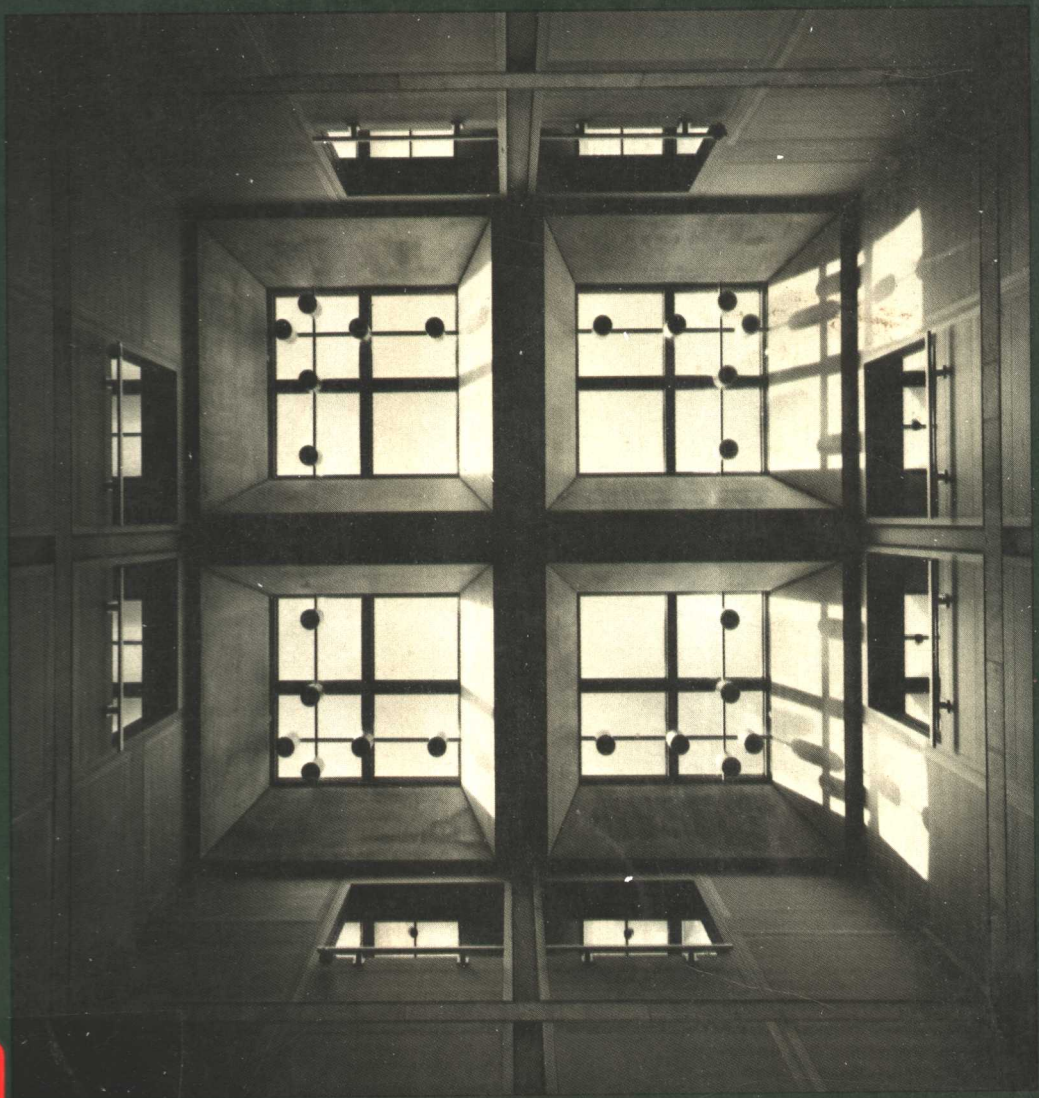
ARCHITECTURE AS ART



STANLEY ABERCROMBIE

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Ceiling, entrance hall, Louis Kahn's Yale Center for British Art. (Photograph: George Cserna)

