

Architecture and Spirit of the Time – Encounters with beings in the built environment



Rudolf Steiner – Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland, 1924 – © L.Fiumara

Ego and Individuality

From the beginning of the Renaissance until the end of the 19th century, mankind became more and more involved and connected with earthly matter. At the same time, a new quality in human development emerged – the development of human individuality – which was already predisposed in Greco-Roman times, but only became generally effective since the Renaissance. When we ask ourselves today what is the spiritual

dimension in architecture, it is directly related to the spiritual situation of humanity, which is connected to the theme of the individual development of man in our time.

Donato Bramante (c. 1444-1514), who as one of the most important architects of the Renaissance was commissioned to build the new Church of St. Peter in Rome (from 1506), had in mind for this church – that is, for the most important building task of Christianity at that time – the ideal of creating a combination of the principle of the basilica with its arches and naves (Maxentius Basilica, 307-313 A.D.) and the principle of the central space such as the Pantheon in Rome (consecrated c. 125 A.D.). In the Pantheon, one felt oneself placed in the centre of space for the first time. Even the central axes of the pyramid-like coffers of the dome converge not at the centre of the hemisphere, but at the centre of the floor, i.e. where the visitor stands. It is certainly no coincidence that the Pantheon was not dedicated to a particular god, but to “all the gods”, so that one could experience oneself in this way at the centre of the whole divine world. This central space, however, is still conceived as a temple and does not have the direction of movement associated with the basilica as a longitudinal building. Bramante now wanted to unite these two principles. Thus, in the Renaissance, a certain new quality of individuality emerged that had not existed before: on the one hand, the experience of the self in the centrality, and on the other hand, the dynamic of movement, the striving of the individual in a certain direction.

These are, of course, beginnings that did not immediately blossom because the interest in matter and towards the external manifestations of nature, especially in the 18th/19th centuries, tended to hinder it. So we cannot say that the process of individualisation in the sense of a connection with the spiritual moved steadily forwards, but one can see in the Renaissance and Baroque, for example in the work of Borromini

(1599-1667), the beginnings of an organic thinking and expression in architecture, above all in Borromini's approach to learning from the laws of living nature.

The architecture of the 19th century with its eclecticism is an extreme expression of excessive subjectivity, whereby the individual orders a house that corresponds to his dreams, wishes and taste. The contrast between the Batlló House in Barcelona (1904-1906) by Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926) and the roughly contemporary neighbouring building by Domenèch i Montaner (1850-1923) shows that we have arrived at a time when everyone can wish for whatever they want if they only have the necessary money and if it is permitted by law. This raises the question of the freedom of individuality or egoism that wants to develop in a time when religious and social forms are losing more and more of their power.



A.Gaudí – House Batlló, Barcelona, Spain, 1904 (on the left, house by L.Domenèch i Montaner) – © L.Fiumara



A.Gaudí – House Batlló, Barcelona, Spain, 1904 (on the left, house by L.Domenèch i Montaner) – © L.Fiumara

If the human being does not give any particular thought to this new condition, it is often the case that other forces replace the impulse and try in various ways to steer its further development in certain directions. Some, very widespread manifestations of contemporary architecture are expressions of forces that would rather retard the expression of individuality and prevent mankind from becoming aware of its individual essence. Through repetition, anonymity and monotony in the environment, mankind is influenced in such a way that the actual sense of individuality is clouded.

There are other forces that are trying to strengthen egoism so that the ego becomes self-possessed, addicted to power and too closely attached to the earth. In the Torre Agbar by Jean Nouvel (*1945), an office and residential building in Barcelona built in 2004, one can see an extreme expression of pride and arrogance. It is not a sacred building, but it is nevertheless as tall as Antoni Gaudí's Sagrada Família (begun in 1882) and dominates its surroundings even more. The sense of power that radiates from this building is interestingly associated with a colourfulness that is reminiscent of something like organic life substances, whose appearance is, however, not entirely healthy. When you see this building from a distance, you have the feeling that blood is flowing over the surface – a very powerful sensual impression indeed.



