

WHY SHOULD ARCHITECTURE BE A GATEWAY TO UNDERSTANDING GOD?

The Long Path that Leads from
the Making of our World to God

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It has taken me almost fifty years to understand fully that there is a necessary connection between God and architecture, and that this connection is, in part, empirically verifiable. Further, I have now come to the view that the sacredness of the physical world – and the potential of the physical world for sacredness – is a powerful, surprising, and sure path to recognizing, and providing small steps towards understanding the existence of God, whatever God may be, as a necessary part of the reality of the universe.

Only in the last twenty years has my understanding of this certainty taken somewhat explicit form, and it continues to develop every day. It has led me to explicit visions of God, and to understanding of what kind of entity God may be, coupled with a way of talking about these things that allows them to be understood in straightforward terms.

I believe it may be understood by all of us – by ordinary people, by scientists, and by religious seers.

All this comes from the task of paying attention to the earth, its land and rocks and trees, its buildings, and the people and ants and birds and creatures all together, and its blades of grass. It comes from paying

attention to the fact that the task of making and remaking the earth that we call architecture, is at the core of this common sense understanding.

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Starting in about 1956, I began for the first time, consciously, to try and find out what architecture *is*. I had by then received my degree in mathematics, at Trinity College, Cambridge, and began, as I had always intended, to undertake a second degree, this time in architecture, also at Trinity College, Cambridge. As I began to take in what I was being taught at Cambridge, I felt that the then-prevailing idea of architecture was rootless and arbitrary, mainly governed by styles and pointless quirks of style, and that what was typically said about it by architects was peculiar, very often meaningless, and above all egocentric. In 1958, as early as I could after completing my architecture degree, I left to go to the United States, to do a PhD in architecture at Harvard. That was the moment when I first got my feet on the ground, and began trying to define the true nature of architecture from first principles.

To get my feet on the ground, and to have something solid that I could be sure of, I started by examining the smallest particles of functional effect, that I could discern in buildings, with small and sometimes barely significant aspects of the ways that buildings affect people. My purpose in doing this, was to focus on the smallest particles of fact that I could be certain of: something that was extraordinarily difficult when faced with the porridge of mush that then passed for architectural theory. In the early years my studies were based on the most ordinary, miniscule observations about usefulness and the effect of buildings on the people who lived in them, always keeping the observations modest, reliable -- small enough and solid enough so that I could be sure that they were true.

At first I included very small particulars of functional effect in any matter that actually made a practical difference to daily life... a shelf besides the door where one could put a packet down while searching for ones keys, for instance, or the possibility of a sunbeam coming into a room and falling on the floor.

But I quickly realized that some of these details were very much more significant than others. Those like the first (the shelf) tended to be

pedestrian, even though useful; while those like the second (the sunbeam) were more uplifting, and clearly mattered more in some obvious but profound sense. I began to focus on those miniscule points which mattered more, in the sense of the second example. Gradually, then, I was able to pave the way to the possibility of seeing how buildings support human well-being – not so much mechanical or material well being, but rather the emotional well-being that makes a person feel deeply comfortable in himself. And as I studied these small effects carefully, gradually I was led to a conception of wholeness, wellness, and spiritual support that might, under ideal circumstances, be present between buildings and human beings.

Starting with these very humble and detailed pictures of what seemed to “matter” in a building, for fifty years I have struggled to provide a basis for architecture, which is able to sustain human feeling, and the human spirit. I made an effort to penetrate the logic of architecture, and the logic of architectural value – in the hope that I could alter the devastating effect of what has become called “modern” architecture on human beings, on human society, and to replace it with an idea and practice of architecture that could help people sustain the sanctity of life – both in their hearts and in society.

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I suppose it is fair to say that there are two approaches to the reality of God: one is faith, the other is reason. Faith works easily, when it is present, but it is luck, or one’s early history in family life, or a blinding insight of some kind that determines whether one has faith. Reason is much harder. One cannot easily approach the reality of God, by means of reason. Yet in 20th century discourse reason is almost the only way we have of explaining a difficult thing, so that another can participate.