Stanley Abercrombie

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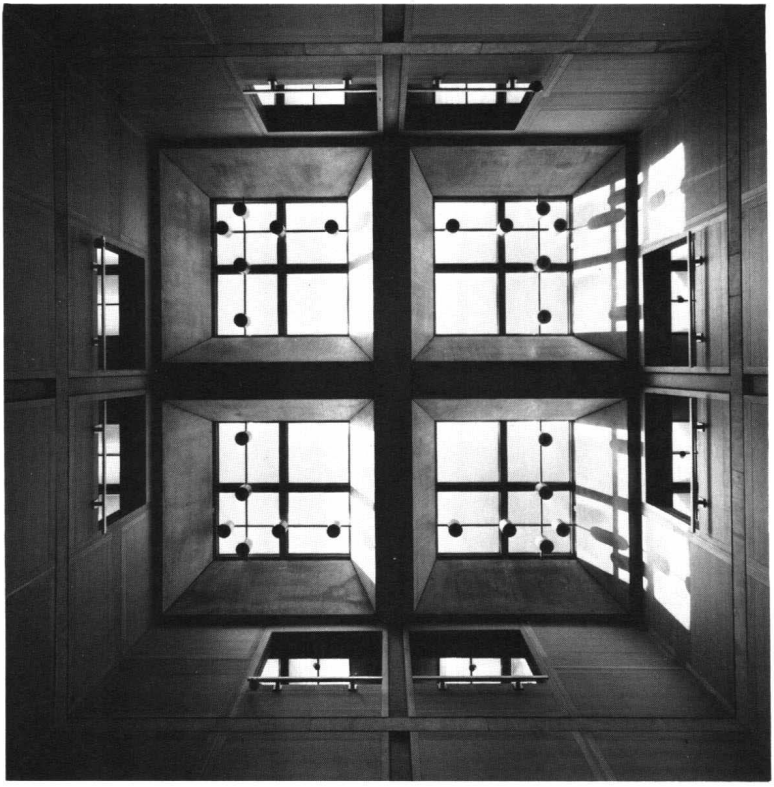

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Contents

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S.A.

Introduction: Architecture as Art

Architecture is frozen music.

Friedrich von Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*

But music is not melted architecture.

Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art*

A book about architecture is one of the few books that can be read inside its subject. Even if a reader is not within a work of architecture, such a thing is likely to be down the street, in the nearest city, or fresh in the reader's mind, for architecture is the most familiar of all arts. Its very familiarity obscures our vision of it as an art, for we know so many things about architecture that are extraneous to art: We may know its location and the building it replaced, its insurance rates and mortgage payments, its occupants and its furniture, how well its air conditioning works and how often its floors are swept. We cannot escape the burden of this esthetically irrelevant information any more easily than we can escape architecture itself.

We may, if we like, avoid all but a glimpse of painting, switch channels at the first step of ballet, and choose to read no poetry, but architecture, as has often been said, is the unavoidable art. It is not only scattered all over the landscape but also likely to stay there a long time. We not only see it often but we also use it; it has been built for a purpose.

Sometimes it has been built for two purposes: to shelter a function and to generate a profit. It could, therefore, also be said to be our most mercenary art form. As Edgar Kaufmann, jr., wrote in *Architectural*

Forum in 1969, "All the oil wells of Arabia will not sweeten this little art; its origins lie in the needs, the whole range of needs, of its animal users." And of its animal owners and developers. Architecture, unlike some other arts, cannot dissent from the opinions of those who would commission it, for it cannot come into existence without such commissions.

But if it often serves venal ends, it can also serve ideals. Architecture can manifest goals of social reform—of more efficient hospitals, more humane factories, more democratic housing clusters, more harmonious relationships between man and nature—and, at its most potent, it can help effect those goals.

Architecture is social in another sense as well: We never see it alone, but always in community with other members of an urban group or in community with nature. A novel, an opera, or a painting can create, for a time, a world of its own. Architecture can cast an equally powerful, equally absorbing spell, but it does so in collaboration with the building next door or the ones down the block, with the way we approach it, with the relationship between its form and the shape of the mountain in the distance, and with the way the sunlight and the shadows of trees fall across its face.

