# Interdisciplinarity
## Understanding Architecture in the Context of the Humanities

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**Fig 1:** *The church of the Dominican monastery of St Jiljí, Prague, a Baroque confessional. A rich interweaving of theology, architecture, art and sculpture. Situated in a context, having an ethical function.*

In this paper I would like to argue that architecture is a humanistic discipline, which benefits from the natural overlapping and inter-communication of different cultural spheres. In doing so, I want to show that authentic works of art and architecture have always had an ethical role to play in human life, providing existential orientation and facilitating participation in civic life. The strict separation of disciplines or areas of knowledge with which we are familiar is a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging only in the wake of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. Prior to the eighteenth century, various branches of knowledge - philosophy, ethics, the sciences, the 'arts' and so forth - were largely interrelated. European medieval theatre can provide an illustration. During the early Middle Ages, it evolved out of the performance of the liturgy, and gradually moved from inside the church to the streets and squares of the town. Re-enacting shared scriptural narratives and using drama, music and the ephemeral architecture of specially constructed stages or 'mansions', it involved the participation of many strata of the community.[1] In showing people how to live their life, and their place in the order of the whole, it performed an essential ethical function.

Likewise, in a Baroque or Rococo church interior, it is impossible to separate the individual components which make up its communicative space. Architecture, painting, sculpture and light all contribute powerfully to the sense of sacred theatre. Music was also an essential component, and we know that specific sacred music was composed for the liturgy and often for a particular church setting and its acoustic. In the Western tradition of harmonic proportions, going back to Pythagoras and Plato, music was seen as the audial counterpart of geometry and number, the perceptible echo of the higher, sacred order of the created universe. On a more pragmatic level, the music evolved to sound good in the churches in which it was performed. On occasion, such interiors were deliberately modified to display the music to better advantage.[2] The Baroque church or library also, however, provided an embodiment to the theology, philosophy and science of the time. Baroque architecture often plays with the formal and philosophical themes of geometry and number, illusion and reality, perspective and infinity. Francesco Borromini's deployment of the number and sacred geometry at Sant' Ivo alla Sapienza in Rome, for example, can be seen as already being informed by the emerging scientific world-view, as well as by a desire to evoke divine mystery. This architecture was not yet 'Art', but a powerfully ethical, symbolic representation of the cosmic order, designed to provide people with existential orientation.[3]

Perhaps the best example of the 'interdisciplinarity' of traditional culture are the 'cabinets of curiosities' which preceded the modern museum (Fig. 2). Cabinets of curiosities or *Wunderkammern*, the private collections assembled in their houses by princely or learned collectors, were part of the culture of curiosities which thrived in European cities in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. They represent a pre-scientific attempt to understand the mystery of the cosmic order. In Mannerist culture the world was seen as a continuum of analogies or correspondences between

the natural and artificial, the animate and the inanimate, and so forth, an order in which nature speaks through metaphor. These collectors' cabinets reveal the unity of the world as one great, unbroken chain, in which all elements echo each other. They are microcosmic images of the greater cosmic order, still understood pre-scientifically or symbolically: 'worlds in miniature,' as they were sometimes called. The scholars, aristocrats or apothecaries who made them called themselves 'natural philosophers': they were versed in contemporary 'scientific' knowledge, which also included theology, alchemy and magic. In seamlessly combining 'natural' elements with artificial and art objects, these collectors delighted in the blurring of boundaries. In some hands such cabinets combined many areas of culture and were also instruments of political propaganda. The culture of curiosities would fade during the Enlightenment, with changes resulting from the scientific revolution, and the empiricism of the scientific method. This corresponds to a new interest in rational classification systems, and the related phenomenon of encyclopaedism. Knowledge would grow and become divided into separate, increasingly specialized branches, which would have no common language or ground (this highly conceptual nature of contemporary science is perhaps best illustrated by theoretical physics today. It creates models for the very structure of the world in which we live, and yet is more or less completely inaccessible to laymen without the knowledge of complex mathematics). Under these circumstances it is often very difficult for the practitioners of contemporary sciences and humanities to communicate. This situation is symptomatic of the dominance today of the conceptual understanding of the world, and the attendant split into symbolic and instrumental modes of representation. It is also evident in modern scientistic culture that the imperatives of scientific objectivity and technological progress can become increasingly divorced from moral principles.[4]



**Fig 2:** The museum at Eichstätt of the apothecary Basilius Besler. (from Besler's Continuatio raritorum … varii generis, 1616)

## The aesthetic



**Fig 3:** Parthenon, east pediment sculptures, now displayed as part of the Elgin Marbles in a special gallery within the British Museum.