J.Nouvel – Agbar Tower, Barcelona, Spain, 2005 – © L.Fiumara

There is another way in which this hypertrophied egoism seeks to manifest itself in buildings. It does not take such an

aggressive approach as with the Agbar Tower, but creates elements of entertainment architecture. This architecture is usually created by large offices like Atkins Design Studio, which today work with hundreds of employees mainly in countries like the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia and create such images – they are actually more images than concrete buildings – that have the task of satisfying emotional needs for playful qualities, superficial amusement and ever new surprises.

On a smaller scale, such approaches can also be found in Europe. A new building district in Amsterdam near the central station shows the effort to create a lively environment in which the separate houses are more individualised than usual – in other words, they pose the question of individuality and diversity. This is achieved with witty façade elements such as hanging windows, curved eaves, arbitrary differences in height, etc. These are all façade designs that, in my opinion, have little content, but are all the more driven by the intention to add a bit of wit. In principle, again, no impulse for a real inner satisfaction or even further development of the human being is discernible.

One can of course ask what is supposed to be bad about building with wit. I suspect that an inhabitant who is exposed to these “jokes” every day will not find them so funny after a short time, because they are too superficial and the user experiences a kind of weakening of his emotional life in the long run; for in the end, one’s own individuality is placed in constant relation to a mere joke. Such phenomena are most often found in Eastern Europe, such as the Nautilus shopping centre on the Lubjanka Square in Moscow. This example shows how many different elements, styles and games with shapes and colours can come together in one building as an expression of emotional streams. Basically, this is more or less the same eclecticism that appeared in Europe at the end of the 19th century. During my long stays in Eastern Europe, I observed

that life itself becomes very superficial when people are always surrounded by such buildings.



A.Vorontsov – Shopping mall “Nautilus”, Moscow, Russia, 1999 –
© L.Fiumara

At the beginning of the 20th century, pioneers of organic architecture like Antoni Gaudí felt the need to do something so that people could become aware of their own individuality and find support for their development through architecture. These pioneers tried to do this in different ways, each according to constitution and possibilities. At this point I do not want to analyse the work of these architects, but will try to show what approaches I see to meet these needs in the spirit of today's times.

Reflection through the medium of

architecture

A first possibility is the reflection of individuality through architecture, in that people are able to perceive an individual expression in a building and are thus drawn to experiencing their own individuality. In Antoni Gaudí's Casa Milà (1906-1910), a large apartment building in Barcelona, the effort to give each window and corner a distinct individual expression is evident. This shows that even in such a building, which was not planned for one particular person but for a large number of families, the quality of the individual can be reflected.



A.Gaudí – House Milà, Barcelona, Spain, 1910 – © L.Fiumara

In a less plastic way, this can also be found in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959). In the Unity Temple in Oak

Park/Illionis (1904), one can perceive – despite the great simplicity of the volumes – the reflection of an individual attitude in the way the view along the street is designed. This is probably due to the fact that the central section is perhaps only 30 to 40 centimetres closer to the street than the lateral elements, and that the proportions of the façade give the impression that the upper section, with its windows and eaves, seems to be looking out from the building. Such qualities can be experienced even more strongly in the later works of Frank Lloyd Wright, such as the Unitarian Church in Madison, Wisconsin (1947).



F.L.Wright – Unity Temple, Oak Park (IL), USA, 1904 – © L.Fiumara



F.L.Wright – Unitarian Church, Madison (WI), USA, 1951 – © L.Fiumara

Apart from the pioneers of this movement, one can find many buildings throughout the 20th century that exhibit the qualities mentioned, such as the towers of the ING Bank by Alberts & Van Huut in Amsterdam (1987). In this case, the type of design is also linked to the intention of individualising the towers so that, despite the size of the complex, the different groups of employees can identify with their own place of work, in contrast to the anonymity usually found in office buildings. This approach can also be found very strongly in many of Santiago Calatrava's works, such as the extension to the Milwaukee Art Museum (1994-2001), where, compared to the ING Bank, one can perceive on the outside a stronger dynamic, a quality of movement.

This building in particular leads us to a second aspect, to what extent an interior can also offer an opportunity to

reflect individuality, for the perception of the view is, after all, only a first moment in the encounter with a building. When I dealt with the subject of interiors on the occasion of a lecture, I was amazed to notice how there is also a basic principle in interior design throughout the 20th century that has to do with Bramante's idea, but which was only able to spread in the 20th century. We can see this exemplified in the pavillion of the Milwaukee Museum, a space that widens from the entrance to about the middle of its total length and then narrows again, coming to a conclusion (in this case with a peak). This creates a sense of the connection between centrality and dynamism: one moves in the direction of the axis of symmetry, one comes to an experience of widening and then of centre, but one does not remain in the centre (as in the Pantheon), but one moves on, one gets an impulse to develop further, to overcome pure egoism. This is a spatial principle that runs as a leitmotif through the entire organic architecture of the 20th century.



