

Transcendental Emptiness in Architectural Rusticity

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Emptiness, the state of containing nothing, is a theme often explored in philosophical discourse. From Aristotle's hypothesis of void to Blaise Pascal's association of nothingness with meaninglessness, emptiness or nothingness typically evokes existential horror and anxiety in relation to the abyss.¹ In Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical writing, nothingness is considered internal to the Being-for-itself. It is the emptiness within oneself that one seeks to fill through one's actions, thoughts, and perceptions.² However, in the philosophical context of East Asia, "emptiness" is endowed with a special spiritual meaning, rather than simply representing "nothingness" and "absence" in the nihilistic sense. From the Daoist mystical interpretation of *wu* (无, literally "nothing") to Zen Buddhist concept of *kong* (空, literally "emptiness") or *śūnyatā*, emptiness cannot be easily explained in the Eastern philosophical context by applying the mere nihilism in Western philosophy. Instead, it embodies a spiritual interpretation and an affirmation of the cosmic world and singular individual life.

In numerous classical scriptures of East Asian philosophies and religions, simple and rustic buildings are used as embodiment of transcendent emptiness, implying spiritual power and serving as metaphors for the transcendent realm of the human mind. Meanwhile, in the spiritual writings of Catholic theology in the Middle Ages, many discussions about steadfast faith, humility, and the relationship with emptiness also use architectural spaces as metaphorical expressions. These texts from different historical periods and cultures coincidentally indicate the spiritual meaning of architectural emptiness, namely the emptiness in architecture metaphorically signifies the existence of the human heart. The human heart (*xin* 心), which usually implies one's remote mind, deep emotion, or poetical spirit in Eastern cultures, looks like an abstract and elusive concept in modern sense, yet it is traditionally located and bounded with physical place and space. Using the atmospheric emptiness of the rustic-look physical space to describe the spiritual realm is a traditional form of spiritual rhetoric based on spatial experiences. In these ancient texts, the conscious attention and descriptions of architectural details, especially through rustic architectural order and materiality, always leads the human mind to "a break in the homogeneity of space,"³ implying the aesthetic and cosmic wholeness of the mind, spirit, and nature. In such rustic architectural tradition, the relationship between the heart and the body is frequently metaphorized to that between the meditative emptiness in architectural space and the rustic materiality of the structure and ornaments.

The Daoist saint Laozi advocates the concept of *wu* (nothingness) for negatively approaching the wholeness of the universe and the remote depth of the mind and nature, as we experience in Chinese gardens. Laozi advanced that *wu* was the origin of all things:

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 238.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Bernes Hazel (New York: Washington Square Press, 1943), 87.

³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Press, 1987), 56.

*The events of the world arise from the existence, and the existence arises from the emptiness.*⁴

天下万物生于有，有生于无。

In Laozi's scripture, for spiritual connection with the wholeness of universe, one needs to establish the physical situation of *xujing* (虚静, "emptiness and stillness")⁵ in space and time.. This concept describes a spiritual state fully and deeply connected with the universe, transcending the distractions of worldly desires of "non-simplicity" such as property, fame, and the greedy pursuit of wealth. The space of *xujing* not only refers to the supranatural world that human cognition cannot exhaust, but also the existence beyond the boundaries of human cognition, the wholeness of universe in infinity.

Regarding this cosmic wholeness and mystic remote depth in emptiness, Laozi also describes it as *xuan* (玄). In Daoist philosophy, *xuan* is another rhetorical expression of "the obscure and mysterious emptiness," which is the origin of all things and the fundamental driving force for the reproduction and change of all things in the universe. "The obscurest of the obscure, they are the swinging gateway of the manifold mysteries."⁶ These spiritual phenomena of the human life emerge and enter the human world without their visible physical forms, and the threshold between the visible and the invisible is called the Heavenly Gateway (*tianmen* 天门),⁷ which guards the world of nonexistence (*wu*). All existence originates from nonexistence, through the mediation of Heavenly Gateway of manifold mysteries.