The sculptures from the east pediment of the Parthenon originally represented a gathering of the Olympian gods to witness the birth of the patron goddess of the city, Athena, and the daily journey of Helios's chariot across the heavens (Fig. 3). Each part of the temple – the cella, containing the great statue of Athena, the anthropomorphic colonnade, the sacrificial altars, and all the sculpture from the metopes to the friezes, played an essential role in the elaborate civic and sacred narrative embodied by the temple. Situated within the architectural order and sculptural programme of the temple (itself embedded in its Acropolis site and within its culture), the pediment sculptures conveyed a powerful existential message of origins, cosmic cyclicality, civic pride and the meaning of human life to the Greek citizens or celebrants who would have experienced them in their original temporal and physical setting. If one is to speak of beauty here, it is in the Heideggerian sense of a deep truth. This is the deeply vital, ethical role which works of art, situated in the churches and palaces for which they were made, typically played prior to the advent of the category of the aesthetic in the late eighteenth-century. Relocated to museums, and thus isolated from a meaningful physical and cultural context, works of art were now objectified, and came to be thought of primarily as sources of sensual delight. The physical de-situation of the work is an important part of the objectification process by which it can become the object of aesthetic sensibility.[5] The individual judgement and taste of the connoisseur-beholder would now assess its quality on the basis of aesthetic criteria. By these, the Parthenon pediment sculptures might typically be judged on the basis of their form and composition: the beauty of their modelling, the quality of their craftsmanship and so forth – all attributes which in their original setting were part of their overall primary meaning, which revolved around the perfection of the immortal Gods high above, in contrast to the ordinary human mortals below.

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The emergence of aesthetics coincides with the separation of art, the sciences, philosophy and religion into separate domains, and can be seen as part of the fragmentation of culture under the influence of scientific rationalism. As all knowledge became increasingly compartmentalized, art, which did not fit into a neat category, was given a category of its own. It was increasingly merely to be looked at, isolated from its context, the subject of vision and not a vehicle of participation. The notion of 'art for art's sake' represents an essential reduction of art's primary ethical purpose, where the work's often cosmic content is reduced to the appreciation of form. The Parthenon sculptures were transported from the Acropolis to England and sold by Lord Elgin to the British Parliament in the early nineteenth century. They soon became one of the most highly prized possessions of the young British Museum, displayed to considerable effect in specially constructed galleries. Admired for their beauty, the 'Elgin Marbles' immediately began to speak of a different kind of story – the then world-dominant power of the British Empire, of the personal and public ambitions of all those involved in their relocation, and of national pride on both sides.[6] As the works' meanings evolve, however, one irreducible fact remains – that they are inevitably and irretrievably isolated from their original function and context in the ancient Athenian polis. This sums up the problem of the nineteenth-century art museum, in which artefacts are de-situated from the original context which gave them meaning. This shortcoming was well understood by many of the modern avant-gardes, who wished to do away with the traditional museum.[7] Some of them focused in their work and daily life especially on the problem of the de-situation of the modern fragment.[8]

From late nineteenth century onward, we see various efforts to heal such cultural fragmentation. Phenomenology, for example, is one attempt to re-integrate separate branches of knowledge in one holistic understanding, based in the close study of the world of given experience. Much modern art speaks, in one way or another, of a desire to reunite the arts and engage the onlooker in corporeal participation. One of the best illustrations of this is again to be found in theatre. Western theatre evolved in Greece out of religious celebrations marking the ancient festival of Dionysus. These ceremonies aimed to ensure the continued fecundity of the land, and the survival and prosperity of the community. They included such diverse activities as the making of sacrificial offerings, the reciting of poetry and playing of music, sports contests, wild partying, and the performance of plays. The participants again included all strata of the urban population (from slaves, women and foreigners to the citizenry and the priesthood), each of which had a specified place in the hierarchy of the auditorium (cavea) of the Greek theatre (Fig. 4).
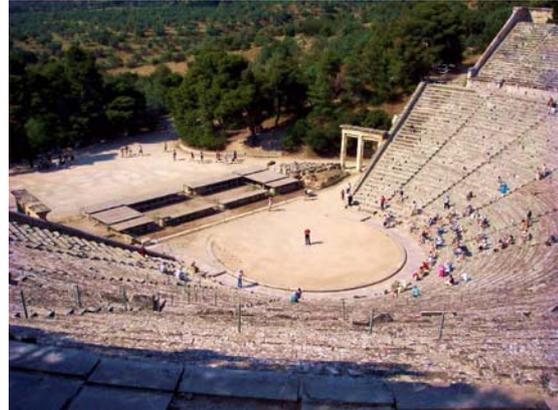


