

# In Search of Beauty Always

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Beauty captivates the flesh in order to obtain permission to pass right to the soul.

-Simone Weil<sup>1</sup>

You see, to me it seems as though the artists, the scientists, the philosophers were grinding lenses. It's all a grand preparation for something that never comes off. Someday the lens is going to be perfect and then we're all going to see clearly, see what a staggering, beautiful world it is.

-Alvaro Malo<sup>2</sup>

Without doubt, architecture has had its most exciting development in more than a century. The technological development of parametric modeling has exponentially advanced the capacity of the creation of complex form and responsive systems. One can't help but to examine these forms with awe. The new modeling programs seductively provide a delirious sense of wonder. A great man once distinguished three stages of wonder. First, there is the attraction to the object, phenomenon or system. Next, its qualities, organization and geometries are studied via empirical perceptions. Third, intellectual tools of understanding emerge along with the confidence of repeatability. It can be argued that the new modeling systems of technology, currently engross us within the first stage. The development of artistry beyond systems which seduce us in their intricate complexities, require closure of these stages through the realm of cultural beliefs. This paper offers some thoughts on inexplicable realms of closures for the loop, *Stage 3-1*, and the potential means of fusion.

## CLOSING THE LOOP STAGE 3-1 OPTIONS

### The Power Of Image

Contemporary culture, literally inundated with thousands of images daily, quickly dismisses the majority of these out of the sheer need to maintain a sense of sanity and self. Artists and architects trained in the visual image deliberately filter the gluttenous plethora of noise for the few images that can be internalized; felt within us.

Several years ago during a lecture, Juhani Pallasmaa reminded the audience of the special power of the precious image. He eloquently expressed his view that the value of literature and all art is the activation of the imagination, creating specific mental space and embodied experiences, rather than images. Images (without the power of activation) focus our attention to an object, dull our senses and weaken our sense of self. Poetic images open up and strengthen our sense of self.<sup>3</sup>

Art has the ability to construct images in the observer which opens up a space of participation between the image and the imagination, creating associative linkages rather than messages passively accepted.

The imagination forms composite images through the creative involvement elicited in the observer/participant and the poetic association of fragments, when just enough detail is presented to set the mind in motion.

The aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and

willing observer, for these images afford him an interpretation of life, and by reflecting on these processes he trains himself for life.<sup>4</sup> –Neitzsche

The connection between participation and image, image and relationship, offers a leap of insight embodied in perception and inspired indeterminacy.

The bridging zones of indeterminacy between perceptual receptions and the emergence of felt, sensible, affective images constitute *creative memory* and associative linkages.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the *ideal* (of architecture) presents itself to our imagination so that the body and mind, the real and the subjective are overcome, not as a dream world of imaginary beings but by *presenting* a world which becomes more real to us.

### The Potency of Belief | Mechanisms of How

In the high Sierra Nevada of Columbia, the ancient Kogi people survive to this day. In “the heart of the world”, these “Elder Brothers” refer to modern cultures as the “Younger Brothers” and believe they (we) are destroying the balance of the world.<sup>6</sup> Keeping with their traditions, they refer to ALUNA, the idea that the land itself is breathed into being by human consciousness. The land is alive, a dynamic source to be embraced and transformed by the human imagination.<sup>7</sup> Matter is fluid. Bones are not death but life crystallized and thus potent sources of energy. The world is a balanced matrix of connectivity, of matter and spirit.

The release of Stephen Hawking’s recent book, “The Grand Design”, controversially concludes “God the Creator” was unnecessary to our existence on this earth, quickly prompting his colleagues to clarify where Hawking missed the point. “Science provides us with a wonderful narrative as to **how** [existence] may happen, but theology addresses the **meaning** of the narrative,” said Denis Alexander, director of The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion. “The ‘god’ that Stephen Hawking is trying to debunk is not the creator God...who really is the ultimate explanation for **why** there is something rather than nothing . . . Hawking’s god is a god-of-the-gaps used to plug present gaps in our scientific knowledge.”<sup>8</sup>

At present, contemporary technology is obsessed with mechanisms of HOW, neglecting the WHY. The proper development of WHY, the spirit of meaning, is yet to emerge from within the medium of digital

craft.

### Continuity and Extension

Classical science treats systems as closed mechanisms.<sup>9</sup> Philosopher Dorothea Olkowski:

Even isolated (closed) systems generally remains subject to external influences, binding that system to another more extensive one, and so on, until they reach the solar system, which is presumably the most objectively isolated and independent system of all. But there is no absolute isolation; matter does not exist in a closed system. Our sun radiates heat and light beyond even the farthest planet, connecting our solar system by a tenuous thread to the rest of the universe which itself goes on infinitely.

