

# Alberto Campo Baeza: Suspending Time

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An essay by Alberto Campo Baeza

Burnt Norton is the first of the *Four Quartets*,<sup>1</sup> one of T.S. Eliot's key works. In its first five lines, the word "time" appears seven times with surprising reiteration:

*Time present and time past*

*Are both perhaps present in time future.*

*And time future contained in time past.*

*If all time is eternally present*

*All time is unredeemable.*

This metaphysical time that poets express so well is the same time that those of us dedicated to creation seek to capture. It is a central theme of architecture.

In this text, I would like to analyze why some architectural spaces are able to stir up such an inner commotion within us, and insist this feeling is inextricably linked to the sensation suspended time at the intersection of beauty and truth. Although it may seem an abstract concept or theme more properly pertaining to poetry or philosophy, this suspension of time occurs with an especially palpable force only in architecture. When we stand before or inside of certain architectural spaces, time seems to stop, suspend itself, and become tangible to human beings.

I can't forget the profound emotion—the suspension of time—I felt the first time I entered the Roman Pantheon.<sup>2</sup> I wept, and still shed tears every time I go back. I often mention to people the deal I've made with my students for many years now. When they visit the Pantheon they must have to send me a postcard, a "*cartolina illustrata*" with a picture of the inside, telling me whether or not they cried. All of those who have written have cried. I've amassed a good collection.



Neither can I forget how, when my building for the Caja Granada headquarters had just been inaugurated, one of the people who worked there wept when entering the central space for the first time. I must confess that, years later, every time I return there and enter that space, my heart still skips a beat, and even more so if the sun, up to its usual tricks, alights upon and strolls over its alabaster walls.

These experiences exemplify, each in unique ways, the suspension of time that I'm speaking of here.

As my career moves ahead, I still seek to deepen my understanding of the architectural mechanisms that make these results possible. I'm still trying to hit upon that perennially elusive "beauty itself" that every artistic creation seeks to embody, especially architecture since it is a form of high art.

It might be helpful to consider how architecture, in comparison to other art forms, is the only one whose creations are capable of physically enveloping man, its protagonist. The experience of being able to stand inside a work of art in flesh and bone pertains solely to architecture, and is impossible to produce in the other arts.

If a space built with gravity, with materials that possessing an unavoidable gravitational weight is tensed by light—light which itself builds time—so that we are moved through the physical, beyond the physical, then we can properly say that we have attained architecture. Architecture happens when we succeed in stopping time in the constructed space: entering within dreams-come-true.

I will not tire of repeating that time is a central theme of architecture: time that is structured by light; capable of stopping our hearts or tying them in a knot, much more than the forms of a passing style or the exquisite adornments of the best construction. *Utilitas* and *Firmitas* only acquire their full meaning when *Venustas* is attained.

## THE TIME OF *UTILITAS*

There is a time that refers to the capacity of making the function for which the building was erected endure. A time relative to function: use, utility, *utilitas*. Time of *utilitas* insists that a building carries out the functions for which it was commissioned and, moreover, that it be adaptable to different functions over the long haul. When I was a student we learned this in terms of the “architecture of boxes” and the “architecture of cases.”

The case meets the requested function exactly, but it can't be used for anything else. A knife sheath can't be used for a spoon; nor is a spoon holder appropriate for knives. If the question is changed, the answer is no longer valid. It tends to happen when, in addition to the specific nature of the function, the dimensions are also strictly bound within certain settled parameters. A low income housing building, even if it is well-resolved to the last millimeter, will most certainly not serve for anything else.

The box, in contrast, can admit many different functions over time. Obviously, the larger the size of a space, the greater the number of different functions it can allow. Boxes endure the test of time better than cases do. Someone who wrote about my works said that all I do is make boxes, little boxes and big boxes. It only really sounds good in Spanish: *cajas, cajitas y cajones*.



## THE TIME OF *FIRMITAS*

There is another time that speaks of physical duration, of the effective combination of materials that culminates in the most perfect construction of architecture. The word *firmitas* means strength, and a well-constructed building will be able to last many years and will remain on solid footing for a long time. All of the great masters of the past have been, furthermore, very good builders whose attention to *firmitas* allows us to admire their works in flesh and blood today.

## THE TIME OF *VENUSTAS*

The time of *Venustas* is that which can be suspended, that stops when we encounter the particular beauty of an artistic creation. It is the most difficult to control, but for that reason it is what most interests us.

All of architecture's treatise writers have sought to come up with a few universal rules that would not only serve to transmit certain forms or styles, but also emit a beauty always capable of moving men deeply.

It's a difficult enterprise. Just as happens with many excellent cookbooks in which nothing is spared to provide every last detail and consideration regarding a recipe, the exquisite dish still requires a skilled and passionate chef. No recipe can guarantee the quality of the cooking. The same thing is true in architecture; one has to have a talent for it.