Architecture is complicated not only because of where it is built and why it is built, but also because of the simple fact that it is built. It is not the work of a single artist alone but the product of a large team. "A great building is the greatest conceivable work of art," Henry James thought, "because it represents difficulties annulled, resources combined, labour, courage, and patience." A great building does indeed represent such accomplishments, but these do not make it the greatest conceivable work of art, only the most unlikely. When building becomes art, it does so only by standing on the shoulders of engineering, physics, mechanics, logistics, economics, and craft.

Its familiarity, its practicality, its frequent commercialism, and its intimate ties to society and to its physical surroundings—all these are basic attributes of architecture, but they are not esthetic attributes. We do not consider a building to be a work of art because its elevators are fast or because it turns a neat profit for its developer; yet, as in no other art, the esthetic criteria for architecture are entangled with such mundane matters. Disentangling them is the aim of this book.

Still another obscuring factor is the sad fact that there is so little construction worthy of being called architecture. Some paintings are better than other paintings, obviously, and many fail as art, but unless we include something as foreign in intent as sign painting, we can say that there are no paintings that do not *try* to be art. The situation

in building construction is very different: Most buildings have no intention and no hope of being art.

Intent is a prerequisite. "If we wanted to say something about art that we could be quite certain was true," philosopher Richard Wollheim has written in *On Art and the Mind*, "we might settle for the assertion that art is intentional. And by this we would mean that art is something we do, that works of art are things that human beings make." This is particularly true of architecture: there is no such thing as spontaneous or accidental architecture. It comes into being only as the end product of a tedious and expensive process that requires forethought and effort. Even vernacular "architecture without architects" is planned. The thatched *rondavels* of South Africa, the stone *trulli* of southern Italy, the mud huts of the Dogon ("among the greatest sculptors of the world," according to architect Aldo van Eyck) — all these building forms have evolved through processes of trial and error, of gradual improvement and adaptation to climate and function; and, in all cases, the process of their construction is begun with a clear vision of the desired result.

Intent, however, is not enough; our cities are littered with failed intentions. What is it, then, that distinguishes architecture from mere building? This is a question often asked, and there is an obvious answer: Architecture is building raised to the level of art. But it is an answer that leads immediately to another question: What is art? For this one, there are libraries of answers to choose from, but consider just one, an idea about art in the final sentence of Victorian critic Walter Pater's *The Renaissance:* "For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."

Perhaps because Pater also wrote, in another context, of "love of art for its own sake," his idea has been said to support the discredited ideal of "art for art's sake," but, on the contrary, it supports art for our own sake, for the sake of the quality of our lives. It is a position that needs no apology.

If we accept as fact that building can be raised from its crib of venality and become a contributor to an enhanced life, that at its best it can thrill us and stretch our imaginations and offer us moments of quality as any other art can do, then the next step in understanding the nature of architecture is to consider how it affects us in ways *not* like any other art.

There are principles of design that are common to many arts, from flower arranging to opera, principles of harmony, rhythm, balance, transition, climax, and relief. These are well understood, and their

application to architecture important and obvious. Yet each artistic medium has, as well, its own private ways, quite apart from its own private tools. What are the ways special to architecture? Within which characteristics of a building are we to search for the quality that separates good from bad, that elevates construction to art?

These are not questions that deal with periods, regions, or styles. Some aspects of architecture, of course, are rooted in a particular situation and could not withstand intercultural travel. The elaborate iconography of a Gothic cathedral might be largely incomprehensible to a Muslim, and the plan of some traditional Chinese houses, proceeding courtyard by courtyard from the public realm to increasingly private ones, would make no sense in the absence of traditional Chinese etiquette. But these aspects of architecture—didacticism in the first case, the manifestation of social patterns in the second—give us no clue to the *quality* of the built form that supports them. They are esthetically neutral and therefore peripheral to our consideration of architecture as art.