S.Calatrava – Quadracci Pavillion, Milwaukee Art Museum.

Milwaukee (WI), USA, 2001 – © L.Fiumara

An archetype of this, or one of the earliest spaces of this kind, is the hall of the second Goetheanum, which opens towards the stage and contains within itself the idea of the double dome or the interpenetration of audience and stage space. The spatial interpenetration in Gaudí's Cripta Güell, which is not derived from the Goetheanum, shows that motifs appeared simultaneously in various places at the beginning of the 20th century as an expression of the Time Spirit.

Inner attitude and design quality

So far I have talked about reflections of individuality. There can also be a reflection or more an inner perception of this quality in the interior. The aspect of development can unfold even more expressively through metamorphosis and through the transformation of forms, as can be seen in the exterior of the second Goetheanum or in the interior of the first. Architects like Jens Peters have tried to convey the sense of development in their buildings. In the Waldorf School in Salzburg (1st building phase 1991-1994, 2nd building phase 2008; cf. Mensch+Architektur no. 61/62) the various parts are obviously in a process of development and transformation, although in this case, I think, there is no metamorphosis as in the forms of the first Goetheanum. That is to say, through this design the aspiration, the impulse towards development can be experienced, also through the design of the roofs and through the whole movement of the building.



BPR -Rudolf-Steiner-Schule, Salzburg. Austria – © L.Fiumara

Another aspect besides the reflection of individuality and the stimulation of its development is the conveying of inner attitudes which, after all, support inner development. This is about feeling the expression of the building more deeply and consciously and connecting it with certain soul qualities. This basically means that an architect who strives for something like this must also be able to sense the inner attitudes that enable development or a connection to the spiritual. For if one accepts that an individuality exists as a being, one inevitably comes to the conclusion that this development of the individuality is in inner connection with the other beings in the world, which can also be called “the spiritual”. For this reason Rudolf Steiner describes anthroposophy as a path of knowledge which seeks to lead the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe of the world. This means that individuality, which through the centuries has increasingly separated itself from the spiritual and increasingly connected itself with matter, must again find access to the spiritual. That is the perspective of development. Architecture can carry qualities and attitudes that are helpful for people to move forward on this path.

In the Bergen Kindergarten (1981), a design by Espen Tharaldsen, we can perceive an attitude of love, a gesture of

love that is expressed through this building and can really be taken up by people as an example of how to relate to the environment and to fellow human beings. Another quality is, for example, openness to the world, as expressed in the view from the main road in the House of Culture in Järna (1992) by Erik Asmussen (1913-1998). The building, which stretches horizontally in the landscape, opens up to the whole environment and shows two tower-like elements on the two sides, which reinforce these movements through the vertical accents and bring them to a conclusion in a kind of awareness.



E.Asmussen – Culture House, Järna, Sweden – © L.Fiumara

Architecture as an aid to spiritual scholarship

Understanding these qualities helps to describe the intentions and characteristics of organic architecture in a non-dogmatic way and to compare it with other approaches. An objective evaluation of architecture needs a concrete basis, which I believe can only lie in observing the impact of buildings on human development. For me, the topicality of Rudolf Steiner's architecture (1861-1925) lies precisely in the fact that buildings such as the Goetheanum combine many of the qualities mentioned to the highest degree. For example, Rudolf Steiner incorporated into the exterior design of the second Goetheanum

(from 1924) the fundamental attitudes necessary for a person embarking on the path of spiritual training or inner development. If you let the impression from the west elevation live in you long enough, you will realise that it radiates an inner attitude that is connected with the qualities of spiritual discipleship. One aspect, for example, is the combination of concentration and individual power, especially thanks to the shape of the upper window and the vertical axis of symmetry; the other is the great openness that one finds especially in the lower area at the level of the terrace. This building combines the two qualities of the soul that are presented in Rudolf Steiner's book 'Knowledge of Higher Worlds' as fundamental prerequisites for the training of the spirit: "an open heart for the needs of the outer world" and "inner firmness and unshakeable perseverance". In this sense, the Goetheanum is actually an object in whose expression one can immerse oneself in order to acquire some qualities that one needs to strengthen in one's own development.



