

SUBTLE AR(T)CHITECTURE

I should begin by making it clear that this theory of “subtle ar(t)chitecture” is a work in progress. It is not the ultimate method for architecture as a whole only exists in the architect’s imagination (cf. Herzog and de Meuron). It will need to be adapted case by case, so it can be applied while still granting exceptions to it as required. It should, above all, provide food for thought so new solutions can be found.

ARCHITECTURE: EVENT AND VEHICLE FOR EVENTS

Architecture is a rather particular literary style, a style that is ever-changing, never complete, that guides and directs, feeds on the contingencies of the environment, the contingencies of desire. A style embracing the contingencies of life. A meta-style jointly created by the existing environment, in other words the natural or manmade surroundings (including factors such as weather and climate) and by the inner environment of the individual, the “viveur”, in other words the individual’s feelings, state of mind, hopes and desires. Architecture lies at the crossroads between these two creative elements. It organises and exerts an influence on the design of situations, of events which are, so to speak, the moment (t) in time where these two spheres meet. Architecture is the means to that end.

First comes the individual – the self – the subjective, the ontological, and then the environment, or environments, in other words architecture, including a group of living beings, which produces accommodating and connecting Nspaces. And then there is the pre-existing environment, which may also be a built environment and, finally, the relations between the old and the new. Together they give rise to events and these successive events translate into situations. Architecture thus contributes to the definition of events as a support function, as surrounding decor with an active or passive role. Architecture exerts a strong influence on situations, their creation and their nature. Architecture provides the framework for creating events. Architectural design consists therefore creating a vehicle

(environment) in a vehicle (pre-existing environment). Its main target is the senses, it arouses emotions but is also part of a larger process that culminates in events (over which it may exert an influence) and situations that it may create or suggest (wittingly or unwittingly). Architecture is both an event and a non-exclusive matrix of events, in a pre-existing environment. It is both subject and object.

Literary style, in the general sense of the term (the written word) is a very different process, since it constitutes “meta-writing”. This is more akin to mathematics, whereas architectural style consists of applying physical laws in a pre-existing chaotic environment. Poetry and literature appeal to the (thinking) mind and to the senses but are meta-writing in that (with some exceptions) they constitute an entity in themselves. They do not serve to support something else, while their medium – the blank sheet of paper – remains virtually unchanged. Admittedly, poetry can be further developed, adapted and may contain unfinished parts but the text itself is constant. Architectural style is never finished, never the same. It involves creating a vehicle. It is always incomplete. A work of architecture achieves completion through the external environment and through the presence of life. It is this human element that makes the environment complete. Subtle ar(t)chitecture consists of making allowance for all these levers that architecture has at its disposal. It means recognising its complexities and using these as a tool.

All architecture comprises several different environments, culminating in a variety of experiences, sensitive and intelligible perceptions all experienced and/or perceived by the individual and therefore designed and produced on a human scale. This link with the individual is vital. Sensitive perceptions are ideas perceived via the traditional human senses, to which should be added the sense of movement (or kinaesthetics), balance (inner ear), temperature, humidity and many other factors yet to be discovered. An architectural experience needs to be designed and developed for individuals on a human scale. Intelligible perceptions are a mixture of both thought and feeling. Thought can constitute an experience.

Architecture is made to be tried and experienced, in other words it is directed towards our intelligence, our bodies and all our senses. Events awakening a number of different senses are those that create the strongest memories. But the aim is not to produce a succession of thrills of the sort experienced in a theme park, which is why the qualifier “subtle” is so important. Architecture has to channel the various connections and disconnections, their effects or the effects,

both discreetly, elegantly and, at times, unconsciously, almost imperceptibly.

Architecture is multifaceted. It starts with the human envelope, the body, and acts as its extension. It is like a breath of air that interacts with the body. And, at a given moment, this breath of air will take on its own significance. Architecture is a whole, a variety of different boundaries or envelopes linked together in different ways by its growing “degrees of freedom”. It is no longer the envelope of a single being but is shared by many, giving it a social function. And, in addition to this envelope, it includes the spaces contained within the envelope. Architecture is oriented towards individuals in the plural. It shrouds them in a predefined envelope and is therefore what links them. It is their social cement. Architecture is a subtle combination of envelopes and the environments they contain, it constitutes their volumes, their surfaces, their tangible and intangible links, the container and part of the content. Their actions or their effects in the different environments, from the smallest to the largest, inside, outside and beyond.