It is noteworthy that in Laozi's teachings, attaining the Dao of universe, namely the ideal transcendental spiritual space, requires passing through metaphorical architectural forms, symbolized as spatial gateways. When referring to spiritual space, ancient Chinese often borrowed spatial or even architectural terms to describe the spiritual realm, constructing their spiritual rhetoric based on spatial experience. Although the Dao was often described as "void," this void was not an unimaginable "nothingness" but a concept that could be materialized rhetorically. For instance, Dao is likened by Laozi to an axle, a bellows, or a room. This kind of architectural rhetoric, commonly found in Daoist texts, uses hollow or spatial structures to represent the primordial "void" of Dao. A similar situation is found in the ancient Chinese descriptions of the mind. Interestingly, Laozi once proposed in a more positive sense that "the excellence of the mind is in abysmal stillness" (*xinshanyuan* 心善渊, or literally "the heart's kindness is in deep abyss"),⁸ using the metaphor of abyss, which presented a hollow structure, to describe the transcendental "void" and tranquility in which the mind could dwell in remote depth.

In Daoist philosophical texts, it is also typical to use an architectural metaphorical form for depicting the spiritual state of the mind:

For this vital breath-energy [qi] is an empty openness that waits for whatever may come, able to depend on all things. The Course is the only gathering of that empty openness. That empty

⁴ Laozi, *Daode jing*, trans. Roger Ames and David Hall (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 77.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 77. The original text in Chinese is: "玄之又玄，众妙之门".

⁷ Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2020), 190.

⁸ Laozi, 87.

*openness is the fasting [room] of the mind. Consider the gaps and cracks and hollows in things: it is in the empty [unadorned] chambers that light appears, and all auspicious things come to roost only where there is stillness.*⁹

气也者，虚而待物者也。唯道集虚。虚者，心斋也...瞻彼闾者，虚室生白，吉祥止止。

The architectural prototype of such a rustic hut, as quoted above from another Daoist saint Zhuangzi, precisely alludes to the spiritual realm of *xujing* (emptiness and stillness). Zhuangzi proposed the philosophical and architectural concept, *xushi* (虚室, "empty chamber," literally "empty room") that explored the ideal spiritual space, which he called "the fasting room of the mind" (*xinzhai* 心斋), in architecture and its metaphorical moment of enlightenment in Dao. It depicts a surreal architectural moment that marvelous light shines into a rustic and unornamented space in which the shapeless and nameless Dao diffuses into the physical emptiness, which implies human's fasting or crystalizing of the mind.¹⁰ Although ancient literature on traditional wooden architecture in East Asia may be scarce in mentioning the geometrical volume and indoor light as predominantly indicated by the modern sense of space, in this metaphorical description of attaining enlightenment of the mind through a simple and plain (*puzhuo* 朴拙)¹¹ contemplative room, spiritual light is portrayed as shining into and fully occupying the original architectural space that maintains a natural and unadorned look, suggesting the contemplator's inner perception of the divine.

Comparatively in Western tradition, the relationship among the heart, rustic architecture, and transcendental emptiness can also be found in medieval Hugh of Saint Victor's *Selected Spiritual Writings* (11th century). Hugh's spiritual writings proposed metaphorical church which is "invisible come into being inwardly and invisibly," as churches realized in human's faith, knowledge and power.¹² For these metaphorical churches built in human's own inmost heart, knowledge builds the structure of faith, then love and virtue are the only adorned embellishment.¹³ Hugh stated, "The Lord's house must be built....The place is the heart of man, and the material is pure thoughts;...the form is one, though the matter is different, for that which is actualized in the wood is actualized also in the people, and that which is found in the heart is same as that which is found in Charity."¹⁴ In Hugh's writing, column is Christ,¹⁵ which use unaffected and rough materials and the virtue of modesty and simplicity is as stated in the Saint Benedict's rules of Christianity, signifying both his divinity and humanity to support the Church by virtue and progress.

⁹ Zhuangzi, 37-38.