Rudolf Steiner – Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland, 1924 – © L.Fiumara

The same can be said about many other buildings. In the Unity Temple by Frank Lloyd Wright that I mentioned, you find to a certain extent the quality that you find in the second Goetheanum and also, in my opinion, an amazing similarity in the expression of the two buildings, in the way they look, in the inner attitude that they convey. This means that both architects must have had a similar feeling for this quality of looking into another world, into a supersensible realm.

Dealing with the Expression of Beings

I would like to mention one last level with the help of which one can find access to the spiritual. It concerns the formation of an environment in which the human being not only perceives his own individuality, but in which he feels that he is also surrounded by other spiritual beings, where he can train himself to perceive other entities besides himself and his fellow human beings. Especially in the case of the heating plant of the Goetheanum in Dornach, built in 1914 according to Rudolf Steiner's designs, it can be noticed that it is not about a reflection of human individuality, but about the expression of another quality of the spiritual. From this point of view, the Goetheanum and the surrounding buildings by Rudolf Steiner can be seen as a kind of colony of different Beings connected with each other.



Rudolf Steiner – Goetheanum power plant, Dornach, Switzerland, 1913 – © L.Fiumara

Something similar can be said about the railway station of the Saint-Exupéry airport in Lyon (1989-1994) by Santiago Calatrava. There is also something of a non-human nature to experience, without wanting to judge whether it is good or bad. Nevertheless, one can feel directly that something that lies outside his humanity is coming towards the observer. In connection with the building task, this can also be an expression of the essence of a community, e.g. the essence of a school. This attitude can not only appear in the main design of a building, but also in details, such as in the railway station mentioned above, where many elements speak of a quality thorough which people are constantly confronted with different entities, e.g. through the finishing elements of the stair railings. The interesting thing is that in recent years these aspects have become more and more widespread even among architects who did not strive for it from the beginning.





S. Calatrava – St. Exupéry Airport Station, Lyon, France, 1994 –
© L. Fiumara

I think this phenomenon has to do with the fact that the spirit of the time is being felt more and more strongly by architects and people in general today. This is happening because of the development we have gone through in the last century and also in connection with what Rudolf Steiner described as the “crossing of the threshold” of the spiritual world for all humanity at the beginning of the 20th century. This is a process that is becoming stronger and stronger with time. But one also notices that without sufficient awareness of the true needs of mankind, this feeling of the spirit of the age shows itself or embodies itself in a form that is not always conducive to man. One has the need to perceive something individual-spiritual, but this takes on all kinds of forms, all kinds of qualities, which are also random or wild (as for example in the interior of the DZ Bank on Pariserplatz in Berlin by Frank Gehry). Last but not least, there can also be harmful effects if this spiritual quality is not consciously grasped.

Besides many examples of dynamic projects by Gehry, Foster or Zaha Hadid, we see an increasingly strong hardening in architecture, where the focus is rather on materialistic functionality and the purity of forms. Much of what is built today, especially in Central Europe, is characterised by a strong feeling of death, even in the choice of materials (mostly steel, concrete and glass) and colours (preferably grey, white or brown). This tendency is based on a world view that sees the development of technology as the main feature and essential cultural factor of our time. Even Le Corbusier was enthusiastic about the aesthetics of the machine at the beginning of the 20th century and called his designs for houses "machines for living", thus pointing in a direction that gradually leads to the exclusion of all living qualities from architecture. In my opinion, this is the expression of a great fear in the human souls of the spiritual and of the unpredictable.

This kind of architecture has also exerted a certain influence on organic architects, whether for economic reasons, or because of the regulations that do not allow anything else (which is indeed the case in many occasions), or because one simply wants to adapt to what is considered modern in the world. Certainly, an interest for the tendencies that live in our time is necessary, but together with this serious preoccupation, one needs a living and conscious relationship with the essence of the spirit of time in order not to fall into one of the extremes and in order to be able to contribute something positive. That is why I wanted to show that for me this aspect is quite essential for the further development of human beings.

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