It is reason, the language of science, and its appeal to sharable, empirical observation and reasoning that has given our modern era its strength. Yet, as just said, one is unlikely to encounter God, on the basis of reason. However, and again yet, there is a persuasive logic in the coherent and well constructed arguments from empirical observation and fact that may even reach to spiritual truths.

This story of my life, is one which began with childlike, primitive faith, which then took me through dark forests of non-understanding, and was finally able to emerge into the light of day, with a vision which is both visionary and empirical. It is a vision which has roots in primitive faith, and from it builds bridges of logic and scientific coherence towards a new kind of visionary faith rooted in scientific understanding. This new kind of faith and understanding is based on a new form of observation. It depends for its success, on our faith (as human beings) that our feelings are legitimate. Indeed my experiments have shown that in the form I have cast them, they are more legitimate and reliable, perhaps, than any other human sensations.

And it is in this way that I was led from architecture to the intellectual knowledge and love of God. It was my love of architecture and building, from which I slowly formed an edifice of thought, that provides for the existence of God as surely as we have previously known the world as made of space and matter.

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I never taught or spoke about God consciously, as part of my work as an architect. As professor of architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, I tried to teach and write in ways that were consistent with my background in science and mathematics. It also seemed highly incongruous to bring God into my discussions of architecture, because I was simply trying to find out what was true, and write it down. A fairly straightforward process, I thought, following well-tested methods of scientific enquiry. So that is what I set out to do, and that is what I did. But in my heart, I was always aware that I did maintain an inner knowing that the best way to produce good architecture must somehow be linked to God, indeed that architecture was always about God, and that this was the source of any strength I had in being able to identify the real thing. But in the early days these stirrings were very much private, interior to me, and subdued.

I was a practicing Roman Catholic, I learned much from Christian mystics (The Cloud of Unknowing), from Sufi saints (Mevlana, Ibn Arabi), from Buddhist and Taoist writers (Chuang Tzu and Lao Tse,

especially the Tao Te Ching), from Zen poets especially Bashō, from south-sea anthropologists Gregory Bateson, Ruth Benedikt and Jane Resture, from the texts of the Sanskrit classical canon, from western writers such as the French psychiatrist Hubert Benoit, from Aldous Huxley, and from the age of enlightenment, especially from Spinoza.

During my years at Berkeley, I encountered considerable resistance from the faculty and administration. Even though the religious content of my work was not articulated, the university made continuous efforts to diminish the importance of my work, and did their best to dissuade students from taking my classes. This took place because the spiritual content and *underlying* message, though always presented in a form acceptable to common sense, struck them as an attack on the prevailing forms of thought and practice in fashionable 20th-century architecture.

Indeed, to protect myself and my students I was obliged during the period 1985 to 1992 to undertake a First Amendment law suit against the University, since the university was undermining my right to teach what I believed to be true. I was by then a full professor in the Department, but nevertheless it took seven long years, before I prevailed in my right to teach the approach I had formulated, and was able publicly to go ahead with research and further reasoning that made full sense to me.

During all these years I had still not yet formulated an explicit way of understanding the connection between God and architecture, nor had I yet found it necessary to do so. But half consciously, it was always at the heart of what I was doing. Questions about the nature of God, the relation between God and our concepts of modern physics, the apparent disparities between the various views of God presented in different cultures and religions, were with me every day, and for several years I undertook various forms of practice – Zen Buddhism, the writings of Mevlana, private forms of meditation -- to do what I could to sharpen and clear my mind.

As time went on, I also began formulating practical and modestly helpful theories, which enabled me (and others) to build better buildings. Some of my works became widely read, and translated into many languages. These theories were focused on the search for a deeper sense of well being

– not thermal comfort, or energy saving, or comfort of illumination on surfaces. The issues I found most helpful were connected with a deeper, psychological and emotional comfort, in which people could feel their own existence as human beings. These theories gradually became widely accepted, but also continued to raise discomfort in the profession, because they plainly were at odds with the stark and ego-centered view of buildings which was then being taught by most teachers of architecture, and which was commonly accepted in late 20th century society as the “correct” view.

