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—Robert Campbell,

*The Boston Globe*

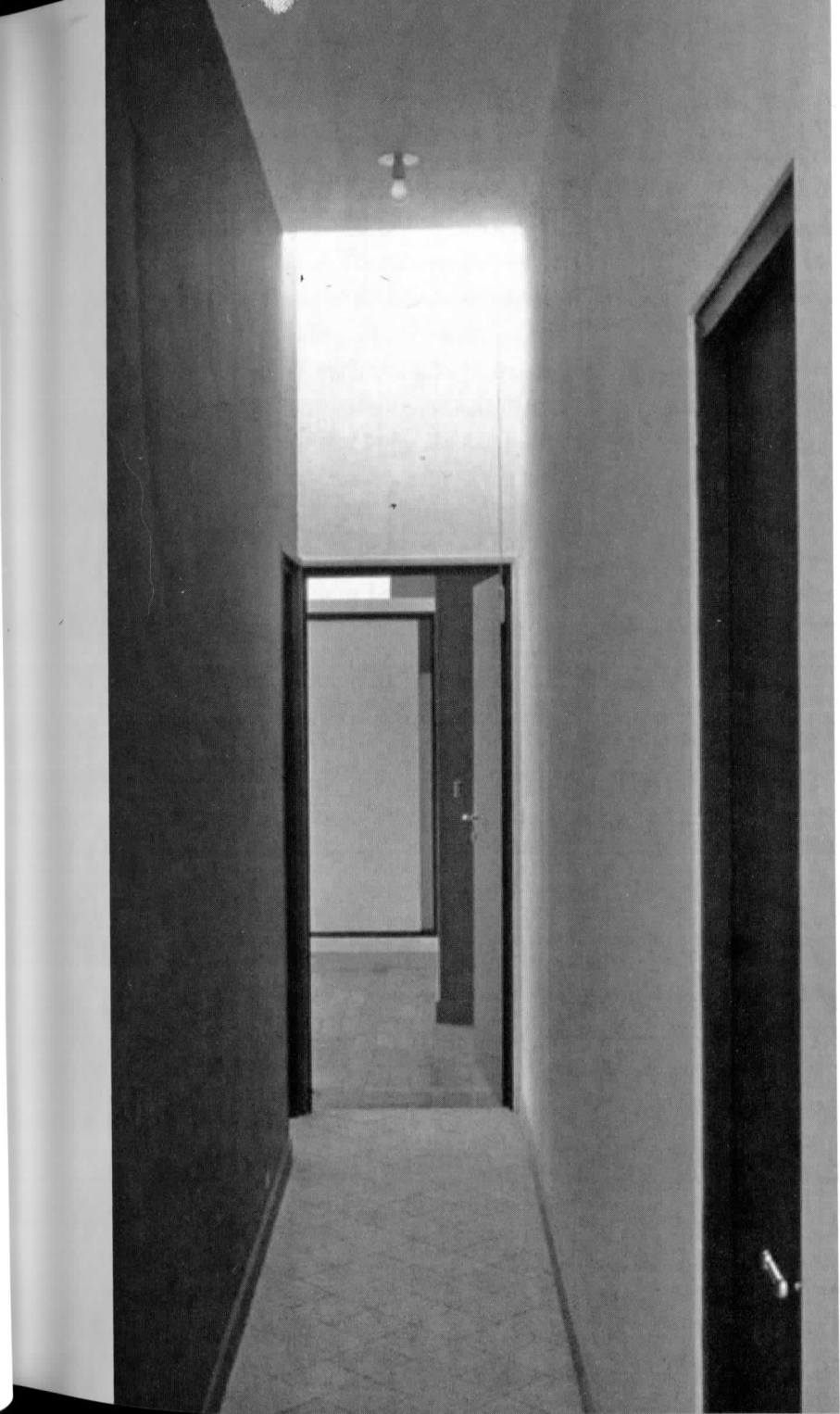
# THE ARCHITECTURE OF HAPPINESS



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# I. The Significance of Architecture



1.

A terraced house on a tree-lined street. Earlier today, the house rang with the sound of children's cries and adult voices, but since the last occupant took off (with her satchel) a few hours ago, it has been left to sample the morning by itself. The sun has risen over the gables of the buildings opposite and now washes through the ground-floor windows, painting the interior walls a buttery yellow and warming the grainy-red brick façade. Within shafts of sunlight, platelets of dust move as if in obedience to the rhythms of a silent waltz. From the hallway, the low murmur of accelerating traffic can be detected a few blocks away. Occasionally, the letter-box opens with a rasp to admit a plaintive leaflet.