¹⁰ The term "*zhai* 斋" literally means fasting, as a religious practice. During the Eastern Jin Dynasty, the poet Tao Yuanming (陶渊明) used the term *zhai* to refer to a type of buildings in his poetry: "The courtyard and trees remain the same, the *zhai* and temples appear spacious (庭树如故，斋宇廓然)." The term *zhai* refers to a clean and quiet residence, semantically mixed with its original meaning of fasting and purification.

¹¹ About the concept "*puzhuo* 朴拙," see Laozi, 104, 147. Laozi advanced that "embrace a simplicity like unworked wood (见素抱朴)" and "what is most skillful [craft] seems bungling [rustic] (大巧若拙)," to emphasize that maintaining simplicity and rusticity is the way to reach enlightenment of the mind.

¹² Hugh of Saint Victor, *Selected Spiritual Writings* (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF and STOCK Publishers, 2009), 59-60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁵ Hugh of St. Victor, "A Little Book about Constructing Noah's Ark," trans. Jessica Weiss, in *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. Mary Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 48.

According to Hugh, after the construction of the soul's symbolic dwelling, it undergoes a process of cleansing and adornment. The cleaning process metaphorically signifies seclusion and repentance, enabling the maintenance of the metaphorical emptiness for "a house to be dedicated is a soul to be sanctified."¹⁶ In order to welcome the arrival of God, abstract and intangible decorations are described as various colors in the heart, filling the emptiness in the room: faith, the hope of heaven, charity, humility, patience, and cleanliness. The spiritual rhetoric about architecture in Hugh's texts also emphasizes the virtuous emptiness contained in the representation of the heart, and this kind of humble and simple emptiness is ultimately reflected in the form of architecture: simplicity and rusticity of the monastic space. The heart's void is seen as a space that carries and embodies human virtues and transcendent experiences, ultimately shaping the metaphorical form of architecture.

In Western medieval monastic space, the transcendental emptiness was intentionally built into an austere and simple architectural form. "Humility, the sense of utter nothingness, is fullness of God."¹⁷ For the simplicity within the rustic order, characterized by plainness, lack of ornamentation, and rough architectural features, it seems to be emphasized even more in religious buildings with themes of meditation, hermitage, and retreat. In the writings from the leader of Cistercian order, St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the wood material of rafters represents "peace, goodness, benignity, joy in the holy spirits," which is consciously remained in a "less beautiful" condition to "give with simplicity."¹⁸ Such an intentional pursuit of simplicity in aesthetics represents a conscious choice of architectural rusticity to cultivate a transcendental emptiness conducive to meditation.

In ancient spiritual texts from diverse cultural traditions, subtle semantic differences emerge in depicting transcendental emptiness, symbolizing the soul's abode. The ideal state of tranquil and serene spiritual condition, as considered by Daoist philosophy, is believed to be achievable only in a simple and original space in which all is created naturally and spontaneously, since *qi* (*pneuma*) exists in the form of emptiness. In Daoist metaphorical architecture, the transcendental emptiness in the spiritual cottage (*xinzhai*), which is comparable to the primitive hut as architectural origin in Vitruvius's treatise,¹⁹ is seen as the beginning of all things, as well as the remote depth of the individual's heart and mind. Comparatively, in medieval scholastic texts, monastic space is the place reserved for human faith and morality after cleaning and purifying towards the architectural origin, namely Garden of Eden, Temple of Solomon, and Noah's Ark.²⁰ These different cultural and religious texts all prioritize the simple, natural, and rustic architectural imagery and forms. However, not every thatched cottage in reality becomes a spiritual space; it requires a philosophical understanding of simplicity and rusticity during the design, building and dwelling process. It suggests that architects should reconsider their objective understanding of physical space in order to find their poetical imagination against nihilistic emptiness in modernity.

¹⁶ Hugh of St. Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1951), 279.

¹⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, "A Rosary of Sacred Heart," in *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux Collection* (London: Aeterna Press, 2016), 1496.

¹⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermons on Canticle of Canticles," in *ibid.*, 1796-1798.

¹⁹ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, trans. Morris H. Morgan (New York: Dover, 1960), Book Five, 150.

²⁰ Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), 13-14, 120-122.

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