

The Idea of Form and Function

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“The bird nest is absolute Functionalism, because the bird is not aware of its death.”

– Sverre Fehn, Architect, Pritzker Prize Winner 1997

INTRODUCTION

The nature of beauty is necessarily that of stillness and rapture.

Rapture as the fundamental nature of birth. It exists to fulfill its latent purpose just on the threshold of becoming always poised ready to burst through to our world. It is among other things continuous, an unbroken chain that comes into being and brings forth together a completion of events and objects. Despite the ease at which we portray beauty in poetry and fiction, descriptions are rhetorical, as beauty transcends direct explanation and explicit knowledge. This present essay examines aspects of, among others, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, J. J. Gibson’s theory of affordances, and Michael Benedikt’s notion of emptiness, comparing them to the Functionalist theory of ‘*fitness of use*’ in order to determine whether the existence of beauty, in its many forms, has purpose beyond its own being. There are many representations of beauty, but Aristotle’s final cause must be distinguished from form and content, as ultimately beauty is harmonious, a synchronized bliss.

I

First, let us begin with Bachelard’s proposal that the poetic image is “a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche”. (Bachelard, 1969, p. xi) As beautiful a phrase as one will find in any literature concerning the creative act, because beauty is not other than that. Some speak of beauty as an internal state of being, but let us examine beauty as a dynamic force always pushing forth into our world. It is difficult to speak of an object’s internal significance when its significance is the object itself. It is easy to slide into the delusion of duality, as if there were separate insides and outsides, subjects as perceivers and objects of perception. However, if we speak of a thing’s being and purpose metaphorically in terms of luminance and radiance, into which Schejldahl’s beauty melts (2001, p. 53), its presence erupts into this world, coming from neither inside nor outside as it emanates completely from its actuality and its *telos*, the finality of its being. In this sense, the perceived object and the perceiving subject are one in the act of perception. We can speak of them as being separate in order to analyze the particulars of their relationship, but we must

know, in fact, they are one, as observable traces within a streaming arrangement of objects in the spatial environment.

According to Gibson, this spatial environment is illuminated by the ambient optic array. (1986) The reflected light illuminates the surfaces and marks the edges between objects. Ambient light is the reverberating light between objects and defines the spatial parameters of what can be known. As direct light illuminates the surface of things, ambient light illuminates its form in relation to other forms; its radiance, the distillation of meaning. What can be known is held by each object in reservation for the perceiving organisms use and affordance. (Gibson, 1986)

Affordances lay dormant until a need arises from the environment. They are what the environment offers as recompense for latency. These affordances exist regardless of the perceiver, and in that sense continue through time as we move away and become neglectful of those things while we become ponderous of other things. Thus, for Gibson, affordance remains with the object as the potential for its manifestation into the world as beauty. But there is a reciprocity of affordance between objects. For example, a nail affords a hammer the opportunity to fulfill its potential. Without the nail, the hammer loses its power to be something more than what it is as an object, even though the hammer and nail may keep their form and function of being a hammer and nail. Affordance implies hidden significance, significance for and of itself, as in, existence for its own sake, and the sake of the perceiver. In this way it fulfills its own function, for its own sake, and is similar to Kant's purposiveness without purpose (*zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*) whose paradox cloaks the relationship between perceiving and perception. Thus, beauty is radiance and comes into final being through the objects immersion in the Gibsonian optic array of ambient light. This ambient light, like the sunset over Camus' Algiers reacts to the beauty and becomes beauty itself.

II

We have located beauty and have provided a suggestion of how it may come into being but we have yet to define what that beauty might be, and what might be its final cause. Kant would suggest that this final cause, this end, or purpose [*Zweck*] is "the object of a concept, in so far as the concept is seen as the cause of the object". (Kant §10) If I conceive of a concept of a rose, the rose, the object, can only exist as long as the concept of a flower presupposes the rose's existence, and only as long as the concept of rose brings about the existence of the flower. Further, the concept brings about the secondary concept of nature, and indirectly the concepts of color, fragrance and vase - perhaps of even a lover. There is no distinguishing

this beauty from other beauty as there is no difference between fiction and what we categorize as our perception. The stories we tell ourselves texturize the beauty we perceive and evoke the purpose of the things being. Beauty beckons.