Much writing and thinking about architecture is concerned with permutations of style, with the detection of new trends and with the tracing of their origins. This is the substance of architectural history—distinctions, for example, between the buildings of Republican Rome and Imperial Rome, or among the characteristics of High Renaissance, mannerism, and the baroque. Even in the consideration of current architecture, much attention is spent on labels, classifications, and derivations. The prolific writer Charles Jencks carries such efforts to an extreme in his encyclopedic *Architecture Today,* written in collaboration with William Chaitkin. Jencks distinguishes between "Late-Modernism" and "Post-Modernism" and, within each of these two groups, further distinguishes six sub-groups such as "Extreme Articulation" and "Slick-Tech," and, still further, charts the progress of each of the dozen sub-groups from 1960 to 1980. Such efforts are not without usefulness and certainly not without interest but, again, they deal with aspects of architecture that are peripheral to its value as art. Even if Jencks convinces us that Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum and Jörn Utzon's Sydney Opera House share the sub-group "Sculptural Form," we have learned nothing about the quality of either the museum or the opera house.

How, then, shall we begin to look for the basis of this art? First of all, we must not look for too much. We must not hope to find—we would not even want to find—a set of criteria so objective and complete that it constituted an exact prescription for either the production

or the recognition of art. In art there will always remain some part that is personal and unpredictable.

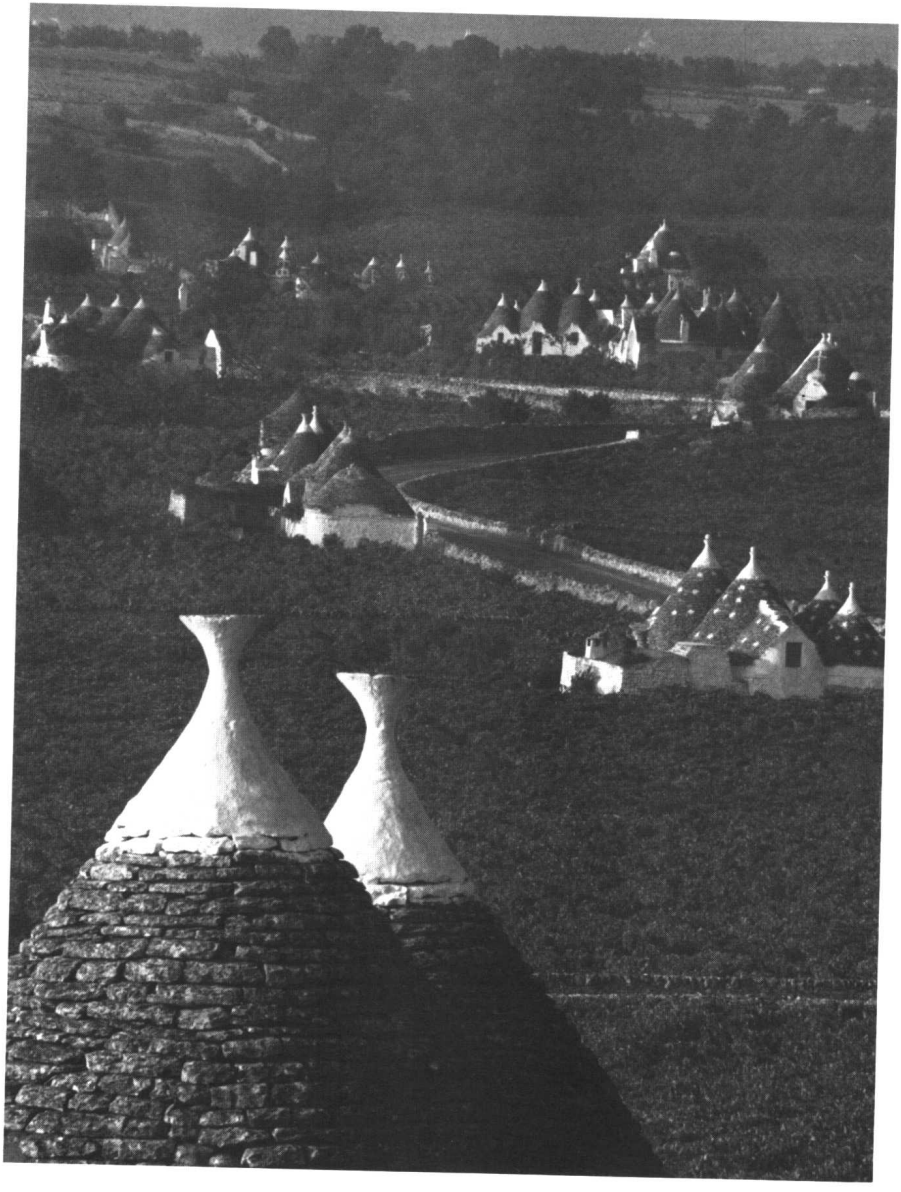
We do know that architecture's power to move us is unlike that of any other art. It cannot fairly be described as three-dimensional painting, nor as habitable sculpture, nor, certainly, as frozen music. Therefore we must look for a basis peculiar to this art alone.

