



Architectural remainder

Description

Visiting Canterbury Cathedral today for only the second time in 35 years I was unsurprised to observe that this important building still has a bent plan. No one would ever think of correcting or straightening the choir and the ambulatory of this item of prime Gothic heritage. But this time I noticed the prominence of the heavy pulpitum that separates the nave from the choir. The visitor can see the roof vaults above this ornate stone barrier, but in spite of a narrow central doorway it prevents a clear line of sight from one end of the cathedral to the other, and thus occludes the kink in the plan.



Canterbury Cathedral choir and rood screen (right)

This screening device brings to mind the constant necessity to make adjustments in architecture, and to cover its flaws. Colin Rowe asserts that architecture has to deal with “the conflict between the absolute and the contingent, the abstract and the natural; and the gap between the ideal world and the too human exigencies of realization.”

In a previous [post](#) I suggested that this need of architecture to adjust to discrepancies is shared with music. Musical instruments must be slightly detuned across each note to spread the disharmony caused by the progression of octaves when overlaid with the progression of fifths. The necessity for such adjustments is an embarrassment to the ancient concept of the “music of the spheres,” that the universe accords with perfect harmonic ratios. At the very least, these problems direct the scholar intent on establishing relationships between architecture and music (space and sound) elsewhere than harmony, beauty and perfect ratios.

Architects and others in the practical arts make frequent reference to the language of tuning and detuning: calibration, tolerance, drift, slippage, the gap, and the remainder. The pythagorean comma in music is a remaindered quarter note (approximately) that must be spread amongst the ordinary notes in a scale series to make them transportable, ie to facilitate modulation between keys. The *remainder* is an embarrassment at the margins that after all gets redistributed to bolster the existence of the authorized and the legitimate.

One has to look hard for any celebration of the remainder in classical architectural discourse, though there is evidence in South Indian architecture. In his analysis of the Vāçstu Mandala, Adrian Snodgrass indicates how the discrepancy evident in calendar cycles, and expressed in rituals and architecture, kept things moving: “as there is a remainder there is no end, the cycle recommences, and time continues on. The residue is thus the seed of the next cycle”! No further motion is possible without the discrepancy between one cycle and the next.â•

Perhaps remaindered spaces carry properties inherited from the enigmatic progenitor of all space, *chora*, “which is eternal and indestructible, which provides a position for everything that comes to be, and which is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning and so is hard to believe in,â• according to Plato in *Timeus*, and as championed by Jacques Derrida.

Drawing attention to those left over spaces, the interstitial non-places, the spaces between unaligned grids, those other spaces that donâ•t conform, the geometrical surpluses, is a recent tactic. But so often this is where the action is. The remaindered canâ•t necessarily be planned for, and so is often ignored.

References

- Derrida, Jacques. 1997. *Chora*. In J. Kipnis, and T. Leiser (eds.), *Chora L Works*: 15-32. New York: Monacelli Press.
- Plato. 1997. *Timaeus*. In J. M. Cooper (ed.), *Complete Works*: 1224-1291. Indianapolis, Ill.: Hackett.
- Rowe, Colin. 1976. *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Snodgrass, Adrian B. 1990. *Architecture, Time and Eternity: Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings, Volume I*. New Delhi, India: Aditya Prakashan.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. adjustment
2. architecture
3. Canterbury
4. cathedral
5. coma
6. music
7. Pythagorean
8. remainder

Date Created

November 20, 2010

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark