



1. Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum

THE POWER OF ARCHITECTURE

By Alain de Botton

I was surprised to pick up my copy of the *AJ* last week and find myself described as someone who hates architects. If only. The truth is embarrassingly the contrary: I belong to that large group of people (often to be seen emerging from architectural bookshops weighed down by tomes) whose days are consumed by a maniacal admiration for architecture, even though they cannot themselves create – and so belong to that barren category Proust referred to as ‘the celibates of art’.

The one compensation for not knowing how to build is the greater amount of time it leaves to reflect on the value and importance of building. The belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better

and for worse, different people in different places – and on the conviction that it is architecture’s task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.

Our sensitivity to our surroundings can be traced back to a troubling feature of human psychology: to the way we harbour within us many different selves, not all of which feel equally like ‘us’, so much so that in certain moods we can complain of having come adrift from what we judge to be our true selves. Unfortunately, the self we miss at such moments – the elusively authentic, creative and spontaneous side of our character – is not ours to summon at will. Our access to it is, to a humbling extent, determined by the places we happen to be in, by the colour of the bricks, the height of the

ceilings and the layout of the streets.

We depend on our surroundings obliquely to embody the moods and ideas we respect and then to remind us of them. We look to our buildings to hold us, like a kind of psychological mould, to a helpful vision of ourselves. We arrange around us material forms which communicate to us what we need – but are at constant risk of forgetting we need – within.

In other words, our buildings present us with ideals. A great work of architecture (to take an example, Louis Kahn’s Kimbell Art Museum) will speak to us of a degree of serenity, strength, poise and grace to which we, both as creators and audiences, typically cannot do justice – and it will for this very reason



2. John Pardey's Duckett House

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beguile and move us.

Architecture excites our respect to the extent that it surpasses us.

All works of design and architecture, from a parliament to a fork or cup, talk to us about the kind of life that would most appropriately unfold within and around them. They tell us of certain moods that they seek to encourage and sustain in their owners. While helping us in mechanical ways, they simultaneously hold out an invitation for us to be specific sorts of people. They speak of particular visions of happiness.

So to describe John Pardey's Duckett House as beautiful suggests more than a mere aesthetic fondness; it implies an attraction to the particular way of life this structure is promoting, through its roof, door handles, window frames, staircases and

furnishings. A feeling of beauty is a sign that we have come upon a material articulation of certain of our ideas of a good life. Pardey's building is a reminder of the truth in Stendhal's aphorism 'beauty is the promise of happiness'.

This doesn't of course mean that the owners of the house will never suffer. They may get fed up, shout and be overwhelmed by anxiety, but at least their building speaks to them of honesty and ease; of a lack of inhibition; a memory of the rural past; and a faith in the future.

Our public buildings, too, can be repositories of ideals. Herzog and de Meuron's Tate Modern appears to me to sketch out an ideal contemporary Englishness. Its elements speak of a society which has succeeded in

perfectly reconciling the opposing elements of male and female, modernity and history, technology and nature, and luxury and democracy.

Taken as a whole, the museum comprises an austere but beautiful promise of a dignified and graceful life. The fact that Britain is beset by all kinds of political and social problems should not dissuade us from putting up buildings that present alternatives. The problems merely underscore the need for idealised buildings to stand as a defence against what is corrupt and unimaginative within us.

Behind a practical facade, the best contemporary architecture tries to reflect back to its audience a selective image of who they might be, in the hope of improving upon, and moulding, reality. No wonder

if great buildings can make us sad: they remind us of how incomplete and compromised the rest of our lives are. A good building, like a good piece of music, should have the power to bring us to tears.

Alain de Botton's book on architecture, The Architecture of Happiness is published by Penguin. An accompanying documentary will be broadcast on Channel 4 on 6 May at 7.9pm.