We know, too, that architecture's power now is the same as it has been throughout all our history. The burial mounds and ceremonial causeways of ancient Egypt, its surfaces and engaged columns, its passages and shadowy niches, all intrigue and touch us in much the same way they must have intrigued and touched their builders. Even if we put completely from our minds whatever we may know of Egyptian religion, Egyptian economy, and Egyptian society—even then these constructions will not cease to speak to us, and their language is the eternal language of architecture. We may or may not be aware that beyond a pair of great pylons lay a sacred precinct to which only a pharaoh and his priests were granted admission; no matter, for the pylons themselves still communicate vividly their role of marking the entrance to uncommon ground.

There must be, then, some constant basis for the art of architecture, continuing intact through all possible changes in technology, in style, and in ourselves. James Marston Fitch is perfectly right in noting that "science and technology have forever altered the scope of the architect's task"; nevertheless, they have done nothing to alter the parts of the architect's work that determine that work's value as art.

We dare not completely neglect aspects of function and context in our investigation, however, for, although they are not esthetic aspects themselves, they contribute to the particular nature of architecture and may well impinge in some way on the basis of judgment we seek. We can also use these aspects as boundaries of our search, making sure that what we find is not destructive of them. It is fine for art to be amoral, but not immoral. It cannot be highly valued and supported if it is inimical to the more prosaic duties of its own medium. It should never exist at the expense of practical, inartistic concerns, but in addition to them.

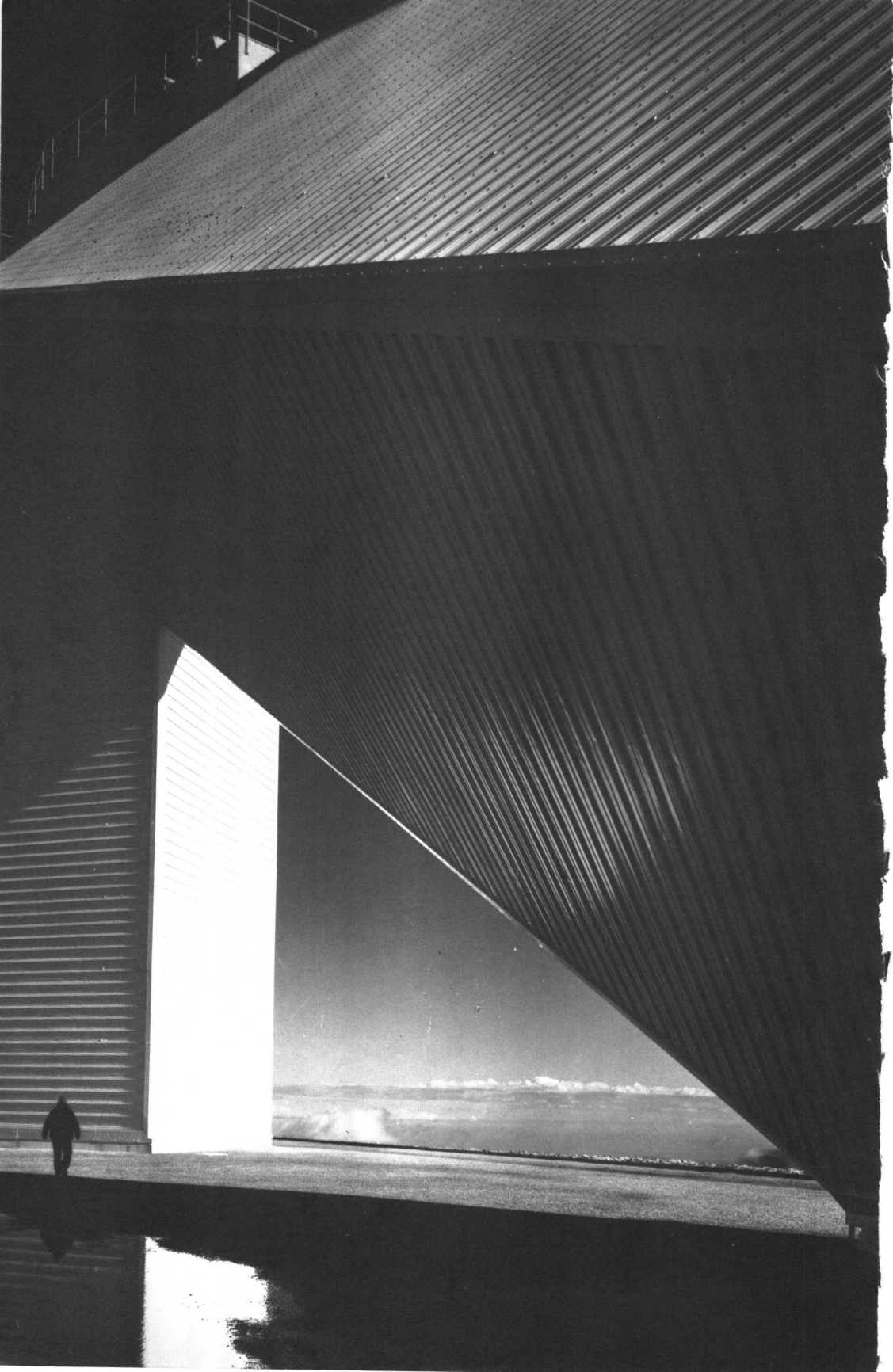
Within these limits, we hope to be able to find in architecture some manner or characteristic or relationship, no matter how vague or subjective, that is attached only to esthetic quality. Sir Herbert Read seems to have had it in sight when he wrote of "that being-in-itself which exceeds being-for-a-purpose." The basis we seek, being itself unchanging, is not likely to be found in the building's relationship to