The house gives signs of enjoying the emptiness. It is rearranging itself after the night, clearing its pipes and cracking its joints. This dignified and seasoned creature, with its coppery veins and wooden feet nestled in a bed of clay, has endured much: balls bounced against its garden flanks, doors slammed in rage, headstands attempted along its corridors, the weight and sighs of electrical equipment and the probings of inexperienced plumbers into its innards. A family of four shelters in it, joined by a colony of ants around the foundations and, in spring time, by broods of robins in the chimney stack. It also lends a shoulder to a frail (or just indolent) sweet-pea which leans against the garden wall, indulging the peripatetic courtship of a circle of bees.

The house has grown into a knowledgeable witness. It has been party to early seductions, it has watched homework being written, it has observed swaddled babies freshly arrived from hospital, it has been surprised in the middle of the night by whispered conferences in the kitchen. It has experienced winter evenings when its windows were as cold as bags of frozen peas and midsummer dusks when its brick walls held the warmth of newly baked bread.

It has provided not only physical but also psychological sanctuary. It

has been a guardian of identity. Over the years, its owners have returned from periods away and, on looking around them, remembered who they were. The flagstones on the ground floor speak of serenity and aged grace, while the regularity of the kitchen cabinets offers a model of unimposing order and discipline. The dining table, with its waxy tablecloth printed with large buttercups, suggests a burst of playfulness which is thrown into relief by a sterner concrete wall nearby. Along the stairs, small still-lives of eggs and lemons draw attention to the intricacy and beauty of everyday things. On a ledge beneath a window, a glass jar of cornflowers helps to resist the pull towards dejection. On the upper floor, a narrow empty room allows space for restorative thoughts to hatch, its skylight giving out onto impatient clouds migrating rapidly over cranes and chimney pots.

Although this house may lack solutions to a great many of its occupants' ills, its rooms nevertheless give evidence of a happiness to which architecture has made its distinctive contribution.

2.

Yet a concern for architecture has never been free from a degree of suspicion. Doubts have been raised about the subject's seriousness, its moral worth and its cost. A thought-provoking number of the world's most intelligent people have disdained any interest in decoration and design, equating contentment with discarnate and invisible matters instead.

The Ancient Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus is said to have demanded of a heart-broken friend whose house had burnt to the ground, 'If you really understand what governs the universe, how can you yearn for bits of stone and pretty rock?' (It is unclear how much longer the friendship lasted.) Legend recounts that after hearing the voice of God, the Christian hermit Alexandra sold her house, shut herself in a tomb and

never looked at the outside world again, while her fellow hermit Paul of Scete slept on a blanket on the floor of a windowless mud hut and recited 300 prayers every day, suffering only when he heard of another holy man who had managed 700 and slept in a coffin.

Such austerity has been a historical constant. In the spring of 1137 the Cistercian monk St Bernard of Clairvaux travelled all the way around Lake Geneva without noticing it was even there. Likewise, after four years in his monastery, St Bernard could not report whether the dining area had a vaulted ceiling (it does) or how many windows there were in the sanctuary of his church (three). On a visit to the Charterhouse of Dauphiné, St Bernard astonished his hosts by arriving on a magnificent white horse diametrically opposed to the ascetic values he professed, but he explained that he had borrowed the animal from a wealthy uncle and had simply failed to register its appearance on a four-day journey across France.

3.

Nevertheless, such determined efforts to scorn visual experience have always been matched by equally persistent attempts to mould the material world to graceful ends. People have strained their backs carving flowers into their roof beams and their eyesight embroidering animals onto their tablecloths. They have given up weekends to hide unsightly cables behind ledges. They have thought carefully about appropriate kitchen work-surfaces. They have imagined living in unattainably expensive houses pictured in magazines and then felt sad, as one does on passing an attractive stranger in a crowded street.

We seem divided between an urge to override our senses and numb ourselves to our settings and a contradictory impulse to acknowledge the extent to which our identities are indelibly connected to, and will shift along with, our locations. An ugly room can coagulate any loose suspi-

cions as to the incompleteness of life, while a sun-lit one set with honey-coloured limestone tiles can lend support to whatever is most hopeful within us.

Belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places – and on the conviction that it is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.

4.

We are sometimes eager to celebrate the influence of our surroundings. In the living room of a house in the Czech Republic, we see an example of how walls, chairs and floors can combine to create an atmosphere in which the best sides of us are offered the opportunity to flourish. We accept with gratitude the power that a single room can possess.

But sensitivity to architecture also has its more problematic aspects. If one room can alter how we feel, if our happiness can hang on the colour of the walls or the shape of a door, what will happen to us in most of the places we are forced to look at and inhabit? What will we experience in a house with prison-like windows, stained carpet tiles and plastic curtains?

It is to prevent the possibility of permanent anguish that we can be led to shut our eyes to most of what is around us, for we are never far from damp stains and cracked ceilings, shattered cities and rusting dockyards. We can't remain sensitive indefinitely to environments which we don't have the means to alter for the good – and end up as conscious as we can afford to be. Echoing the attitude of Stoic philosophers or St Bernard around Lake Geneva, we may find ourselves arguing that, ultimately, it doesn't much matter what buildings look like, what is on the ceiling or how the wall is treated – professions of detachment that stem not so much from an insensitivity to beauty as from a desire to deflect the sadness we would face if we left ourselves open to all of beauty's many absences.



*Architecture can render vivid to us who we might ideally be.*  
Mies van der Rohe, dining area, Tugendhat House, Brno, 1930

5.

There is no shortage of reasons to be suspicious of the ambition to create great architecture. Buildings rarely make palpable the efforts that their construction demands. They are coyly silent about the bankruptcies, the delays, the fear and the dust that they impose. A nonchalant appearance is a frequent feature of their charm. It is only when we try our own hand at construction that we are initiated into the torments associated with persuading materials and other humans to cooperate with our designs, with ensuring that two pieces of glass will be joined in a neat line, that a lamp will hang symmetrically over the stairs, that a boiler will light up when it should or that concrete pillars will marry a roof without complaint.

Even when we have attained our goals, our buildings have a grievous tendency to fall apart again with precipitate speed. It can be hard to walk into a freshly decorated house without feeling pre-emptively sad at the decay impatiently waiting to begin: how soon the walls will crack, the white cupboards will yellow and the carpets stain. The ruins of the Ancient World offer a mocking lesson for anyone waiting for builders to finish their work. How proud the householders of Pompeii must have been.

In his essay 'On Transience' (1916) Sigmund Freud recalled a walk he took in the Dolomite Mountains with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. It was an exquisite summer's day; the flowers were in bloom and brightly coloured butterflies danced above the meadows. The psychoanalyst was glad to be outdoors (it had been raining all week), but his companion walked with his head bowed, his eyes fixed on the ground, and remained taciturn throughout the excursion. It wasn't that Rilke was oblivious to the beauty around him; he simply could not overlook how impermanent everything was. In Freud's words, he was unable to forget 'that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty that men have created or may create'.

Freud was unsympathetic; for him, the capacity to love anything

attractive, however fragile it might be, was a hallmark of psychological health. But Rilke's stance, though inconvenient, helpfully emphasises how it can be those most in thrall to beauty who will be especially aware of, and saddened by, its ephemeral character. Such melancholic enthusiasts will see the moth hole beneath the curtain swatch and the ruin beneath the plan. They may at the last moment cancel an appointment with an estate agent, having realised that the house under offer, as well as the city and even civilisation itself, will soon enough be reduced to fragments of shattered brick over which cockroaches will triumphantly crawl. They may prefer to rent a room or live in a barrel out of a reluctance to contemplate the slow disintegration of the objects of their love.

At its apex, a passion for architecture may turn us into aesthetes, eccentric figures who must watch over their houses with the vigilance of museum guards, patrolling their rooms in search of stains, a damp cloth or sponge in hand. Aesthetes will have no choice but to forgo the company of small children and, during dinner with friends, will have to ignore the conversation in order to focus on whether someone might lean back and inadvertently leave a head-shaped imprint on the wall.

It would be pleasant to refuse in a muscular spirit to lend stray blemishes genuine significance. However, aesthetes force us to consider whether happiness may not sometimes turn on the presence or absence of a fingerprint, whether in certain situations beauty and ugliness may not lie only a few millimetres apart, whether a single mark might not wreck a wall or an errant brush stroke undo a landscape painting. We should thank these sensitive spirits for pointing us with theatrical honesty towards the possibility of a genuine antithesis between competing values: for example, an attachment to beautiful architecture and the pursuit of an exuberant and affectionate family life.

