatorio," a mountainous climb of redemptive spirit, and "Paradiso," a celestial journey of transcendent nature. While rooted in Christian theology, the poem's allegorical richness invites a spectrum of personal interpretations, transcending temporal and cultural boundaries. The poem serves as the narrative backbone for an architectural speculation in this study. It seeks to crystallize Dante's spiritual quest utilizing spatial form, sequential progression, and atmospheric elements to echo and elicit profound spiritual responses.

Embracing a phenomenological approach is essential to forge a connection between literary essence and architectural embodiment. Phenomenology in architecture delves into the experiential aspect of spaces recognizing that the essence of a building goes beyond its physical form. One's experience of a space is intrinsically linked to sensory qualities such as sight, taste, smell, auditory, and touch. These sensory dimensions, so vivid in "The Divine Comedy," are instrumental in crafting a compelling story, fostering connectivity, and personal interpretation. As these sensory experiences intertwine, they amplify the experiential qualities of space, paving the way for transcendental moments. In manifesting the sensory richness of the literature, the focus is placed on visual elements that can invoke a multisensory response.

While this poem has previously been translated into an architectural experience by Guiseppe Terrangi in the 1930s with his theoretical project "Danteum," this research takes a contemporary approach to translating "The Divine Comedy," employing a variety of emerging technologies and incorporating far more speculative architectural processes. The use of these diverse tools and technologies provided greater opportunities for exploration and resulted in mixed media interpretations and expressions of the poem.

Methodology

The study first embarked on a meticulous analysis of "The Divine Comedy," employing matrices to decipher its complex literary, psychoanalytical, and narrative structures. To explore the phenomenological aspects, particular emphasis was placed on the sensorial qualities-olfactory, gustatory, auditory, tactile, and visual- present within the poem's distinct segments: "Inferno," "Purgatorio," and "Paradiso." The aim was to harness these sensory elements to invoke emotional reactions and potentially induce transcendental experiences within the architectural context. Rather than implementing direct phrases or lines from the poem, sensorial qualities reflecting the overarching narrative of each of the three canticles were mapped, portraying a well-rounded phenomenological rendering of "The Divine Comedy" (Figure 1.) To gain a better understanding of how these sensorial qualities within the literature could be visually represented through architecture form, these sensory traits were used as textual prompts within the artificial intelligence diffusion model, Midjourney AI. This generative text-to-picture artificial intelligence tool helped guide this architectural translation in the preliminary design stages, relaying impressionistic interpretations of how such phenomenological qualities could ground themselves in a visceral architectural experience.

Speculative architectural drawings (Figures 2, 3, and 4) served as an important medium for investigation, capturing the essence of architectural elements such as light, geometry and form, and sequence in an ambiguous manner. Speculative architectural drawings serve as conceptual illustrations that inhabit imaginative or theoretical worlds, blurring the lines between art and architecture. These drawings go beyond conventional floor plans or sections, dwelling in an interpretative potentiality and inviting the audience into a dialogue with various design representations. This interpretive freedom fosters in-depth conversations exploring architectural elements and delving into experiential understanding. The drawings explored a variety of literary and architectural elements like structure, rhythm, sequence, and form, instrumental in forging the spatial integrity of the proposed architectural experience. The framework for these speculative drawings originated through thoughtful depictions of architectural and literary themes with primary notation systems (Figure 5.) Although these notational devices didn't directly address the sensory aspects of the drawings, they significantly advanced the overall configuration and suggested intriguing, ambiguous architectural form. Key visual illustrations were blended with architectural annotations, employing a spectrum of tools ranging from hand drawn techniques to the use of artificial intelligence assisted ideation, digital modeling and rendering technologies.

As the study progressed, the drawings transitioned into a digital format, allowing for refined articulation of spatial features. Attributes such as lighting, materiality, form, and sequential characteristics were also refined, further articulating the overall narrative and essence of the "The Divine Comedy." These advanced architectural digital explorations, while remaining within the virtual sphere, pave the way for the conceptualization of a digital architectural and spiritual spatial experience. This space is envisioned to captivate the senses through visual storytelling, continuing the sensorial journey the architectural experience.