## THE TIME OF MEMORY

Another thing is the time that the building is capable of remaining in men's memory: a built work's resistance to oblivion, or better yet, the thing that secures its trajectory into architectural history, which has little to do with current fashion or passing fame. Those of us who are no longer children have seen lofty names and works that mean nothing today. The phenomenon, controlled and exaggerated by the press, still works at full strength. Many of the names that make up today's architectural "A-List" are sure to disappear tomorrow, their fame short-lived. They will never remain in men's memory.

But there are other, quieter sorts of architecture that are much more eloquent and capable of transcending our tendency to ephemerality. Above and beyond fashion and vanity, our aim should be to erect more profound architecture for history. Such architecture has a different rhythm, and belongs to truth and beauty in fullest sense.

The time of memory—of permanence—is the "difficult desire for duration" (*le dur desir de durer*) which Paul Eluard spoke of poetically and which is so profoundly rooted in the will of every creator: the will to transcend.

## HISTORY

Few buildings in History hold the special capability of causing us to lose our sense of time.

The Roman Pantheon<sup>2</sup> is the example *par excellence*. Well built, and a perfect embodiment of the universal function endowed to it by its creator, the Pantheon is also overwhelmingly beautiful. All of the great creators have understood that when they've been inside of it. Suffice it to quote Henry James when he recounts the memorable scene of Count Valerii kneeling inside the Pantheon with only moonlight and with rainwater making the light from on high material.

And if I had to give just one example of contemporary architecture, I would recommend visiting the Burgo Tower by Eduardo Souto de Moura in Oporto. Not only is it impeccable in its function and its construction, but also in its radical beauty. Going in, out, and through it, and I speak from my own experience, is like escaping from time. This building clearly reflects its historical period, the third millennium live in today. Thus, I must insist that we, living architects, remember that it *is* possible to stop time with our hands, as Josiah did with the sun, and in the current example, with great formal restraint.

## THE BLUE-EYED ROTHKO<sup>3</sup>

Every time I enter the Olnick Spanu family home in Manhattan my heart skips a beat: there in front of me, I see a painting by Rothko, my favorite painter, in an unusual size and color. Its small dimensions and blue and green tones completely sweep me away. A good friend of mine, with whom I often discuss this painting, tells me it is “the blue-eyed Rothko.” He’s right. I can witness to the fact that there, in front of this wonderful painting, time stops, it disappears.

It happens that painting, like architecture, shares this special capacity to carry us away and suspend time. I’ll never forget my first visit to London when, with Sáenz de Oíza, my beloved teacher and Spanish master, we stood in front of Velázquez’s *Venus of the Mirror* in the National Gallery. Time, space, desire—everything—disappeared. In that brief infinite lapse we stood as if in divine rapture

## MUSIC CAPABLE OF STOPPING TIME

I was shaken when, having almost completed this essay, the words “suspended time” sounded clear and strong in the air. They were spoken by Peter Phillips, director of The Tallis Scholars, Saturday, April 2, 2011, in an interview he gave before performing Tomás Luis de Victoria’s *Requiem*<sup>4</sup> with his group in the packed church of St. Mary the Virgin in Midtown, Manhattan.

In that interview, the words flowed from his mouth as if in a cascade: intensity, sobriety, profundity, precision, simplicity, clarity, but above all, suspension, referring to time. Additionally, when asked where The Tallis Scholars had sounded best, he answered in the Sydney Opera House, by the master Jorn Utzon: a gift.

The concert, devoted entirely to Tomás Luis de Victoria, and commemorating the fourth centenary of his death, was long, but I would say that for all of us who filled that church in New York, everything happened in a second. Time stopped there, in the way that only beauty can make possible.

Of course, if I had to bring a contemporary musician there, I’d bring Martynov, the contemporary Russian composer, and author of *Come In*<sup>5</sup>. You need only to hear this music to understand at once what I’m talking about.



## SORT OF DISAPPEAR

And while we could survey all artistic creations and discover that the crux of the matter is always the same, namely reaching man's heart through his head, I am going to limit myself to a couple of examples of how film, the seventh art, is also capable of stopping time.

An unforgettable scene comes to mind: the white plastic bag floating in the air in the film *American Beauty*<sup>6</sup>. Sam Mendes magically transforms something so basic from a novel into a masterful visual piece. Given the supreme beauty of something so simple, we all cry with Wes Benly and Thora Birch. There, time disappears and our heart dissolves in five infinite minutes.

Of course, *Billy Elliot*<sup>7</sup> expresses it still more clearly in that "sort of disappear" that he repeats twice when the panel asks him what it is that he feels when he dances. This attainable "sort of disappear" is the time I'm talking about when I propose suspended time. Stephen Daldry summed up something as abstract as suspended time in artistic creation so precisely in this beautiful little phrase!

## THE SECRET OF ARTISTIC CREATION

Architecture, painting, literature, music, and film are, in fact, no more than the creative works of human beings which redeem us and make this life worth living.

