

Rafael Moneo 1996 Laureate Essay

Thoughts On José Rafael Moneo

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When you visit a building by Rafael Moneo, you are intensely aware of the architecture. But you are equally aware of yourself as a presence within this architecture. You find yourself turning and climbing. You emerge onto a high bright overlook, or descend into a darker cave. You feel yourself to be traversing a path, a path that is never fully mapped out but instead offers choices. Having to choose, you explore, you witness, you quest.

When Moneo writes of his buildings, he behaves like a novelist. He tends to establish a point of view from which the experience of the architecture is perceived. The point of view is that of the visitor to the building, a fictional character imagined by Moneo. Seldom does he describe a building as an autonomous artifact. Instead it is an event in the life of a witness, or more likely a sequence of events. For example:

At the Davis Museum: "The stair becomes the home of the viewer ... inside the stair, the viewer becomes the *owner* who possesses the collection."

At the Miró Foundation: "The visitor following the entry path will be surprised to find a beautiful, ample square. From here he can go on to explore the garden."

But Moneo's tendency to create fictional character goes beyond this invention of an observing consciousness. The building, too, has feelings.

Of the Miró Foundation: "Sharp and intense, the volume ignores its surroundings or, better still, answers with rage the hostile buildings that have worn down the previously beautiful slope."

Of Davis: "And indeed, this Museum tries to reflect on, and to give testimony, to, this particular collection."

Finally, writing about the Museum of Roman Art, Moneo describes "the wish of enclosure that is always present in the architecture of the Museum."

In this architect's mind, what is taking place is a social and intellectual encounter between two characters, the building and the visitor. They meet, they exchange glances, they inquire of one another.

And like all meetings, this one occurs at a particular time and in a particular place.

The embodiment in architecture of time and place is Rafael Moneo's deepest concern. It is not a fashionable concern today. To many designers and students, the idea that a building should respond to the past, or to its physical surroundings, is regarded as *passé*. We live in a single worldwide culture, it is argued. A new scale and a new kind of architecture are required. Indeed we may think of ourselves as existing not in time and place at all, but rather in cyberspace—that electronic universe of signals and impulses which, ideally at least, is both timeless and placeless. Being so, it must also, of course, be immaterial.

Moneo is perhaps the single most important figure on the opposite side of this question. For him, architecture does not exist except as built of sensually apprehensible materials. A Moneo building is deeply embedded in its time and place and is expressive of them. Architecture thus becomes a way of knowing. Again, the best way to illustrate is to quote the architect, whose writings are among the most eloquent by any artist of this century.

"News, films, TV, advertising—everything pushes us towards a life understood as a continuous consumption of information received through images. No wonder that architecture, in today's world, no longer represents power. The media are the vehicle of power."

Thoughts On José Rafael Moneo (continued)

“For others ... the reality of the building will be sought in its lasting tangible presence, which speaks about the architectural principles behind its construction. That is where I would like to be.”

“The site is an expectant reality, always awaiting the event of a prospective construction on it, through which will appear its otherwise hidden attributes.”

“The shadow of anywhere is haunting our world today ... architecture claims the site from anywhere... Architecture is engendered upon it...The site is where architecture is. It can't be anywhere.”

Architecture has traditionally served to help us achieve presence in an otherwise frightening cosmos. Within the infinite universe of time and space, architecture creates one moment, one place. Moneo wishes it to continue to perform this function, to be a prop to our identity, to our knowledge of where and when we are, and therefore of who we are. A Moneo building creates an awareness of time by remembering its antecedents. It then layers this memory against its mission in the contemporary world. And it creates a perception of place by seeming to look around it, exchanging signals with the neighboring world as ships at sea might flash semaphores.

All these qualities are embodied in the Museum of Roman Art (illustrated in the photos on this and the following three pages) at Merida in Spain, a work that is so powerfully itself as to reduce the labels of criticism to nonsense. It is implanted in its site in the most literal way, woven among Roman foundations and roadways and connected by tunnel to the remains of an ancient theater and arena. Rising from this past, Moneo builds his walls of Roman brick. But, as is typical of him, he evokes a simultaneous sense of the present by suppressing the mortar joints to create a modern, crisp, abstract surface: the wall is a memory, not a replication. As always, the handling of interior daylight is masterful, here an ever-changing golden wash. The light contrasts with the ghostly paleness, therefore the pastness, of the antiquities on display, which continue to bear witness when we are not present. Beyond all this, Moneo constructs an astonishing conceit of time and place. His museum, rising from the actual ruins, appears itself to be older building that has been renovated for its present use. Modern concrete slabs span between the arches, and balconies of steel thread themselves among the walls of Roman brick as if they were recent inserts in a previously existing fabric. The brick is deteriorating by spalling and chipping—not an intended effect, perhaps, but one that adds to the sense of the great masonry shell as something that has lived a long time and experienced both decay and renewal. The museum is thus a conceit that expresses three eras: a genuine past, a fictive past, and a candid present. One detail is especially evocative. At a turn in the ramp that descends to the lowest level, an actual Roman foundation is exposed and floodlit as an artifact. Right beside it, presented in exactly the same manner, is the exposed concrete footing of one of Moneo's own columns. The architect is presenting his own work as archeology. He intensifies your awareness of time and materiality by proposing a metaphor that spans two millennia. This is, indeed, architecture as a way of knowledge.

Rafael Moneo is a warm, unpretentious, immensely likeable man who is neither awed nor self-impressed by winning the Pritzker Prize, which arrives at a moment when he is perhaps only coming into his full powers. His buildings are still youthful, filled with invention and risk, yet grounded in a depth of intellect and scholarship rare among practicing architects and even rarer among those to whom the material world means as much as it does to Moneo. The world is now beating a path to Rafael Moneo's door, and his future work should be something to see.

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