**Fig 4:** *The theatre at Epidaurus, 4th century BC.*

The form of the theatre building itself resembled the image of the cosmos, with the circular orchestra encircled by a ditch resembling the round earth surrounded by the great river Okeanos. These festivals, during which comedies and tragedies were also performed, formed an essential part of the civic and religious life of the polis. European theatre, often understood as a microcosm of the world, would retain its essential ethical and participatory dimension into the Baroque period. This would all change with the sterile illusionism of nineteenth-century theatre, where the audience, fixed, and separated from the action on stage by the 'fourth wall' of the proscenium opening, became (through the new techniques of vision) disengaged, placid spectators. The subject matter of the theatre came increasingly to be detached from the vital concerns of modern life, rendering what had once been essential, irrelevant.

The innovators of modern theatre in the early twentieth century set about changing this state of affairs. They saw the need to break down the barriers between the spectator and the performance, and to get the audience involved both corporeally and morally. Futurist, Constructivist and Brechtian theatre, with their new performance modes and subject matter, sought to provoke, shock and even insult the audience into moral and political engagement. The need to change the spatial relationship between the performer and the audience in order to achieve a more direct and vital experience, and even to abandon the traditional theatre building all together, preoccupied directors such as Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski (Fig. 5). Antonin Artaud in his Theatre of Cruelty sought to recapture the lost dimension in theatre and in daily life of the ritual, visceral

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and the sacred. Audiences of modern theatre were sometimes asked to take an active part in the event, blurring yet more boundaries. Many of these new theatre forms aimed to reintegrate dance, music and ritual elements within the performance, and shared a common emphasis on the power of close bodily proximity to restore this art form as a more primitive, visceral experience.
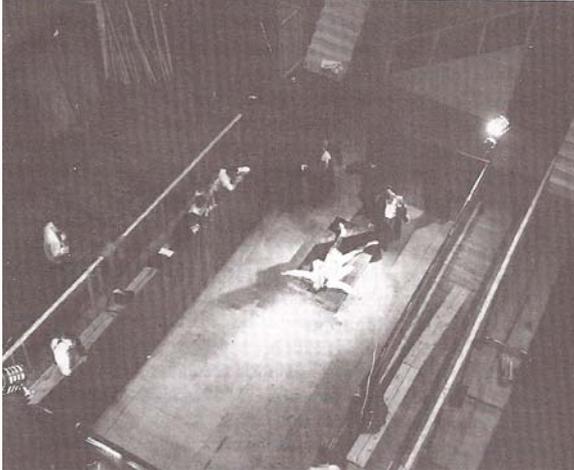


*Fig 5:* Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theatre, the Constant Prince, c. 1968. Here a small audience peering over a wall was brought into close proximity of a torture scene, being implicated in it.

In architecture, a similar need was often felt to reintegrate various kinds of knowledge and cultural domains. Throughout his career the architect Le Corbusier was active in a number of different incarnations, including as a painter, sculptor, furniture designer, writer, urban planner, and a designer of books and tapestries. From the 1920s onward he spoke of the need for the engineer and the architect to work together in the creation of modern architecture which would be technologically innovative but also thematically rich. Later in life he would collaborate with the modern composer Edgar Varèse in designing the Philips Pavilion as a vessel for image and sound. This desire to reconcile such apparent opposites as art and technology, modernity and the primitive, the most up-to-date with the timeless is evident in all of his mature work. The "synthesis of the arts", towards which he aspired, is evident in his pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp (Fig. 6). The hilltop chapel is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, its thematics oriented around Mary as a maternal vessel of divine light, and around her protective and redemptive powers. It can also be seen in terms of the dialectics of the tent and the cave, of light and darkness. Its construction marries elements of sophisticated modern technology (the airplane-wing structure of the enveloping concrete-shell roof) with the rough primitivism of heavy, rubble masonry.[9] The remarkable power of the chapel is intensified by its blurring of the conventional boundaries between building and

sculpture, with painted-glass windows, sculptural furnishings and enamelled-steel doors. Le Corbusier had long been interested in the acoustic experience of architecture, and the theme of sound and hearing features in his post-war paintings and sculpture. Originally, the chapel was to have comprised also a high-tech belfry (designed by the industrial and furniture designer Jean Prouvé), which would have filled the building and its surroundings with Varèse's specially composed electronic music.[10]



*Fig 6:* Le Corbusier, pilgrimage Chapel at Ronchamp, early 1950s, south wall

Finally, I would like to affirm the significance which an interpretative understanding of architectural history and tradition has for meaningful architectural design. In schools of architecture these two areas are often taught separately, with little apparent acknowledgement of their mutual reciprocity.

Yet both architectural design and history are essential parts of culture. Design is impoverished if it does not, in some way, represent a contemporary reinterpretation of tradition, and address the stability of certain archetypal cultural situations. Thus for example, the design of a library, even in these times of digital information, must recognize the need for a spatial hierarchy (from the openness and dignity of the public areas to the intimacy of the study carrel), the reader's and the book's relationship to daylight and view, and the civic dimension of the library as a public space where individuals gather to form – albeit perhaps fleetingly – a kind of community. Understanding something of the history of monastic and collegiate libraries, or of the topos of the Baroque library as a great summary of secular and sacred knowledge about the world, can only enrich the design approach.

Thus we can see that some of the most profound cultural forms have displayed an inherent inter-disciplinarity, and involved the effective communication between people with different kinds of expertise. Architecture, one of the most complex of

these cultural forms, has to be understood within the context of the other humanities. It is clear, I think, that the blurring of discipline boundaries belongs to a more authentic cultural expression, which we have sometimes forgotten today. It is to be encouraged.

## Notes

1 On the staging of medieval drama in urban public spaces, see for example Cesare Molinari. *Theatre through the Ages*. London: Cassell, 1975.

2 The reciprocity between performance spaces and music is well illustrated by the architectural modifications which J.S. Bach made at the church of St Thomas in Leipzig, where he was organist and for which he composed. After the reformation, with its focus on the spoken word in local language, the reverberation time in many medieval churches was shortened (by adding resonant wood to stone, curtained wooden galleries, draped or upholstered boxes, and so forth). This made possible the greater intimacy and complexity of Baroque music, and led in the seventeenth-century to the development of the cantata and the Passion. Michael Forsyth. *Buildings for Music: the Architect, Musician and the Listener from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1985.

3 The term 'ethos' is deployed here in the sense in which it is understood, for example, by Karsten Harries, as reflecting man's true place in the world. See his *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c1997.

4 The enthusiasm for eugenics in the early decades of the twentieth century was fuelled by, amongst other things, a misplaced confidence in the authority of science. Human cloning seems destined today to proceed when it becomes technically feasible, despite widespread moral unease.

5 The British Museum curator Ian Jenkins makes this clear when he states in front of the Elgin Marbles that "they've become great works of art *because they have been taken from the building and placed in front of the spectator.*" Interviewed by Bonnie Greer in a video on the BM website, http://www.britishmuseum.org (my emphasis).

6 More recently, of course, this message has been much complicated and questioned, and today the Elgin Marbles represent a very different kind of ethical question, that of the rights and wrongs of such cultural 'exports'.

7 Most notably the Futurists and the Surrealists.

8 These themes are addressed in Dagmar Motycka Weston, '"Communicating Vessels": André Breton and his Atelier, Home and Personal Museum in Paris', *Architectural Theory Review*, Vol. II, No. 2, 2006, 101-128.

9 The thick south wall was constructed as a series of concrete fins, the space between which was then filled with the rubble left on the site from an earlier chapel, damaged by German bombing.

10 The church clients found this idea too daring and in the end a simple frame, holding three bells, was built in the nearby wood.