Our works go on to "transcend material and limited life." Stefan Zweig, in that essential text I have quoted so very often, *The Secret of Artistic Creation*, manifests this with such force: "there is no greater pleasure or satisfaction than recognizing that man is also capable of creating everlasting values."

Works that are worthwhile transcend us; they transcend their creators and no longer belong to us. They already belong to the memory of men.

## ADDENDA

I began this text recalling the capacity of the Caja Granada's central space<sup>8</sup> to move us. For obvious reasons of modesty, I will only make a brief commentary on my works in relation to this suspension of time. While this suspending time is one of the final purposes of architecture, I also know that I am trying to explain something that is beyond expression.

If one can speak of the profound impact of seeing the palpable light on the alabaster of the Caja Granada, I would describe what we feel when we walk through the extremely white ramp of the Museum of Memory of Andalusia, also in Granada next to the Caja, as luminous wonder. It is a moving *promenade architecturale* that I believe is indeed worthwhile.

In my houses, however, the sensations very diverse: quiet calm in Gaspar House and Guerrero House, turned in upon their white courtyards; serene transparency at rest in nature, looking down from their podiums towards sought after peace in De Blas House in Madrid, the Olnick Spanu House in New York, and Rufo House in Toledo.

Other projects produce feelings of yet another kind. In the building we are finishing for the Advisory Council of the Regional Government of Castilla-León, in front of the Cathedral of Zamora, a box of powerful sandstone walls opens to the sky, and we are stunned before the extreme delicacy of the glass box constructed within it. The trees in the garden that were there before, now recovered, serve as an effective counterpoint and are reflected, looking at themselves, in the mirror of the large plates of glass.

It is a similar operation to what I did years ago in Mallorca with the BIT Center<sup>9</sup>. The *marés* stone box enclosed an ordered plot of alternating orange trees and white pillars which complimented a simple slab that protects the basic glass box. Both of the "*hortus conclusus*" projects, Zamora and Mallorca, strike us through the powerful contrast between the primitive stone walls and the intelligently deployed advanced technology. Both buildings, Zamora and Mallorca, moreover, lead us to an eloquent silence of contemplation.

If I were asked to divulge my trick or recipe, I'd say I have none. I manage to throw myself with my head and heart into each job I do, dedicating an enormous amount of time—thousands of hours—to each project. I want each of my works to unfold in the light of truth always, knowing, as we already knew, that beauty is the splendor of truth. John Keats beautifully encapsulates this metaphysical recipe in the conclusion to his *Ode to a Grecian Urn*: "Truth is beauty, beauty truth. That is all."

Not long ago I discovered that Paul A.M. Dirac, 1933 Nobel Laureate and one of the great physicists of our time, proclaimed, "Beauty and truth go together in theoretical physics." Could today's architects, instead of musing on vanities, concur with the poets, philosophers, and physicists in the primacy of the pursuit of truth, and attempt to actualize this all-too-possible miracle of the suspension of time?

Le Corbusier, in simpler language, spoke of the "unspeakable space," and on other occasions, of how the most "useful" buildings were those that "fulfilled the desires of the heart." The master was so very right. And if we started with a poet, T.S. Eliot, we will conclude with another, William Blake. In his *Auguries of Innocenc*<sup>10</sup> he proposes:

*To see a world in a grain of sand,*

*And a heaven in a wild flower,*

*Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,*

*And eternity in an hour.*

Well, eternity is what we would like to achieve with our architecture.

## NOTES INDEX

<sup>1</sup> Burnt Norton. Four Quartets. T.S. Eliot.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xDpueV1U8k>

<sup>2</sup> Green, Blue, Green on Blue. Mark Rothko

<http://www.globalgallery.com/enlarge/24068/>

<sup>3</sup> Pantheon.

<http://www.monolithic.com/stories/the-pantheon-rome-126-ad>

<sup>4</sup> Tallis Scholar. Requiem. Tomas Luis de Victoria.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1cV0hqJ95Y&feature=related>

<sup>5</sup> Ensemble Opus Posth - Come In! Vladimir Martynov.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9q8\\_M12mW6Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9q8_M12mW6Q)

<sup>6</sup> American Beauty. The white plastic bag. Sam Mendes.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yfpPpu7bik>

<sup>7</sup> Billy Elliot. Sort of disappear. Stephen Daldry.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0tTT\\_87Hh8&feature=watch\\_response](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0tTT_87Hh8&feature=watch_response)

<sup>8</sup> Caja Granada Savings Bank. Alberto Campo Baeza.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/campobaeza/442162119/in/set-72157600040292822/>

<sup>9</sup> BIT Center in Mallorca. Alberto Campo Baeza.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/campobaeza/462871059/in/set-72157600086044649/>

<sup>10</sup> Auguries of Innocence. William Blake.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wi848QqLbdo&feature=related>