Moving Further

This study aims to transcend the temporal divide, reimagining “The Divine Comedy,” a masterpiece from the 14th century, for today’s audience through the lens of architecture and phenomenology. It represents an innovative convergence of literature and architecture, offering an immersive experience that resonates across the boundaries of time, aligning with the theme of resonance of the past, spirit of the future. As the study progresses, it continues to evolve within the digital sphere, sculpting a vision for a digitally mediated architectural and spiritual experience. Using a variety of techniques from mapping and matrices to sensory translation, the aim is to capture the essence of Dante’s entire poem in a comprehensive architectural journey. This endeavor is not merely about creating a physical form; it’s about orchestrating an array of senses, emotional resonance, and spiritual connections, with the ultimate goal of cultivating transcendent experiences through the medium of architectural innovation. Moving forward, assessments of the phenomenological attributes will be conducted through immersive virtual reality experimentation, visualizing the speculative architectural environment, and exploring the sensory experiences described in the source material.

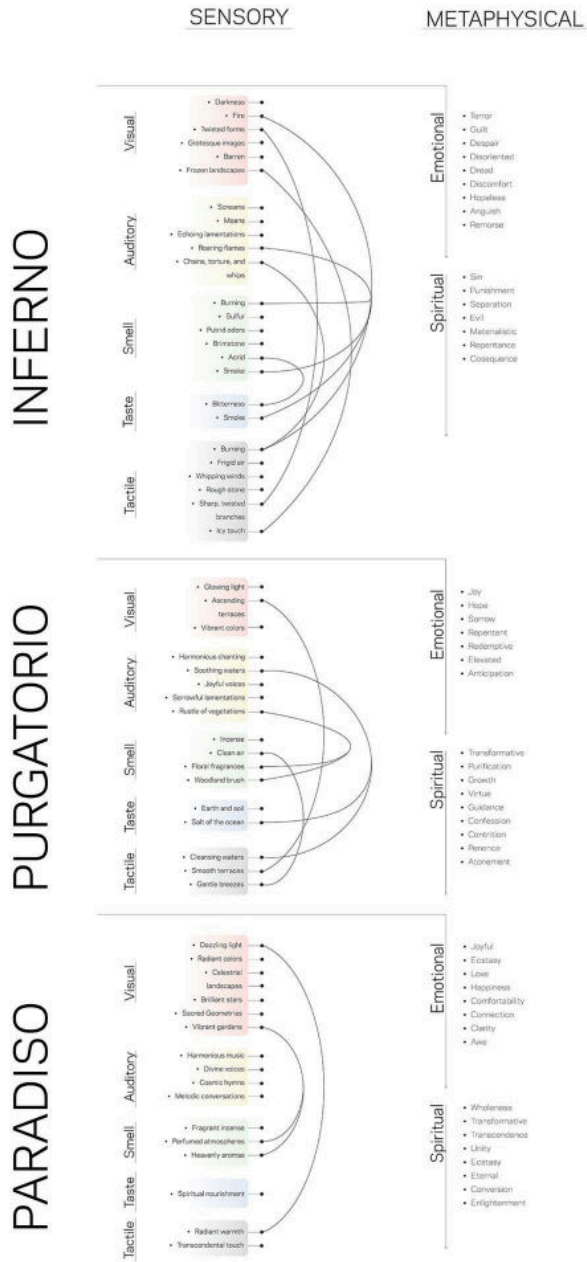


Figure 1: Phenomenological Mapping Diagram (Image in the public domain)

