

CAZA

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Making The Shot While Falling: On Iversonian Beauty

“Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation.”

--Elaine Scarry

“beauty is political not despite the fact that it feels subjective but precisely because it is, in fact, subjective. Beauty enters us into a world of dispute, contention and conflict at the very moment when we feel to be removed from the social world... beauty exists at the tense intersection of the individual and society, with the individual neither fully subsumed nor fully free from social norms and cultural hierarchies... beauty is not something given but something that we do and something that we change.”

--Dave Beech

The professional basketball player Allen Ezail Iverson played a different kind of game. He was shorter than most of his peers yet insisted on going deep into the court to score. His speed was legendary and his trajectory never straight. He would spin back and forth in a dizzying staccato of repetitive corkscrews, testing the field in front of him then leaving his opponents flat-footed. His most famous points were made while he was almost tumbling down to the ground.

Iverson's movements were almost like those of a frenetic 3D printer. He tracked every possible play without predetermination then orchestrated a rapid blend of actions that left everyone—including sometimes himself— in shock. His game seemed based on the recognition of emergent patterns instead of on the execution of a preconceived plan. Iverson's form felt nearly digital. His breakthrough was in being able to make athletic opportunities through a variable non-linear process.

Iverson on the court looked as if he was actively learning to play. He appeared to be sampling the environment for new forms. His game was arresting because there was something about it that we recognized yet didn't know or

anticipate. His basketball was a kind of exercise in restless prototyping. This probably explains his proximity to near failure. His successful moves exemplified a promise, at the level of the imagination that the game might be played otherwise.

Watching Iverson play is an altogether contemporary experience of the beautiful. His game is not concerned with idealized form. His basketball is beautiful because, rather than being a thing in itself, it suggests that the sport is a game about the immediate world around us. Iverson's plays demands an extension of one's experience. They are models to think of athletic form as a discursive practice that connects us with the world in unpredictable ways.

Our contemporary experience of architecture is not dissimilar to Iversonian basketball. Buildings cannot be isolated from their surroundings and as such any concept of architectural beauty cannot be autonomous from the world. We cannot assume unmediated knowledge of our surroundings and our sense of enduring exile is a given in our post-humanist age of continual crises. Our buildings are similarly part of their context but not altogether integrated: building systems are widely parcelized, the construction industry is Balkanized and the execution of any project involves multiple constituents seeking consensus through design.

The whale of social media and electronic exchange has swallowed architecture. Buildings today are no longer objects of contemplation or even unmitigated distraction. We see them proliferate as images on screens dissolving their solid mass of material realism. Images of our built environment become proxies for seeing future scenarios and buildings are conceived as interfaces for an unpredictable mass of users. Our current situation of close-up electronic declaratives and multi-player video games places architectural beauty in an open format of unremitting emergence.

Architectural beauty today is less and less actualized in any particular shape. Visit any famous building and witness how the flow of digital information mediates architectural form: countless people frantically snapping pictures to send instead of stricken still, as Odysseus once did, when confronted with the beautiful. Our contemporary relationship with architecture is entirely rhizomatic. We seek out connections and are drawn to objects because of their ability to relate to other objects. Our sense of the beautiful circumscribes routes outward towards the fantastical, the imaginary, and the improbable.

Umberto Eco's comparative treatise on the history of beauty established its inexorable mutability. Beauty we learned is not absolute. Its diverse history is directly

dependent on our changing models of the universe. Any reflection on contemporary beauty is, therefore, an exercise in self-consideration. If so then to dwell on contemporary architectural beauty might help us better understand how design can be relevant today.

Western philosophy has treated the irresistibility of the beautiful as confirmation of its purity. If beauty could be recognized then it proved the autonomy of the object in question. Plato's cave established beauty as an approximation of an idealized environment. Buildings are, as a consequence, turned into shadows of a perfection we partially glimpse through an encounter with the beautiful. Aristotle's paradigm of organic unity set up beauty as invariable. For architecture, this meant that a building could not change making it impossible to define the architectural beauty in terms of a building's engagement with spatiotemporal phenomena such as light. Immanuel Kant's expression of the beautiful as "disinterested delight" further separated buildings from the actuality of our daily engagement with architecture.

The philosophical tradition of beauty when applied to architecture separates the individual from their surroundings. Architecture beauty however must consider how individuals relate to the materialization of man-made structures in our world. Architectural beauty today is a node in a network connecting our concepts of aesthetic judgment to ideas about our environment, our political precariousness, our economic volatility, and ultimately ourselves.

The Iversonian model of basketball calls for an understanding of beauty based on the generation of new positions, rather than rerun known forms. The beautiful in architecture must similarly be conceived of as a creative act of ideation. The appearance of things in architecture is inseparable from their working in the world and as such any discussion of beauty in architecture is an engagement with a conceptual framework about buildings and their site, history and cultural milieu.

The trouble is that architectural beauty does not tell us what it is about. Beauty does not involve a didactic transmission of ideas. We know it when we see it. To encounter beauty is to become instantly acquainted with the mental event of conviction, as Elaine Scarry wondrously documented in her readings of the beautiful from Homer through Rilke. The experience of the beautiful is an experience of momentary buoyancy that insinuates itself as a discernibly exuberant event.

We see Iverson make the shot and feel something that leads to a declaration. Beauty begets pleasure that in turn creates a desire for communication. The

beautiful in architecture becomes an invitation to describe that which lies beyond us. Like Einstein's theory of how stars are made, beauty demands the creation of its own space. The crystallization of beauty exemplifies a triumph in our ability to connect with something outside, to move past the imaginable and take delight in our exploration of this outside.

Hans George Gadamer's essay on the relevance of the beautiful imparts a model to think of beauty as a discursive event of transgression. The beautiful is an activity centered on the possibility of exceeding the logic of current systems of thought. Architectural beauty is a proxy to play with our limits as individuals. Play, for Gadamer, is how we create community through communication. The beautiful challenges us "to construct new compositions directly from the elements of the objective visible world and to participate in the profound tensions that they set up... it challenges each of us to listen to the language in which the world speaks and to make it our own."

Contemporary architectural beauty offers up the possibility to think of connectivity as an optimistic gesture. We not only discern something clearly but we are provoked to deliberate. We want to make connections back and forth with other places both real and imagined. The beautiful creates the desire to relate buildings to their contexts and histories—it is a rouse to experience architecture as part of a community of people.

Robin Evans once described his encounter with the Barcelona Pavilion as an experience that focused our attention on how we see. This is an example of beauty producing a concept. The beautiful in contemporary architecture can be like meeting Deleuze's friend of wisdom whose "presence is intrinsic to thought, a condition of possibility of thought itself—in short, a living category, a constitutive element of thought."

The beautiful in architecture transforms our physical world and all its banalities into a repository of possible ideas about how things work and why they can be different. Experiencing beauty makes us momentarily like Iverson on the basketball court. It is an alchemical process of conceptualization that sets up a tension between facts and experience. We can talk about new perfections in the work of Alvaro Siza and Kazuyo Sejima or different truths in projects by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron or partial multiplicities in buildings by Enric Miralles. These architects produce singularities that acknowledge their contingent situation, reordering reality in ways that are both enduring and touching.

Beauty is an activity of creating concepts in architecture. Concepts do not wait. To actualize a new world through design is to be engaged in the production of imagined communities. Our designs must be made in response to social exigencies. We must be try, like Iverson, to imagine how we can move through space in improbable ways and make the shot even while we are falling down. If the beautiful has an optimistic structure it is that empathy results from the desire to transform physics into culture.