Subtle ar(t)chitecture is an invitation to reinvent “a being-in-the-world” at a given moment in time and space, to foster multiple intersections: actions / spheres / dimensions / feelings to transform, enrich and improve (communal) life. It shapes the environment or rather the environmentS in which we live. Architecture is an opera in which the spectator is a player. Architecture is always incomplete on its own. It is the addition of life that makes it complete. Visitors, spectators, players, inhabitants or users – a little of all of these at once, in other words “*viveurs*” (livers), the word chosen to underline the active role played by living beings. For humans can only exist by inhabiting, making choices, acting and not simply playing a passive role. It is the “*viveurs*” therefore who add the final brushstrokes to a work of art.

I discovered that the French word “*viveurs*” had already been used by the situationists to describe the stage when the onlooker goes from spectator to player. Of the fact that this stage has taken place, there can be no doubt, since we have moved from a “society of spectacle” (cf. Guy Debord) to a society where the show is all around us, and making a spectacle of oneself quite normal (witness the “social media”). Human beings are compound, a mixture of what they are but also of the image of themselves they wish to project. They live in many physical and/or virtual spheres. Individuals have not halted the show, they want to be part of it. They are therefore the “*viveurs*”, at times the image of themselves.

“To be is to be perceived or to perceive”

George Berkeley

When I employ the term “*viveur*”, it is in the sense of a player in a given space: an individual full of life interacting with his environment as his environment interacts with him, not only virtually but also in real and physical terms. The spaces concerned are neither the social media nor other virtual spaces but essentially physical locations that arouse our bodies as music will arouse a dancer.

Subtle architecture is not about making all “*viveurs*” potential dancers but more about bringing out their inner dancer, a dancer who walks, shakes hands, plants a kiss on another’s cheek... a “bringer of life” aware of his or her surroundings, sensitive to those little nothings that give colour to space and produce the fantastic operas of life.

Creating subtle ar(t)chitecture means first addressing a number of questions. It is now time to discover those I consider to be vital.

1. CONTEXT

Context is provided by the setting, social factors, history (local memory), geography, climate, culture, the proposed development and its economics.

Architectural projects always begin with a site visit. This is the place where the building is to be constructed, the environment into which it will have to fit. It is therefore important to understand this environment which is, inevitably, about to change. It is necessary to realise the effect the architect’s actions will have on the existing environment and the effect that the existing environment will have on the new and emerging architecture. Architecture is the art form where context plays the greatest role. It alters the properties of a place and needs to take advantage of the full potential of the site (geography, perspectives, prevailing winds, light, etc.) to decide how best to create a whole. If space is reserved for wellbeing, the architect will need to introduce pleasure, possibilities for situations by directing our gaze, revealing light, exposing to a breeze, highlighting contrasts, fuelling sensations. Architecture has to be designed to accommodate and exploit different types of event. Unlike other forms of art, there is no blank sheet of paper: that is merely an illusion!

The context is basically the physical world but it is also a vision of the place, in other words the intangible factors associated with a space, its memory, its culture or the culture around it. Context encompasses a variety of notions, which I will now attempt to summarise:

- Location: to blend into a place, it is first necessary to be at one with planet Earth, in other words respect the relationship between earth and heaven. Dialogue with the heavens, that other place which is (to some extent) what unites us, is extremely vital. The site selected is also marked by the specific features of its surroundings, such as its urban development, the horizon, the nature of the soils.

- History: the memory of the place and its surroundings. Memory is what makes a space or plot of land a place. It is the intangible part of space, a human and temporal link with those who went before and those who will come after us.

- Geography: the natural topography (seafront, river bank, mountain top) but also the existing natural environment, the flora and fauna. Which trees should be preserved? What parts of the relief? What species need to be protected?

- Economics: the need to produce sustainable solutions, the most durable and cost-effective technical response.