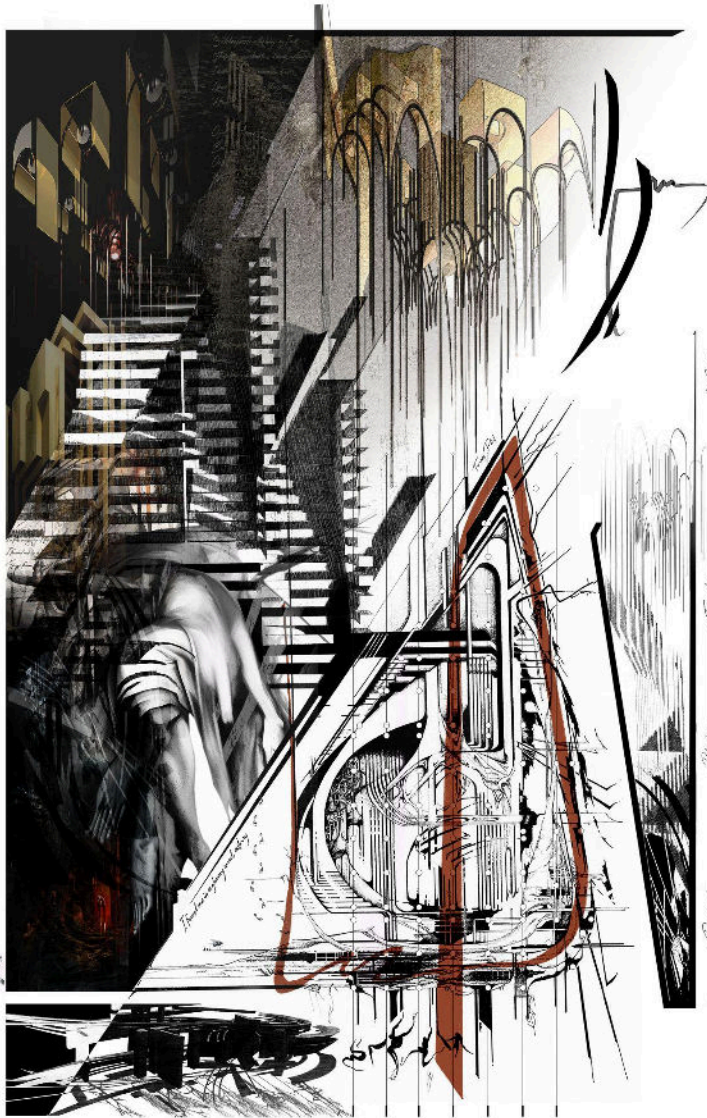


Figure 2: Mixed Media Speculative Drawing (Image in the public domain)



Figure 3: Paradiso Speculative Drawing/ Later Digital Translations (Image in the public domain)

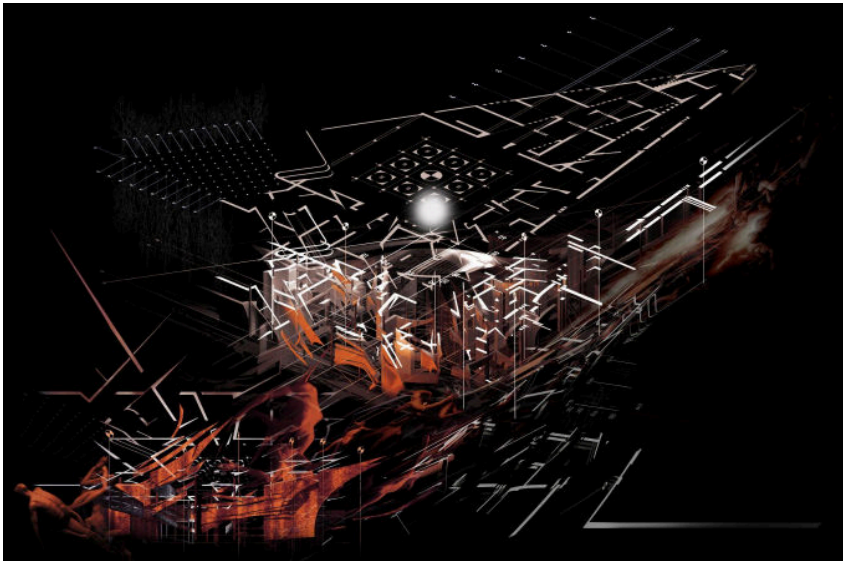


Figure 4: Inferno Speculative Drawing/ Later Digital Translations (Image in the public domain)








Notation	Representation
Regulating Lines and Orientation	
Canticle Divisions and Parameters	
Hierophany (Unity)	
Heavenly Bodies	
Canto Structure	
Forest of 100 Cantos	
Landscape Divisions	

Figure 5: Speculative Drawing Notation Chart (Image in the public domain)

References

- Alighieri, D. and Longfellow, H.W. (1891) "The Divine Comedy." London: Routledge.
- Brockman, D.D. (2017) "A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Dante's 'Divine Comedy.'" London: Routledge.
- Brown, D.K. (2021) "The Allegorical Architectural Project: Provocateurs, Propositions and Confrontations." *Architectural Design*, 91(4), pp. 120–127.
- Fletcher, A. (1964) "Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode." Ithica, N.Y., Cornell.
- Pallasmaa, J. (2005) "The Eyes of the Skin." Chichester: Wiley.
- Schumacher, T.L. (2004) "Danteum." New York: Princeton Architectural.
- Spiller, N. et al. (2022) "Radical Architectural Drawing." Oxford: John Wiley & Sons