

introduction

We could not live without architecture, but that is not why it matters. The purpose of this book is to explain what buildings do beyond keeping us out of the rain. Architecture may be able to stake a claim to being necessary to our lives in a way that poetry and literature and painting cannot, but the fact that buildings give us shelter is not the answer to the question posed by the title. If it were as simple as that, there would be nothing left to say.

Architecture begins to matter when it goes beyond protecting us from the elements, when it begins to say something about the world—when it begins to take on the qualities of art. You could say that architecture is what happens when people build with an awareness that they are doing something that reaches at least a little bit beyond the practical. It may be as tiny a gesture as painting the front door of a house red or as grand an undertaking as creating the rose window of a cathedral. It can be as casual as a sliver of decorative molding around a window or as carefully

wrought as the ceiling of a Baroque church. A clapboard farmhouse with a columned porch is architecture; so is a house by Frank Lloyd Wright in which every inch of every wall, every window, and every door is part of an elaborately considered composition. Wright liked to say that architecture began when he started building his sprawling modern houses on the American prairie; Mies van der Rohe said, more poetically and also more modestly, that the origin of architecture was in the first time “two bricks were put together well.”

The making of architecture is intimately connected to the knowledge that buildings instill within us emotional reactions. They can make us feel and they can also make us think. Architecture begins to matter when it brings delight and sadness and perplexity and awe along with a roof over our heads. It matters when it creates serenity or exhilaration, and it matters just as much, I have to say, when it inspires anxiety, hostility, or fear. Buildings can do all of these things, and more. They represent social ideals; they are political statements; they are cultural icons. Architecture is surely our greatest physical symbol of the idea of community, our surest way to express in concrete form our belief in the notion of common ground. The way a community builds tells you, sometimes, all you need to know about its values: just to look at Radburn, New Jersey, will tell you that it is a suburb built to control the automobile, in the same way that it does not take long to figure out that Positano and the rest of the Amalfi Coast in Italy were built to connect to the sea. You can understand the difference between, say, the leafy precincts of Greenwich, Connecticut, and the suburban tracts of Levittown, Long

Island, more easily, I suspect, by comparing Greenwich's estates to Levittown's houses than you could by looking at the residents of each community. The people can mislead you more easily than their architecture can.

Buildings also stand as evidence of the power of memory. Who has not returned after many years to a house, a school, a hotel, or some other place in which meaningful events in your life occurred and not found that the buildings themselves unleashed a sense of the past too strong to ignore? Architectural historian Vincent Scully has said that architecture is a conversation between the generations, carried out across time, and while you could say that this is true of all forms of art and culture, in architecture the conversation is the most conspicuous, the most obvious, the most impossible to tune out. We may not all participate in the conversation, but we all have to listen to it. For that reason alone, architecture matters: because it is all around us, and what is all around us has to have an effect on us. That effect may be subtle and barely noticeable, or it may shake us to the core, but it will never fail to be there.

Because architecture is there, presenting itself to us even when we do not seek it out or even choose to be conscious of it, it makes sense to think about it in slightly different terms from the way in which we might discuss, say, Baroque music or Renaissance sculpture, which is to say that it makes sense to consider it not only in terms of great masterpieces but also in terms of everyday experience. Architecture is a part of daily life for everyone, whether or not they want it to be. You may visit Chartres Cathedral as a conscious act of intention, just as you might elect

to read *Madame Bovary* or decide to hear a performance of Beethoven's late quartets, but you live your life within and around and beside dozens of other buildings, almost none of which you have chosen to be with. Some of them may be masterpieces and some of them may be the architectural equivalent of dime-store novels or elevator music. It is perfectly reasonable to talk about the meaning of literature without talking about Danielle Steel, but can you grapple with the impact of architecture without looking at Main Street?

I tend to think not, which is why the pages that follow will deal to a great extent with the everyday experience of looking at buildings, which is, for most people, a major reason—sometimes the only reason—that architecture matters. Masterpieces are no less important for this, and they will get plenty of attention here. It is not wrong to say that the greatest buildings provide the greatest moments of architectural experience. They certainly have for me. But I prefer to see architecture not as a sequential story of masterworks, a saga beginning with the Pyramids and the Parthenon and extending through Chartres and the Taj Mahal and the Duomo and the Laurentian Library and St. Paul's Cathedral, and then on to the work of Louis Sullivan and Wright and Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, but as a continuum of cultural expression. Architecture “is the will of an epoch translated into space,” Mies said. Buildings tell us what we are and what we want to be, and sometimes it is the average ones that tell us the most.

