

## ON INTELLECTUAL ENJOYMENT IN ARCHITECTURE

On becoming a member of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando two years ago, my inaugural address was based on Beauty, on "Relentlessly seeking Beauty". I wanted today to focus on "Intellectual Enjoyment" in Architecture that feeling of enjoyment that presents itself with every discovery, with every new project conceived and, above all, and in a very special way, with the initiation of every new work.

How can I express in words the overpowering feeling of intellectual enjoyment that has occasionally possessed me in recent times? Time and again, something related to Architecture touches us in such a special way that we are possessed with that intangible quality that I have termed intellectual enjoyment. Many architects reading these words will understand perfectly what I am speaking about.

As this very special *je ne sais quoi* has been happening to me lately, I decided to write down my thoughts on this none too original discovery. And I discovered that what we call intellectual enjoyment, intellectual satisfaction, intellectual pleasure, tends to happen more frequently and more especially as one gets older. The enjoyment I get from reading Homer's *Odyssey* is quite distinct from the joyful wonder I felt the first time I came across it. And that deep and profound feeling happens with a frequency that quite surprises me. It is like a joyous radiance that quite takes your breath away.

Plato said to a young apprentice in philosophy: "the burning impetus that propels you towards the reason why is beautiful and divine; but while you are still young, practice and train yourself in those philosophical efforts that do not appear to serve a purpose and are what the crowd calls idle talk; otherwise, truth will escape your grasp". It is at that stage of renewed youth where I should like to be when speaking of intellectual enjoyment, which in our case occurs especially with Architecture.

## ARCHITECTURE

In Architecture we find intellectual enjoyment in many moments, of which I believe the three principal ones to be: recognition, conception and final or nearly final.

## RECOGNITION

The moment of recognition in Architecture, on visiting a significant work for the first time, is the cause of great intellectual enjoyment. To recognize, on viewing for the first time a work of architecture that we had never seen with our own eyes but had studied so many times, in chapter and verse. This moment of intellectual enjoyment occurs when we witness at first hand something which was already familiar to us. We architects are very well acquainted with this. I shall never forget the first time I entered the Pantheon in Rome. I cried. This intellectual enjoyment produced by Architecture is somewhat akin to what is known as the Stendhal syndrome. Stendhal syndrome is an impulse provoking a rapid heartbeat when we are faced with a particularly beautiful work of art. It is named after Stendhal, who, on visiting the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence in 1817, wrote in his book *Naples and Florence: a journey from Milan to Reggio*: «I reached this emotional turning-point where those celestial sensations of Art are met with passionate feelings... Everything spoke so vividly to my soul. As I emerged from Santa Croce, I had palpitations of the heart. Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling to the ground».

## CONCEPTION

The moment of conception, the moment an idea is born. This happy idea is no chance occurrence. Quite the contrary, it tends to happen when, faced with all the ingredients, the architect starts thinking, investigating in a patient search over almost always a considerable length of time and tends to produce an idea as a result. An idea capable of being materialized. In his book *A Beautiful Question*, Frank Wilczek, Nobel prize-winner in Physics in 2004, refers to 'incarnate'. Personally I prefer the term materializing an idea, which is what we architects do. The question is asked: does the world incarnate beautiful ideas? And my response is yes. For in that joyous moment when one knows that potentially everything is already resolved, the idea is so powerful that it tends to be the cause of enormous intellectual enjoyment.

It is the moment that we have so often called inspiration. When following a battle in our thoughts, with our inner selves, in which we architects look for that added something capable of substantiating a new work, inspiration appears at a very precise moment, the vibrant instant we call inspiration, everything is turned upside down, a thousand of Handel's trumpets sound, and our being is invaded by that intellectual enjoyment so difficult to describe and so easy to recognize. And the idea is born that is capable of bearing fruit, of materializing.

## NEARLY FINAL

The final or nearly final moment of a work that we have conceived and initiated very often produces that intellectual satisfaction.

There is no satisfaction comparable to that which one experiences when the built work reaches the stage when those spatial operations conceived by the architect in his head, explained in his writings and expressed in his drawings, become reality. I must confess that I shall never forget the emotion I felt on seeing for the first time the sunlight shine through the open skylights in the central area of my Bank of Granada. I cried openly like a child, like Ulysses on hearing the bard's song. Not only was I witnessing the entry of that solid, real, material light; it was something much stronger. That slowly moving light placed the whole area in tension and made it resound divinely, just as music does when the air comes in contact with a musical instrument. It was the very history of Architecture recalling other related episodes that I had studied so many times.

When my mother baked a flan, it was a time of celebration at home. And just before taking it out of the oven, where it lay in its *bain-marie*, we children observed the ceremony of introducing a metallic knitting-needle into the almost set liquid. If it came out with even a touch of the mixture adhering to it one had to wait a little longer, as it was still a little too liquid. But if it came out clean –oh, so clean- then it was proof that it had set. And it was party time.

That is what happens to me with my works. And while already spoke of an early experience of a work like the Granada box, which was built over 15 years ago, I must tell you of my latest, as yet unfinished, experience. Before me right now, a space that promises to be, that will be something marvelous: the main area of the sports pavilion for the University Francisco de Vitoria, which is just about to set. It is almost there, but we have to wait just a little longer for the needle to come out clean. The structure is beautiful, now entirely painted white. The two translucent northern walls give a marvelous light. The two southern walls, white inside and out, reflect and qualify this equally marvelous white light. A facade, inside and out. The remaining elements will also be white. I can imagine it, I can already see it, all filled with an extraordinary light. Just like a *boîte à lumière*, which is what it is. And I know that it won't be long now, not long at all, before the needle comes out clean, when the baked flan is set. And I know that right then that feeling of intellectual enjoyment will invade us all.

Because, as we architects well know, when a work emerges and receives the light, in the same way as a musical instrument receives the air and plays, it produces a feeling of intellectual enjoyment very difficult to describe.

And so I'd like to finish off on a musical note. The story goes that when Handel's servant used to bring him his hot chocolate in the morning, he often found the maestro sitting there with large teardrops on the paper before him, smudging his recently written notes and the servant would stand there stock-still while the chocolate went cold. I have absolutely no doubt that the maestro was in a

complete trance, in a moment of sheer intellectual enjoyment. Perhaps that is why, when we listen to the Rejoice Greatly of Handel's Messiah, we cannot but feel that enjoyment, that *rejoice*, that intellectual *enjoyment*.