But as a result of struggling to understand these things at the deepest level, and while establishing a foundation which seemed ordinary, and practical, and dependent on common sense, I found it more and more difficult to fit together a well-defined scientific or intellectual model of what was going on, in a way that could encompass these simple matters. And yet it was also clear to me that the empirical reality of these simple observations could not be denied, and certainly could not be abandoned.

Indeed, in the period from 1979 to 1990, I found to my great surprise, that I was gradually forced to wrestle with questions about the nature of reality, the nature of space, the nature of value, the nature of human freedom. As I moved forward, the urgent necessity to clarify these issues became more and more important. Coupled with these problems, I also found that within the positivistic, scientific canon I had grown up with as a student at Cambridge, it was virtually impossible even to *formulate* adequate concepts that would be capable of solving the more profound issues which lie at the root of architecture.

I resisted this internal mental pressure from the scientific philosophy and practice of my youth, for as long as I could. I had been trained in physics and mathematics, and assumed, virtually as part of my educational birthright, that these disciplines could be relied on, and that I should not step outside the intellectual framework which they provided and allowed. But to solve the practical and conceptual problems I had to address, I now embarked on study of a series of concepts, which, though formulated more or less within scientific norms, nevertheless opened doors, and ways of thinking, which were highly challenging to the academic establishment.

1. Wholeness
2. Value as an objective concept
3. Unfolding wholeness
4. Connection with the inner self
5. Centers
6. Structure-preserving transformations
7. Degree of life

These concepts, and a few others, were introduced, by me, because I found them to be essential to the task of thinking clearly about the life of buildings. Yet they were almost not definable within the terms of reference of then-contemporary scientific thinking. This was true to such a degree, that even raising these topics as matters for discussion and clear thinking in professional architectural circles, caused raised eyebrows, obstructive discussion, and certainly little sincere effort to get to the bottom of the issues needing discussion.

One by one, then, I allowed these concepts into my everyday way of thinking, doing my best to hold to the scientific rigor and clarity as far as I could, yet trying to form models which would adequately portray the needed concepts in a way which could make sense of them.

During 1978-85, while I continued working on Volumes 1 and 2 of *The Nature of Order*, I went as far as I was able, to lay the ground work of a new model.

One might say that this new model relied heavily on new forms of experiment, in which a person would attempt to judge the quality of an action, or a building, or a painting, by consulting his own self, as to the degree of wholeness, or healed-ness, that appeared in the items under discussion or investigation.

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This was the beginning of a very new way of thinking about architecture, which viewed the environment and its structure, as an instrument interacting with human beings in such a way that people could heal

themselves. In short, it was the beginning of a practical theory of healing environments – still far from the subject of God -- but beginning to point in that direction.

This theory was put forward in a number of books by my coworkers and myself, of which the most important was probably *A Pattern Language*, which has (I am told) become the best-selling architecture book of all time. Other companion volumes included *A New Theory of Urban Design*; *The Production of Houses*; *The Linz Café*; *The Oregon Experiment*, all published between 1975 and 1983. The concepts embedded in these five books, created the beginning of a generative theory with which people could produce well-functioning environments for themselves. As a group these books have become a standard work in architectural education, all over the world.

As the use of these concepts proliferated, and as my colleagues and I continued experiments in which we did our best to apply these principles to real building projects, it became more and more clear that we needed to sharpen our idea of health, and clarify the target of this work.

It was urgent to be able to provide a more solid conceptual and experimental foundation, which could provide us with operational definitions of health, and which would also provide us with practical ways of understanding health, and with practical ways of helping us to judge which environments, and which kinds of environments, were indeed most successful in sustaining or promoting health.

This task began to lead, for the first time, to my finding an empirical hint of the presence of God. In effect we began to discover a new kind of empirical complex in buildings and works of art that is connected with the human self, God, spirituality, social and mental health, and ways of understanding the role that love plays in establishing wholeness, the role of art, and conscious awareness of the human being as part of some greater spiritual entity.

These arguments are conveyed in *The Nature Of Order*, Books 1 and 2.

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I would like to summarize the content of this new kind of empirical complex in the following way. In any part of what we call nature, or any part of a building, we see, at many levels of scale, coherent entities or centers, nested in each other, and overlapping each other. These coherent entities all have, in varying degree, some quality of “life.”

For any given center, this quality of life comes about as a result of cooperation between the other living centers at several scales, which surround it, which contain it, and which appear within it. The degree of life any one center has, depends directly on the degree of life that is in its associated centers at these different scales. In short, I had identified a kind of wholeness: in which the life of any given entity depended on the extent to which that entity had unfolded from the wholeness.

When one contemplates this phenomenon soberly, it is hard to imagine how it comes about. But what is happening is, in effect, that life appears, twinkling, in each entity, and the cooperation of these twinkling entities creates further life. You may view this phenomenon as ordinary. Or you may think of it, as the Buddhists of the Hua Yen canon did, when they viewed it as the constantly changing God-like tapestry that *is* God, and from which life comes.

In this view, architecture contributes to the world, to just that extent to which it plays its role in this tapestry: and that in turn comes about as a result of the extent to which a building, or an outdoor place between buildings, or a doorway, is composed entirely of entities which are themselves whole and entire, and which -- each one of them -- make us feel whole and entire. This is in any case, an attempt to make a picture of the Whole.

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You see then, how it is that the careful study of architecture, led me – and I believe inevitably leads – to thoughts about the nature of things, and the simultaneous existence of what we may call the objective (outer) nature of things – typically dealt with in science – and at the same time

the existence of what we may call the subjective (or inner) nature of things. The discovery which is new, is the discovery that the so-called subjective, or inner view of things, is no less objective than the objective-outer-mechanical view of things. When questions about the subjective are asked carefully, and in the right way, they are as reliable as the experiments of physics. Indeed, this understanding has led to a new view of experiment, which uses the human being as a measuring instrument, and leads to reliable, shared results when properly done.

This has come to light because of my interest in architecture. In conventional philosophy, there is nothing which allows one to test the reality of God, or of visions inspired by God. But when a person is asked to compare two buildings, or two doorways, and to decide which one is closer to God, this question will be answered in the same way by different people, and with a remarkably high reliability.

All this, the experiments, the vision, and the consequential impact on planning and architecture, seem to have a unique ability to point to the reality of God. In theory, other disciplines like ethics, might seem to have more claim to lead to a knowledge of God. But the tangible substance of architecture, and the fact that in a successful architecture every tiny piece is (by definition) suffused with God, either more or less. This gives the concept of God a meaning, essentially translated from the beauty of what may be seen in such a place, which shows us God made manifest in a way that has rarely before been claimed, or seen, or attempted.

It is this, I believe, that ultimately thereafter then leads us to see God, and to know God. If we pay attention to the beauty of those places which have the quality that self-like, or God like entities are visible there, and we see the extraordinary tangible beauty that such places have, it enables us to see God in a down-to-earth way. The thought of God, the meditation on nothing, which makes room in our hearts, and as a consequence, that which is truly good can flow from it. That follows from the awareness in our hearts, and from our active effort to make things that make the Earth beautiful.

This is not a pastiche of pseudo-religious phrasing. In technical language, it is the structure-preserving or wholeness-extending transformations

(described in *The Nature of Order* and capable of being precisely defined) which show us how to modify a given place in such a way as to give it more life, and when applied repeatedly, this kind of transformation is what brings life to the Earth, in any place.

Earth -- the physical Earth and its details -- sand, water, rocks, birds, animals and trees -- this is the garden in which we live. We must choose that we are gardeners; we must choose to make it our task to make this garden beautiful. Understanding this properly will give us both intellectual insight into the nature of God, and also give us faith that we may believe in the existence of God, as something immense, yet also as something modest, something which lies under the surface of all matter, and which comes to life, and shines forth, when we treat the garden properly.