Trulli, the conical limestone houses of Italy's Apulia region, idiomatic, but not undesigned. (Photograph: Norman F. Carver, Jr., AIA.)

transient phenomena; it will more likely be found within the building itself and within those ways in which it relates to the permanent aspects of nature, including human nature.

We might reasonably object that the qualities we perceive in any object are never inherent in the object at all but in the response apparatus that we, as observers and users, bring to it. Composers, painters, or architects never complete an art work; they can only offer us material that we will be able to perceive for ourselves as art. But there is a difference between what we perceive in the work the artist gives us and what we perceive in that work's complex and changeable intercourse with its particular context of time and place. It is perception of this second, transitory type that enables us to make use of objects; but it is perception of the first and lasting type that enables us to make art of them.



The Size of Architecture

No perfect thing is too small for eternal recollection.
Arthur Symonds, introduction to Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*

On the other hand,

Mere size has, indeed, under all disadvantages,
some definite value . . .
John Ruskin, *Mornings in Florence*

Gaining a mountaintop, or turning the corner at Sunset and Vine, we confront an object. Our first analysis, so fleet that it is subconscious, is of the object's nature: Is it threatening or benign, alive or inanimate, rushing toward us or stationary? In the same subconscious instant we judge the object's size, using our own size as the measure: Is it smaller than we are, or bigger? If bigger, how much bigger?

So fundamental and habitual are these questions about size, asked in the interest of self-preservation, that we naturally resist the suggestion that size alone can be a source of esthetic pleasure. Part of becoming a civilized adult, after all, is learning the lesson that quality is independent of quantity, and even that quantity may conflict with quality. If we are sensitive to the limits of earthly resources, E. F. Schumacher has told us, we must see that "small is beautiful," and to choose the largest package under the Christmas tree is a display not only of greed but, probably, also of poor judgment. It may be

Atop Kitt Peak in Arizona, the Kitt Peak Observatory by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill: The size of a building, relative to man, plays a crucial role in its effect on us. (Photograph: Ezra Stoller © ESTO)