There are surely some readers for whom architecture matters in a more specific way than I have in mind here. For some, architec-

ture matters because buildings are our greatest consumers of energy (far more than cars), and if we do not reduce the amount of energy consumed in constructing and maintaining our buildings, we will be in far worse shape than if every MINI Cooper owner traded in his car for a Hummer. I could not agree more with the urgency of the green architecture movement and with the wisdom as well as the practicality of making sustainable buildings. One of the most encouraging developments in the past decade is the extent to which the architectural profession has taken up the values of the environmental movement and made many of them its own. So I am in complete agreement with the move toward sustainable architecture, and I do not discuss it in this book only because my intention is to look at architecture from a broader and less technical standpoint. But there can be no doubt that one of the ways architecture continues to matter is in how it uses energy and that reducing the amount of energy consumed by buildings needs to be one of the highest priorities of our time.

By the same token, I am sure there are readers who feel that architecture matters because the building industry occupies a huge position in our economy and that if we can make it more efficient, the entire economy will benefit. For others, architecture matters because the technology of building is undergoing remarkable advances, allowing us to build all kinds of things that architects once could barely dream about. And there are surely readers who believe that architecture matters because people are in desperate need of housing and that architecture has the potential to address this as well as so many other urgent social needs. Here again, I am in agreement, and I do discuss the issue of the

social responsibility of architecture in a limited way toward the end of chapter 1. But as with green architecture, the economics and technical aspects of building are not the focus of this book, however much I share a belief in their importance.

This book does not argue for a single theory of architecture, an all-encompassing worldview that can dictate form to the architect and explain it to the rest of us. I do not believe there is such a thing as a universal recipe for good architecture; even in ages with much more stylistic coherence than our own, there have always been a myriad of ways in which different architects have chosen to build. I am excited by the best architecture of any style and any period, and although the focus of this book is almost exclusively on Western architecture, what I say about space and symbol and form—and about the relation of everyday buildings to special ones—has application to architecture of all cultures. Architecture takes very different forms in different cultures, but the nature of our experience with such fundamental matters as proportion and scale and space and texture and materials and shapes and light is not as different as the appearance of the architecture itself may be. And it is the quest to understand these basic things that interests me the most—far more, surely, than any theory or dogma or cultural tradition that argues that there is a single acceptable way to build.

Architects, being artists, often see things differently, and they should: it probably helps to produce an important body of work if you believe that there is one true way. The blinders that theory

represents can be useful, maybe even essential, to artists in the making of art. But I do not believe that they help the rest of us to appreciate and understand it.

But if not theory, what? What determines whether, to use Mies's phrase, the bricks are put together well? Why do some buildings lift the spirit and others depress it? Why are some buildings a joy and others painful? And why do some hardly register at all?

If there are many routes to the kingdom of architectural heaven, it does not mean that there are not still guideposts along the way. *Something* has to help us tell the good from the bad. Some of those guideposts are purely aesthetic: much proportion, for example, is based on the purity of the so-called Golden Section, the roughly three-by-five rectangle whose ratio of height to width is particularly pleasing to the eye, neither too bluntly square nor too elongated. We can analyze this and other combinations that make buildings pleasing as objects until we are blue in the face (and I will say something about such issues of visual perception in chapter 3), but such analyses will take us only so far. Ultimately architecture, though it can reach great aesthetic heights, achieves its meaning from the balance between aesthetic and other concerns. It must be understood as a complex and often contradictory set of conditions, in which art seeks to find some detente with the realities of the world. Architecture is always a response to limits—physical constraints, financial ones, or the demands of function. If it is seen purely as art or purely as a practical pursuit, it will never really be grasped.

In *Art [Objects]*, Jeanette Winterson asks how we can know the difference between art to be admired and art to be ignored. “Years ago, when I was living very briefly with a stockbroker who had a good cellar,” she says, “I asked him how I could learn about wine.

“‘Drink it,’ he said.”

And so it is. Experience is not sufficient, but it is necessary. The only way to learn is to look, to look again, and then to look some more. If that does not guarantee connoisseurship in art any more than sampling a lot of wine can turn someone into a wine expert, it is the only possible beginning, and ultimately the most urgent part of the long process of learning. This book is firmly on the side of experience. Between walking the streets and reading a work of architectural history, I will always choose walking and the power of real perception. Facts—whether stylistic characteristics, names of obscure pieces of classical ornament, or the birth-dates of great architects—can always be found later in books. The sense of being in architectural space—what it feels like, how it hits you in the eye and swirls around in your gut, and, if you are very lucky, sends shivers up your spine—cannot be understood except by being there.

Everything has a feel to it. Not just masterpieces but everything in the built world. The purpose of this book is to come to grips with how things feel to us when we stand before them, with how architecture affects us emotionally as well as intellectually. This book is not a work of architectural history or a guide to the styles or an architectural dictionary, though it contains elements of all three of these. Its most important message, I hope, is to

encourage you to look, and to learn gradually how to trust your eye. Look for essences, not for superficial stylistic detail. Think about intentions, but do not be too forgiving on their behalf, for they have given birth to more bad architecture than good. As in art, intentions are necessary, but they are only a beginning, not an end in themselves. How good intentions become serious ideas which, in turn, inspire the creation of built form that is capable of pleasing us or, better still, of moving us, is the subject of the rest of this book.

This page intentionally left blank