The mechanisms of contemporary digital craft present a fascinating admiration of the fineness of geometry, multiplicities and subtleties of form. Yet the collective effort in this media appears to have stalled. It is neither developing new directions mechanistically, nor has it properly achieved the realm of spiritual meaning. It is becoming uncomfortably “same”. The inherent ‘extension’ of open form, appears to have limits of its own comfort. I wonder if this stall is from not yet developing through Stages 2-3 with the cultural belief systems which allow poetic art, in addition to exquisite artistry.

It’s interesting to see parametrically based work before parametric modeling emerged. Robert le Ricolai’s structural models were compelled with his famous limit, “Zero gravity, infinite span.” Erwin Hauer’s cast concrete walls and screens marry the phenomenon of light with the detail of formwork

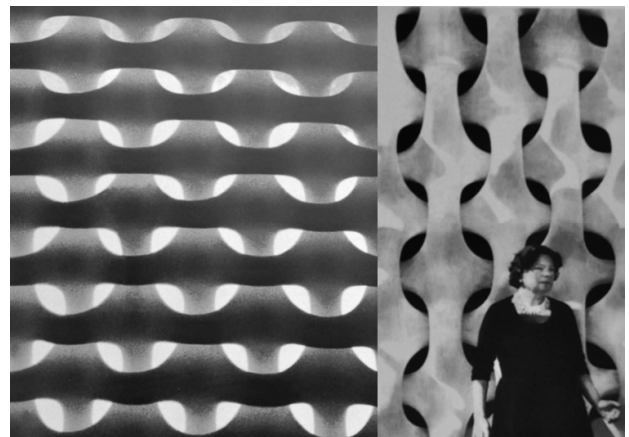


Figure 1: Design 3 (1952) Erwin Hauer

and infinite geometries. The most successful of these infinitely baroque screens (by his measure), being Design 3 in 1952, nearly 60 years ago! (Fig. 1 ) It's challenging to craft parametrically based work sans computer. "Roaming Shell" a recent participatory/design studio I conducted did just that. It's poetic image creating associative linkages of salt-marsh, sea and the microscopic skeletal structures that drift within the tides. (Fig. 2)

### Beauty's Extension

In "The Invisible Dragon, Four Essays on Beauty", art critic David Hickey writes:

When you finally sort it out, the whole problematic of art invariably revolves around the purported impropriety of art having an effect on us. Are we (or are we not) being victimized by pleasure? What right does a work of art have to do something to us that we can't describe?<sup>10</sup>

Beauty is the agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder—by showing us something of which we may not approve in such a way that we cannot resist it. In other words, beauty is the instrument that empowers an audience to expand its way of looking at things; it confirms certain areas of consonance between the image and its beholder in hopes of eliciting other ideas or attitudes. We must distinguish between the "attractive" image that simply confirms what we already believe, and the "beautiful" image about which there is an atmosphere of danger...Be-

gerous" aspect of beauty, that makes beauty pleasurable and exciting, rather than merely comforting.<sup>11</sup> "Ontological memory is constituted in relation to the sensation, the affective image, the body's own influence on itself, resulting in the pleasure and pain that often arises with perception."<sup>12</sup>

