

An Aesthetic for Relatedness - The Non-Blank Canvas

Recently, in the Pastoral Hall in Yamaguchi Prefecture, I became involved in a lively exchange of views about the idea of "intervention" with Sey Takeyama, and the Spanish architect, Vicente Diez Faixat. In our discussion about modern design interventions in historical architecture, we became aware that the term "intervention", in translation to the Japanese *kainyu* (介入), takes on a military connotation that conveys a harsher, authoritarian image not present in the Spanish. The Spanish term has a more positive implication, especially in connection with restoration, that suggests the rebuilding of a new relationship between different conditions, and it was in this sense of the term that we continued our discussion. For future developments as well as throughout the history of building, this theme described by the key word of "intervention" is constantly being reintroduced.

Examining Gaudi's Church of the Sagrada Familia, both at present and during construction, a monument on a global scale, we must remember that Gaudi was not the original designer but actually the second architect to take on the project. Building on the previous architect's existing construction, in a process of intervention rather than one of replacement, he created the work that we see today. Similarly, the Alhambra Palace begun in southern Spain in the Middle Ages under the influence and culture of Islam, was by no means a building built in a single phase. In the continuing process of construction of the Alhambra, a succession of builders used some existing elements and discarded others while adding their own contributions to create a unique dialogue between the cultures and conditions of subsequent eras. Taking a general view of the generation of buildings historically, a "blank canvas" from which a completely fresh start can be made has never existed. Rather, from the contact with different cultures, with elements gathered together and assorted depending on the situation, a new building is generated from what could be called a "non-blank canvas".

The idea of the "blank canvas" can be seen to have partly resulted from an increasingly widening gap between art and architecture since the beginning of modern times. To explain this, we have to look back on the history of art and architecture since the Renaissance. Why the Renaissance? Because it was not until this time that the artist and architect came to establish themselves in independently integrated professions, although prior to this period, of course, there did exist important movements involving art and architecture both in the west and east.

In the Renaissance, it was often the case that the architect, sculptor and painter were all the same person. It is a well-known story that Brunelleschi, who won the first prize along with Ghiberti in the competition for the bronze doors of the Florence Baptistry, lost to him in the end, instead took up designing the cupola of the Duomo. Leonardo Da Vinci was not only a scientist but also a painter, sculptor and an architect. Michelangelo, who took part in

the planning of St. Peter's in Rome left a number of sculptural masterpieces including the statue of David. Raphael was supervising the construction of St. Peter's while being a most splendid painter. It is our modern prejudice to dismiss such a situation as only being "unspecialized". We must note that as artisans working in groups around their studios, they were, in the first place - even before being an architect, sculptor or painter - artists who shared the same training skills starting from learning how to sketch.

It is sometimes the task of an historian to give a precise account of why specialization in modern occupation emerged from such a situation of diversity. In my opinion, however, it seems to have had something to do with the emergence of museums. As it is widely known, the Uffizi gallery in Florence was used as offices at that time. When the line of the Medici's ended, it was turned into the gallery we know today. Paintings without frames were at first commissioned, with a certain theme in view, to be located at a specific place for a particular client, the same went for sculptures. In this respect, they stood on the same ground as architecture, which would involve clients, require a specific site, theme and budget before the work started. As sponsors changed or declined, the Uffizi, which also served as a place for their storage, took in paintings and sculptures for its own exhibits. In the meantime, those paintings and sculptures were granted freedom of movement by being cut off from topos. Paintings, put in frames, became commodities, which could be bought and sold. In other words, as a result of being emancipated from specific sites, they were plugged into a monetary economy by being floated on a market. I wonder if it's not the case that the notion of "pure aesthetics" was brought into the scene at this point in order to enhance these changes and compensate for the dignity that art had lost since. It should be noted that all these events coincided with the emergence of museums. The Uffizi opened to the public in the 18th century. The British Museum started exhibiting its historical monuments in the mid 18th century, which it collected from all over the world by cutting them off from their topos under the influence of the British Empire. The Louvre began to be used as a gallery in the latter half of the 18th century. In view of all this, museums began to appear only some 200 years ago.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that both the emergence of museums and the emancipation of visual arts from topos had a tremendous impact on those who engaged themselves in artistic activities. On the other hand, architecture was to enter the 20th century while still being tied to topos. It was the 20th century that saw revolutionary changes in architecture. It seems that these changes were facilitated by three elements: machinery, art and media.

Since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, throughout the 19th century processes of social restructuring and changes that followed in urban mechanism took place centering upon arrivals of new means of production. Ensuing this, an aesthetic of machinery came to influence architecture in the beginning of the 20th century. As we can see in a series of early modernistic movements such as Russian Constructivism, De Stijl, and activities took up by Bauhaus, art and architecture of the 20th century Modernism were developed side by side

with the same visual ideology. There have been no other relationships between art and architecture as parallel as this one; in the Renaissance, for example, even whole architectural forms and aesthetics of painting or sculpture shared a reciprocal relationship, they were not unified under a certain visual ideology. In the 20th century, architecture was encouraged to bear qualities free from the conditions by which architecture is naturally bound to topos, by means of communication through media such as photography.

Architecture in the 20th century began to divert from topos, heavily influenced by fields such as machinery, art and media, which had already become well independent of topos. The criticism which views 20th century modernistic urban redevelopment to be the cause of many incidents of 'loss of place', seems to have not only stemmed from some retrospective sentiment, but also to have been directed towards Modernism for its tendency to deviate from topos.

In contemporary times, architecture's relatedness to the people who inhabit it as well as to the natural environment, the landscape, as well as the course of history and the institutions governing society remains important. Influenced also by its connection to art and various other fields, architecture must, in order to hold onto the essence of relatedness in a building, retain a clear will - one that views itself as not being devoid of context. This need is often obscured by the image of a blank canvas from which to start instead, but this image is nothing more than an illusion. In fact, one might say that the 20th century has been an era in many ways defined by this illusion of the blank canvas. In the ideas of a utopian state that form the foundation of many social and political movements, the promise of a blank canvas continues to be a popular theme. Similarly, parallels can be drawn between the adamant stance of some modern-day environmentalists who feel that the natural environment must be left completely untouched and unaltered - a pristine blank canvas - and the religious Puritanism of a few centuries ago.

Movements in society aside, perhaps the field that can have the best claim to the existence of a blank canvas are art. Looking back to the 18th century, the loss of "topos" in art came with the emergence of the first museums. In contrast, architecture remained tied to topos until the relatively recent 20th century influence of Machine Art and Media. An independence from place was promised to architecture with the advent of Modernism. Yet while a separation from topos in art (in other words, a blank canvas) can be associated with insecurity or a clarifying neutrality, the implications in architecture are quite different. In architecture, this pursuit of a blank canvas is irrevocably tied to the destruction of topos, a clearing away of what has gone before. Represented by much modern urban development, the failures of architecture in such attempts to be independent of pre-existing historical and geographical context are clear. Indeed, art has also begun to reconcile itself to topos with the development and explorations of work that are, once again, conceived for a particular place.

Thus, I believe throwing away the blank canvas, that the starting point for the new era is instead a "non-blank" canvas where one attempts to depict the new relationships of art and

architecture that lead up to the creation of a new relatedness in the 21st century.