How wise were the ancient philosophers in suggesting that we exclude from our vision of contentment anything that might one day be covered

by lava or blow down in a hurricane, succumb to a chocolate smear or absorb a wine stain.

6.

Architecture is perplexing, too, in how inconsistent is its capacity to generate the happiness on which its claim to our attention is founded. While an attractive building may on occasion flatter an ascending mood, there will be times when the most congenial of locations will be unable to dislodge our sadness or misanthropy.

We can feel anxious and envious even though the floor we're standing on has been imported from a remote quarry, and finely sculpted window frames have been painted a soothing grey. Our inner metronome can be unimpressed by the efforts of workmen to create a fountain or nurture a symmetrical line of oak trees. We can fall into a petty argument which ends in threats of divorce in a building by Geoffrey Bawa or Louis Kahn. Houses can invite us to join them in a mood which we find ourselves incapable of summoning. The noblest architecture can sometimes do less for us than a siesta or an aspirin.

Those who have made architectural beauty their life's work know only too well how futile their efforts can prove. After an exhaustive study of the buildings of Venice, in a moment of depressive lucidity, John Ruskin acknowledged that few Venetians in fact seemed elevated by their city, perhaps the most beautiful urban tapestry in the world. Alongside St Mark's Church (described by Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice* as 'a Book of Common Prayer, a vast illuminated missal, bound with alabaster instead of parchment, studded with porphyry pillars instead of jewels, and written within and without in letters of enamel and gold'), they sat in cafés, read the papers, sunbathed, bickered and stole from one another as, high on the church's roof, unobserved, 'the images of Christ and His angels looked down upon them.'

Endowed with a power that is as unreliable as it often is inexpressible, architecture will always compete poorly with utilitarian demands for humanity's resources. How hard it is to make a case for the cost of tearing down and rebuilding a mean but serviceable street. How awkward to have to defend, in the face of more tangible needs, the benefits of realigning a crooked lamppost or replacing an ill-matched window frame. Beautiful architecture has none of the unambiguous advantages of a vaccine or a bowl of rice. Its construction will hence never be raised to a dominant political priority, for even if the whole of the man-made world could, through relentless effort and sacrifice, be modelled to rival St Mark's Square, even if we could spend the rest of our lives in the Villa Rotonda or the Glass House, we would still often be in a bad mood.

7.

Not only do beautiful houses falter as guarantors of happiness, they can also be accused of failing to improve the characters of those who live in them.

It seems reasonable to suppose that people will possess some of the qualities of the buildings they are drawn to: to expect that if they are alive to the charm of an ancient farmhouse with walls made of irregular chiselled stones set in light mortar, if they can appreciate the play of candlelight against hand-decorated tiles, can be seduced by libraries with shelves filled from floor to ceiling with books that emit a sweet dusty smell and are content to lie on the floor tracing the knotted border of an intricate Turkoman rug, then they will know something about patience and stability, tenderness and sweetness, intelligence and worldliness, scepticism and trust. We expect that such enthusiasts will be committed to infusing their whole lives with the values embodied in the objects of their appreciation.

But, whatever the theoretical affinities between beauty and goodness, it is undeniable that, in practice, farmhouses and lodges, mansions and



*We would still often be in a bad mood:*  
Philip Johnson, The Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1949

riverside apartments have played host to innumerable tyrants and murderers, sadists and snobs, to characters with a chilling indifference to the disjunctions between the qualities manifested in their surroundings and in their lives.

Medieval devotional paintings may try to remind us of sadness and sin, they may seek to train us away from arrogance and worldly pursuits and render us properly humble before the mysteries and hardships of life, but they will hang in a living room without active protest while butlers circulate the finger food and butchers plot their next move.

Architecture may well possess moral messages; it simply has no power to enforce them. It offers suggestions instead of making laws. It invites, rather than orders, us to emulate its spirit and cannot prevent its own abuse.

We should be kind enough not to blame buildings for our own failure to honour the advice they can only ever subtly proffer.

8.