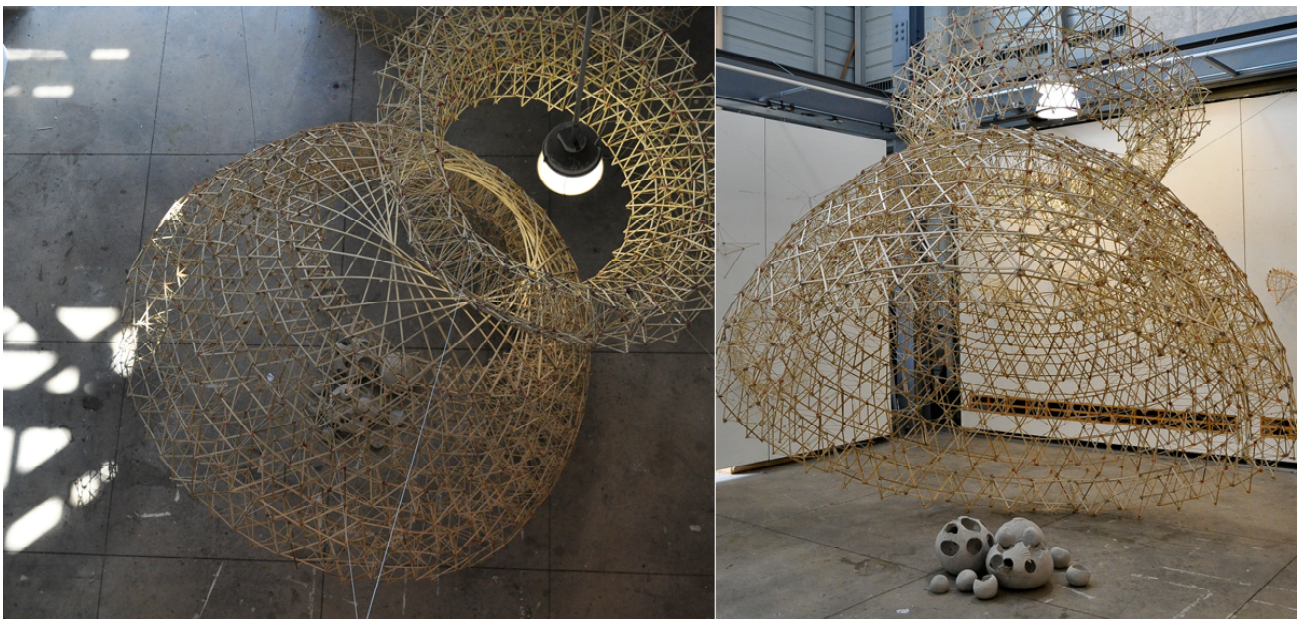
Echoes of Kant notwithstanding, Hickey contemporizes the relationship between mimesis and metaxis, idea and participation, image and linkages.

### CLOSING THE LOOP

With the accelerating advancements of technology, the architectural field faces the challenges of maintaining the phenomenological inhabitations and poetic spirit within the systematic paradigms of digital craft. It's yet to find a "grounded-ness" in culture, myth, and phenomenon. Without this, digital craft will eventually close the loop, but with emptiness.

"As an artist [architect] you have an agenda—you want to reconstruct the visual world in such a way as to privilege certain things, certain behaviors or outcomes that you believe in, that you desire. And you devise an image as an agency for that agenda, to make it visible in a persuasive way. Whatever "it" is, you try to make it beautiful."

A reminder from Louis Kahn on the enduring spirit of architecture:



cause it's trying to persuade us...And it's this "dance"  
Figure 2: "Roaming Shell" participatory design/build.

Beauty is in the unseen, the questions presented, the understanding and reconstructions of perceptions. Great architecture is not about materiality and form but about the questions that it evokes, the questions that one is working on through materiality and form.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 135.
- 2 Alvaro Malo, "Through the Looking Glass," *Proceedings 83rd ACSA Annual Meeting*, ed. Trina Deines, (Washington DC: ACSA Press, 1995).  
during a lecture at Virginia Tech, 2004.
- 3 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Apollinian and Dionysian Art: From the Birth of Tragedy," *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 473.
- 4 Dorothea Olkowski, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Intertwining and Objectification," ([www.phaenex.uwindsor.ca/ojs/leddy/index.php/phaenex/article/viewFile/31/96](http://www.phaenex.uwindsor.ca/ojs/leddy/index.php/phaenex/article/viewFile/31/96)), 123-124.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Wade Davis, *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*, (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2009), 141.
- 7 [http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/09/02/hawking.god.universe/index.html?iref=NS1#fbid=Do6mC\\_CfpYe&wom=false](http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/09/02/hawking.god.universe/index.html?iref=NS1#fbid=Do6mC_CfpYe&wom=false).
- 8 Dorothea Olkowski, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Intertwining and Objectification," ([www.phaenex.uwindsor.ca/ojs/leddy/index.php/phaenex/article/viewFile/31/96](http://www.phaenex.uwindsor.ca/ojs/leddy/index.php/phaenex/article/viewFile/31/96)).
- 9 Dave Hickey, "The Murmur of Eloquence: Intimations of the Full World," *Plane/Structures*, (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 1994), 25.
- 10 Ann Wiens, "Gorgeous Politics, Dangerous Pleasure; An Interview with Dave Hickey," *New Art Examiner* 21, no. 8 (April 1994), 13.
- 11 Dorothea Olkowski, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Intertwining and Objectification," ([www.phaenex.uwindsor.ca/ojs/leddy/index.php/phaenex/article/viewFile/31/96](http://www.phaenex.uwindsor.ca/ojs/leddy/index.php/phaenex/article/viewFile/31/96)).
- 12 Ann Wiens, 14-15.