- Climate: providing protection and taking advantage of the external environment and its variations to enhance the environment inside. Creating pleasant and attractive environments. Designing in relation to natural resources: geothermal energy, sun, rain, wind, etc.

- Culture: Asian culture is, for example, different to African or European culture. In Asia, culture is not the same in Japan as it is in China. In Taiwan, culture in Taipei and culture in Kaohsiung are not alike, etc. The idea is to use the art and historical culture of a particular place as an inspiration, not to reproduce the past but to create something new, consistent with the specific thinking of the past. Seeking inspiration means understanding a place both intellectually and emotionally. Influence will, therefore, always contain a measure of subjectivity.

- Social issues: Who is the building for? How can we encourage visitors to meet and engage in social intercourse? How can links be made, created or suggested?

- Development: a university is not the same as a public utility, a senior school or junior school. What are the specifics of the project? How could it be represented in spatial form today? How could it evolve, develop, allow for other future projects impossible to imagine at this point? What extras can we provide? Should the project dictate the building or, conversely, should it lend itself easily to adaptation?

- Client: what does the client want and what are his primary, conscious and unconscious needs (in other words, other than in purely architectural terms)? These, and more, must be given shape.

- Local materials: are there any quarries in the neighbourhood? Timber? Particular factories? How can these specific materials be put to use in the project proposed? Is it possible to recycle materials or existing buildings?

- Local skills: how can we use the particular skills of local craftsmen to good avail? This factor will also affect project economics and ties in with the use of local materials and the sustainable development dimension (short production chains).

Any architectural project will need to consider all these contextual components. Its position is always at the meeting point, the crossroads between era, place, project, client, climate, etc. The context will provide the first building blocks, the first pointers, the first constraints. Making wise and intelligent use of the potential offered by the context, the existing more or less extensive environment is also a source of energy, a host of ideas, the starting point for a structure consistent with sustainable development precepts.

2. BASIC PRINCIPLES

Basic principles include such things as functionality, upkeep, serviceability and durability. Architecture has to comply with the Vitruvian triad of *Utilitas* (utility) – *Firmitas* (solidity) – *Venustas* (beauty).

Allowing for the general context, functionality for all users, flexibility, maintainability, flow control are our contemporary 'Utilitas'. Proper management of these factors will contribute to the design of flowing spaces adapted to human movement yet well-equipped, places where people feel at ease, where they like to spend their time.

To build correctly in today's world (Firmitas), it is necessary to make allowance for a large number of technical criteria: gravity, water-tightness, resistance to earthquakes and other extraordinary events. These all depend on the nature of the soils and the specific climatic conditions. The challenge is to achieve the best structural solution in relation to the site but also one that tallies with the underlying architectural concept. In terms of durability, it is important to be consistent, efficient, starting with the overall concept for the building and then addressing its different parts rather than the reverse. It is also important to make due allowance for the building's ageing process by planning ahead, making time your ally so that changes and "movements" in the architecture can become an integral part of the concept. For example, by foreseeing how the vegetation will take ownership of the building, by taking account of the wear patterns (regular or not) of certain materials, the way their colour or texture will alter over time.

For my first building project, the Villa La Sousta (delivery end 2006), I attached enormous importance to the external environment, to the trees in other words. The land had been left to run wild and boasted numerous evergreen oaks. I was keen to create three distinct environments: one in the trunks of the trees, one in the canopy and one above with a view over the vegetation to the sea. By providing such contrasting environments, it would be possible to inhabit different parts of the property depending on season, mood or time of day. Once the building was finished, it was clear that the intended effect of intense links with nature was a success, you could touch the branches of the trees from the middle terrace. Then, as time went by, some of the trees died, unsettled by the excavations. At first, I was bitterly disappointed. A mimosa was planted for its yellow winter flowers, but that, too, failed to survive. Today, there are fewer trees close to the property. Yet these unplanned events can also be perceived as an asset. They have changed the environment in the medium term (a few years) but are still in harmony with the original concept. Appreciating the random changes caused by nature is one way of interpreting the passage of time. Architects must learn to make time their ally. The same would be true with other phenomena on other scales.



Villa La Sousta

Our role will therefore consist of highlighting some of these phenomena by making allowance for them from the design stage.