Suspicion of architecture may in the end be said to centre around the modesty of the claims that can realistically be made on its behalf. Reverence for beautiful buildings does not seem a high ambition on which to pin our hopes for happiness, at least when compared with the results we might associate with untying a scientific knot or falling in love, amassing a fortune or initiating revolution. To care deeply about a field that achieves so little, and yet consumes so many of our resources, forces us to admit to a disturbing, even degrading lack of aspiration.

In its ineffectiveness, architecture shares in the bathos of gardening: an interest in door handles or ceiling mouldings can seem no less worthy of mockery than a concern for the progress of rose or lavender bushes. It is forgivable to conclude that there must be grander causes to which human beings might devote themselves.

However, after coming up against some of the sterner setbacks which



*The moral ineffectiveness of a beautiful house:*  
Hermann Göring (in white) at home with the French Ambassador and, to the right, Generals Vuillemin and Milch. In the background, *Saints Margarethe and Dorothea*, German (fifteenth century), and *Lucretia* (1532) by Lucas Cranach

bedevil emotional and political life, we may well arrive at a more charitable assessment of the significance of beauty – of islands of perfection, in which we can find an echo of an ideal which we once hoped to lay a permanent claim to. Life may have to show itself to us in some of its authentically tragic colours before we can begin to grow properly visually responsive to its subtler offerings, whether in the form of a tapestry or a Corinthian column, a slate tile or a lamp. It tends not to be young couples in love who stop to admire a weathered brick wall or the descent of a banister towards a hallway, a disregard for such circumscribed beauty being a corollary of an optimistic belief in the possibility of attaining a more visceral, definitive variety of happiness.

We may need to have made an indelible mark on our lives, to have married the wrong person, pursued an unfulfilling career into middle age or lost a loved one before architecture can begin to have any perceptible impact on us, for when we speak of being ‘moved’ by a building, we allude to a bitter-sweet feeling of contrast between the noble qualities written into a structure and the sadder wider reality within which we know them to exist. A lump rises in our throat at the sight of beauty from an implicit knowledge that the happiness it hints at is the exception.

In his memoirs, the German theologian Paul Tillich explained that art had always left him cold as a pampered and trouble-free young man, despite the best pedagogical efforts of his parents and teachers. Then the First World War broke out, he was called up and, in a period of leave from his battalion (three quarters of whose members would be killed in the course of the conflict), he found himself in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin during a rain storm. There, in a small upper gallery, he came across Sandro Botticelli’s *Madonna and Child with Eight Singing Angels* and, on meeting the wise, fragile, compassionate gaze of the Virgin, surprised himself by beginning to sob uncontrollably. He experienced what he described as a moment of ‘revelatory ecstasy’, tears welling up in his eyes



*Life is not usually like this:*  
Ken Shuttleworth, Crescent House, Wiltshire, 1997



Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna and Child with Eight Singing Angels*, 1477

at the disjunction between the exceptionally tender atmosphere of the picture and the barbarous lessons he had learnt in the trenches.

It is in dialogue with pain that many beautiful things acquire their value. Acquaintance with grief turns out to be one of the more unusual prerequisites of architectural appreciation. We might, quite aside from all other requirements, need to be a little sad before buildings can properly touch us.

9.

Taking architecture seriously therefore makes some singular and strenuous demands upon us. It requires that we open ourselves to the idea that we are affected by our surroundings even when they are made of vinyl and would be expensive and time-consuming to ameliorate. It means conceding that we are inconveniently vulnerable to the colour of our wallpaper and that our sense of purpose may be derailed by an unfortunate bedspread. At the same time, it means acknowledging that buildings are able to solve no more than a fraction of our dissatisfactions or prevent evil from unfolding under their watch. Architecture, even at its most accomplished, will only ever constitute a small, and imperfect (expensive, prone to destruction and morally unreliable), protest against the state of things. More awkwardly still, architecture asks us to imagine that happiness might often have an unostentatious, unheroic character to it, that it might be found in a run of old floorboards or in a wash of morning light over a plaster wall – in undramatic, frangible scenes of beauty that move us because we are aware of the darker backdrop against which they are set.

10.

But if we accept the legitimacy of the subject nevertheless, then a new and contentious series of questions at once opens up. We have to confront

the vexed point on which so much of the history of architecture pivots. We have to ask what exactly a beautiful building might look like.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, having abandoned academia for three years in order to construct a house for his sister Gretl in Vienna, understood the magnitude of the challenge. 'You think philosophy is difficult,' observed the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 'but I tell you, it is nothing compared to the difficulty of being a good architect.'