The most urgent, and I think most inspiring way we can think about our buildings, and our way of making and remaking the Earth, is to recognize that each small action we take, in placing a step, or planting a flower, or shaping a front door of a building, is a form of worship -- an action in which we give ourselves up, and lay what we have in our hearts, at the door of that fiery furnace within all things, which we may call God.

The kind of architecture these practices lead to is comprehensively demonstrated in *The Nature of Order*, and particularly in *Book 3, A Vision of a Living World*.

The condition which makes this [seeing God in the world around us] true, occurs only if the quality of the architecture is right -- an almost unattainable condition in today's world. Why is it almost impossible? Because in an epoch when God was not acknowledged, it became virtually impossible for people to build the kinds of buildings where God appears. The whole purpose of the work I have done, is to show (a) that the presence of God in a matter-configuration is an objectively existing condition, and (b) how we may create buildings where the presence of God can be seen and felt.

The two go hand in hand.

We cannot make an architecture of life, if it is not made to reflect God – an objective condition. And, by a surprising twist, the search for a true architecture, that is to say, a real architecture which works, and in which this feeling of rightness is present in every bone, in an irreligious era has the unique power to bring back the reality of God to center stage in our concerns.

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My work has proven this to me: There is available to us, a form of transformation which, each time it is applied, extends and enhances the wholeness of the land, and the act of using this process of transforming puts us in touch with ourselves. This means that it makes the land of the Earth become more and more deeply connected to our selves. An environment, when made in this way, may even be regarded as a vision of our inner selves.

The best state for the land – our best actions on the land, in the land and in the buildings – will come from our awareness of its wholeness and from our awareness of its connection with our own selves – that is to say, with God, that substrate of the universe which is the origin of who and what we are.

As I have said, our ability to grasp the wholeness, our ability to see it, and to adhere to it – these are all profound, and often difficult. But in order to understand these operations from a practical and mathematical point of view, we need to be guided by an inner voice – and I believe that voice is, essentially, tantamount to a vision of God. Thus – although it is formless and shapeless, nevertheless it is this vision of God which draws us on.

That new vision can become a new source of inspiration and motivation. I call it new, not because it is at root *genuinely* new. Of course it is not, it is ancient. But it is entirely new in our era, to take such a thing with full seriousness, and to be able to derive from it, well-fashioned, scientifically endowed conceptions of what is needed to heal a given place. It will not be governed by money, or profit; it will not be governed by social politics; it will be governed simply by the desire and firm intention to make beauty

around us, and to contemplate the true nature of beauty, which is humility.

Perhaps that sounds as though it is not solid enough for sober and enlightened action. I have come to believe that quite the opposite is true. The vision of God we hold in our inner eye, that we draw from the hills and mountains, from the cities towers and bridges, from the great oak trees, and from the small and tender arbors, and from the stones and tiles and colors which have been carefully laid by people forming bricks, and building with them, it is that which is God, and which we encounter as we try to find a vision of God in the world. This will then guide us surely, as if with a certain hand, towards those things that can emerge from the present wholeness, and lead towards a future which is yet more beautiful.

The capacity to do this lies in the heart of every man and every woman... it is stark in its simplicity. To make each brick, each path, each baluster, each window sill, a reflection of God. The world shaped by this presence, will thrive from it, and will surely lead us back to a vision of God, and a sense of right and wrong, and a sense of well-being. This vision of the world -- a real, solid physical world, that is built with this in mind -- will lead us back to a vision of God. Future generations will be grateful to us if we do this properly.

So indeed, I have concluded that the work of taking architecture seriously, as I have tried to do, will slowly, but inevitably, lead us to the proper treatment of tiny details, to an understanding of the unfolding whole, and to an understanding -- mystical in part -- of the entity which underpins that wholeness.

Thus, as I promised, the path of architecture does seem to lead inexorably towards a renewed understanding of God. It is an understanding very far beyond religion, something which is true within the canon of every religion, not connected with any one religion in particular, something which therefore moves us beyond the secularism and strife that has torn the world for more than a thousand years.