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A Reflection on Art and Architecture

Ricardo L. Castro, MRAIC.

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“A work of art is an expressive and communicative medium of feelings and thought.” Pierre Francastel, 1950.¹

What is the role of art and architecture in society? How can one learn more about history through art and architecture?

These apparently simple questions encapsulate a series of complex responses that could easily fill several volumes. Since antiquity, these questions have been catalysts for the development of philosophical, aesthetic, societal, and architectural theories. A helpful strategy to respond here is to touch upon the work of 20th century thinkers who have elucidated (or addressed) some of the issues raised by the questions, as well as examine in more detail the examples of the Alhambra and the Generalife.

In his seminal work, *Peinture et Societe*, Pierre Francastel examines early Renaissance and modern works of art and demonstrates that artists act as the transmitters from one state of civilisation to another. Francastel’s pioneer work is among those which have brought attention to the societal role and importance of works of art as well as to their relevance as tools for the writing of history.

I believe that architecture, which is primarily associated with the basic notions of shelter and functionality, possesses other characteristics and operates at many other levels; unfortunately

¹ Pierre Francastel, *Peinture et Societe* (Lyon: Audin ed.) p. ii. (My translation). Unfortunately this important work by the renowned French sociologist, critic, and historian awaits translation into English.

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these are often relegated to oblivion. Examples include architecture's experiential impact on all our senses and its symbolic possibilities. These categories account for the production of extraordinary works throughout the ages. It is through the symbolic and sensorial criteria that we can discuss architecture's expressive quality, hence its relevance as art.

For instance, the Alhambra and the Generalife, which are extraordinary palatial complexes composed of buildings and gardens, are undoubtedly among the extant architectural wonders of the world from the medieval period. The Alhambra, which signifies "The Red" in Arabic (*al hamra*), took most of its present form in the early 14th century during the rule of Ibn Nasrid, the founder of the Nasrid Dynasty. The castle eventually became a strategically fortified and sumptuous city palace on a hill overlooking the city of Granada. Outside the Alhambra is the Generalife, which is derived from the Arabic words *Jennat al-Arif* – meaning, interestingly, 'garden of the architect'. With elegantly laid out gardens, the Generalife is another palace from the 14th century, which functioned as the summer retreat for the Nasrid court.

I will focus here on the uses of water that underscore the design of many of the indoor and outdoor spaces in the Alhambra and the Generalife, and by extension, of Islamic architecture. I will not refer to the well-known and mere ecological and functional aspects of water such as its essential quality to sustain life, hence its availability through sources and cisterns, its use as a means of transport (waterways), and the infrastructure to deliver it (aqueducts) or other pragmatic uses. Rather, I will refer to its experiential and symbolic qualities created by such properties as reflection, transparency, sound, taste and its tactility. The anonymous architects and artists of the Nasrid complexes used these qualities in a masterly way to underscore the expressive and symbolic spatial content of gardens and buildings, i.e., to transform them into true works of art.

Consider the famous Patio de los Arrayanes (Court of the Myrtles) in the Alhambra. This rectangular court, which is simultaneously indoor and outdoor, contains a water basin, which adds coolness to the space during the warm months. Functionally, it limits and defines circulation to the edges of the court. At the same time, the basin acts as a gigantic mirror which reflects inversed images of the facades at both ends of the court. I would suggest that the intentions of creating a deliberate reflection of the buildings refers to the symbolic and pervasive notion of reversibility found in Islam. Think of the relationships between paradise-earth (Gardens), the idea of the cosmological tree of life growing upside down in paradise, and the concept of praying to and from the Ka'ba in Mecca.

At one end of the basin, a discreet and beautifully designed fountain feeds it with a continuous yet subtle flow of water, which does not disturb its mirroring quality. Introducing the soothing sound of bubbling water, the fountain also becomes a contemplation anchor, which visually lures visitors. Vegetation, a tacit symbol of the life-giving power of water, appears as well in the court through the planting of geometrically pruned myrtle hedges, which gives the place its name and visual scale. In some of the walls, the unusual ornamental patterns of the alicatados (tiles) evoke the idea of order, flow and movement, and add colour as well to the court. The skilful combinations of all these elements ultimately produce a powerful expressive space, which will continue to inspire artists, architects and poets.

The Alhambra and the Generalife are in the company of other single works such as the Parthenon in Athens and the Pantheon in Rome, other complexes such as the Cordoba mosque and many Eastern and Western gardens, or entire cities such as Toledo, Venice and Florence. All these works – art objects – possess unusual expressive qualities, which clearly corroborate Francastel's aphorism at the beginning of this essay.

Perhaps what I have stated above may be reinforced by introducing some of the concepts that Material Culture addresses. A novel inter-disciplinary domain, Material Culture may be considered as yet another possible approach to discuss the issues raised at the beginning of this essay. Material Culture constitutes a type of intersection of many disciplines such as history, art history, anthropology, folklore, and the history of science and technology. As such, it is concerned with the psychological role, the meaning, the experiential impact that all physical objects have on humans in a particular culture. It also refers to the range of manufactured objects or artefacts that are typical of a culture and form an essential part of its identity.

Professor Daniel Waugh, a faculty member at the University of Washington and a well-known scholar in the field, illustrates the point: “Material objects include items with physical substance. They are primarily shaped or produced by human action, though objects created by nature can also play an important role in the history of human societies. For example, a coin is the product of human action. An animal horn is not, but it takes on meaning for humans if used as a drinking cup or a decorative or ritual object ... The physical existence of a religious image in a dark cave as a 'work of art' provides evidence of the piety of an artist or a sponsor.”²

Among the artefacts which Material Culture studies, architecture and art objects – whether paintings, sculptures, calligraphy, musical scores and many other similar art works – play an important role in the making and the understanding of culture. They constitute a fundamental repository that informs the writing of history and ultimately supports the idea that without their works of art, without the possibility of their expressive channels, human societies cease to exist as such.

Ricardo L. Castro is an Associate Professor of Architecture at McGill University, Montreal, Quebec

² Daniel Waugh, Material Culture / Objects, Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, URL: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/objectsmain.html> (accessed 2 December 2007).