Purposiveness is “the causality of a concept with respect to its object” (Kant, §10). Therefore, the concept has a causal relationship with “its” object, the emphasis suggesting a permanent unique connection. Through this causal relationship from concept to the object itself as an effect, Kant suggests that here is where we have an end, its primal affordance, its *raison det*; The tendency to want to preserve the “continuance” of this relationship is what Kant calls pleasure, and hence is regarded as a “source of delight”. And further “[n]ow this relation, present when an object is characterized as *beautiful*, is coupled with the feeling of pleasure. This *pleasure* is by the judgment of taste pronounced valid *for every one*...” (Kant §11, emphasis mine) Here Kant discriminates between what is beautiful and what is aesthetically pleasing, as he sees the difference as a matter of taste and universality. One person’s taste is not enough for the claim of beauty, as beauty must please universally. And as Scarry states “The beautiful, almost without any effort of our own, acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction – to locate what is true.” (Scarry, 1999, p. 31) Thus, the “purpose” of the beautiful is to please, and by its nature is to ascend towards truth, a function of its individual being.

And here, beauty floats off into nothingness to where it became. It no longer resides with the form. Form has become constrained by function, the function of being beautiful, of being pleasurable, as if to follow it into synthetic state of submission, “reduced to a simple scheme of organization, a diagram of circulation routes...” (Rossi, 1982, p. 46) Functionalism, fit for use, for purpose, above all else, has the prerequisite of nothingness. It is a container that holds back the becoming of the beautiful. Like a quill dipped in water, even calligraphy will fade away; it lacks in that which is real and eternal, and only attempts to impersonate beauty.

III

The place of functionalism in building can be traced back to the Vitruvian triad, where 'utilitas' ('commodity', 'convenience', or 'utility') stands alongside 'venustas' ('beauty', or 'delight') and 'firmitas' ('materialism', or 'durability') as one of trimodal goals of architecture. Functionalism, in the modern sense, is the notion that any part of the organism must serve its particular function from which beauty would naturally follow. There is a particular attraction to this erroneous notion that beauty manifests

when the form of an object is particularly well adapted to a rigidly defined set of objectives and programmatic limitations. This is the dichotomy between beauty is, and beauty for. If we describe functionalism as the stripping of ornament, as the deconstructing of form, the separation of fancy from desire, then we come close to *zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*. When beauty dissociates itself from representation “which does not have to gain its power by pointing to a larger conceptual significance”, (Hillman, 2001, p. 269) like the patterns of a butterfly wing, then we find purposiveness without purpose.

“True beauty requires an emptiness of intention”, (Benedikt, 1987, p.52) and an emptiness of function. Its presence transcends both the form and the function. The finality is indistinguishable from the formal properties of its delivery into the world. Invested in the world of function and efficiency, the traits that make a form beautiful are no longer available. They cease to be important once they actually become something. It is why Benedikt’s emptiness₂, Kahn’s silence, is always unfinished, waiting for its moment of completion; of birth into the world of being in its subsequent form. As Benedikt explains it, it is more like life as we find it, seeped in becoming, it requires no one’s attention, and is not required to fulfill a purpose other than to be. It is more akin to the idea of space, or interval, it is formless. (Benedikt, 1987, p. 56) It is *Ma*, the in-between. It is Gestalt, the beauty of *that* which is missing yet still perceptible; *that* which reinforces the hidden structure of the invisible.

One must ask whether the Functionalists aspired to this notion of absence. For satisfying the functionality, they believed beauty would naturally and necessarily follow, implying a philosophical underpinning of emptiness. They failed believing that form should necessarily follow. These thoughts may seem absurd, since function in itself is a presence upon which architectural rhetoric and objects are built. However, we know from Gibson that surfaces and edges appear as resultants of the ambient light, and that the objects’ function is an affordance of its being, its story, framed by the impulse of beauty from each side. Beauty is immersive, not constrained by form or function. How, then, can we describe an architect’s formal expression without relying on rhetoric? Does the term “function” imply meaning; does it imply usefulness, and efficiency? Is the shedding of ornament in lieu of function a discourse in aesthetics? Kant would have us believe it is, for beauty is of the object regardless of the projected concepts we place upon it or the form from which it presents itself. In regards to beauty, form and function are irrelevant.

END

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