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Susanne Langer on Architecture: Ethnic Domain, Virtual Space, and the Feeling of Life

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Abstract: That human thought is essentially symbolic was Susanne Langer’s “new key” to philosophy. No approach might seem less promising for understanding our experience of architecture: apart from a few academics who have confused architectural drawing with architecture itself, most people think of architecture as comprising three-dimensional, physical objects built of wood, stone, steel, glass, and all sorts of contemporary composites, as real rather than symbolic as it can get. We should begin where she did, namely, by distinguishing what she called “discursive” and “presentational” symbolism. Langer’s main point is not merely that architecture provides ethnic domains, but that it provides images of ethnic domains.

I. ARCHITECTURE AS SYMBOLISM

Although now largely forgotten, Susanne Knauth Langer (1895-1985) was a significant figure in American philosophy and a major figure in aesthetics from the 1940s into the 1960s, when her star became obscured by such philosophers as Nelson Goodman, Richard Wollheim, and Arthur Danto. A student of Alfred North Whitehead at Harvard University and influenced by other philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce and Ernst Cassirer, Langer contributed a ‘new key’ to philosophy—the title of her 1942 *chef d’oeuvre*, followed by *Feeling and Form* in 1953, her chief work in aesthetics—the view that human thought is essentially symbolic. But Langer did not take a strictly cognitivist approach to what Goodman called ‘symbol systems’.¹ For her, symbols were

vehicles for the expression' and communication of feeling and emotion, as well as more conceptual or intellectual content. This approach makes the application of her basic concept of symbolism to the case of architecture interesting, even if her account may lack the precision prized in contemporary philosophy.

For anyone coming to Langer's work in aesthetics and particularly on architecture with more current conceptions of it, symbolism might not seem to be the most obvious concept on which to base an approach to architecture. Most people think of architecture as comprising three-dimensional, physical objects built of wood, stone, steel, glass, and all sorts of contemporary composites that are as real as it gets, rather than symbolic. From the vantage point of recent philosophy of language, attempts to understand architecture as a *linguistic* symbol-system might seem particularly problematic: *syntax* might be a useful analogy for understanding some aspects of some architecture, e.g., how Doric columns go with one sort of capital and entablature, while Ionic columns match different ones. There does not; however, seem to be much room for application of the idea of *semantics* to most architecture, that is, the aspect of language that concerns reference and truth. Moreover, a linguistic conception of pragmatics, or the use of language to accomplish actions such as making a promise, does not seem to be necessary for understanding architectural functionality, such as accommodating a family, a manufacturing operation, and so on, which is understood straightforwardly.² To be sure, there have been overtly symbolic works in architectural history, some highly successful, such as the Erechtheion of the Acropolis with its caryatids, as interpreted by Vitruvius;³ some unbuilt projects, such as the Cenotaph for Newton designed by Etienne-Louis Boullée, a sphere representing the heavens (though perhaps the forerunner of some built planetaria);⁴ and some simply humorous structures, such as the Long Island duck stand in the shape of a duck, so celebrated by Robert Venturi.⁵ Sometimes a work of architecture or some feature of it may be symbolic in a straightforward way without detriment to its overall appeal or quality, as when the cathedral's requisite cruciform floor plan, symbolic of the cross used for execution by crucifixion, has been successfully integrated with the building's other spatial, structural, and decorative elements, such as quatrefoil windows in the clerestory, and so on. But this seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

In trying to understand how Langer brought architecture under her 'new key' in *Feeling and Form*,⁶ we should begin where she did, namely, by distinguishing what she called 'discursive' and 'presentational' symbolism:

One conception of symbolism leads to logic, and meets the new problems in theory of knowledge . . . The other takes us in the opposite direction—to psychiatry, the study of emotions, religion, fantasy, and everything but knowledge'. These two can be subsumed under the single rubric of symbolism, because 'in both we have a central theme: the human response, as a constructive, not a passive thing.'⁷

However, the kind of symbolism Langer thought is involved in architecture is very much the second kind, not the first. Not that she thought that architecture is like a dream or fantasy best studied by psychiatry, but the central concepts Langer's approach brought to architecture—ethnic domain, virtual space, and the feeling of life—have much more to do with our experience of architecture and the emotions it can arouse than with any form of cognition that might be modelled by logic and science. Many conceptions of symbolism, such as Goodman's, might be too narrow for understanding architecture, precisely because they work within the confines of a discursive conception of symbolism—all Goodman could think to ask about architecture was 'how [do] buildings mean'?⁸

By contrast, Langer's conception of symbolism is capacious. For her, 'A symbol is any device whereby we are enabled to make an abstraction',⁹ and making an abstraction seems to mean pretty much any form of thinking or feeling something by and in the experience of something that goes beyond merely passive reception of sensory stimulation. Symbolism does not require the formal features of discourse such as syntax and semantics, and it can consist in grasping and communicating feelings as well as concepts. Giving expression to feeling through form, to allude to the title of Langer's chief work in aesthetics, counts as symbolism. In this approach to art, Langer's view was close to her near contemporary R.G. Collingwood, even though he did not conceive of art as the expression of emotion without conceiving of philosophy in general as the theory of symbolism. And before him, Benedetto Croce's conception of art as an 'intuitive' rather than conceptual expression had much more influence on aesthetics in English during the first half of the twentieth century, and especially on Collingwood, than is remembered.¹⁰

Langer considers architecture one of the three 'plastic arts', that is to say visual arts, and its primary means for symbolism is the fundamental object of vision, namely space. However, she reconciles the reality of space—Langer is no Kantian about space—with her view that all art is symbolic through her concept of virtual space. She acknowledges that architecture, unlike the plastic arts of painting and sculpture, must accommodate ordinary 'actual values' such as 'shelter, comfort, [and] safekeeping'. However, functionality, ordinarily considered an essential aim or value in architecture, going back to Vitruvius under the name *utilitas*, does not loom large in her account, or rather enters indirectly through her concept of the 'ethnic domain'.¹¹

In what follows, I first explain Langer's unusual concept of ethnic domain, then return to her conception of virtual space and finally relate both to her account of the feeling of life, or the emotional impact of architecture. That Langer's now unfamiliar conception of symbolism and her idiosyncratic concept of virtual space led her to recognise architecture's emotional impact strikes me as a good reason to revive interest in her now somewhat forgotten work.

II. ARCHITECTURE AND ETHNIC DOMAIN(S)

By ‘ethnic domain’, Langer does not mean anything necessarily connected with the contemporary usage of ‘ethnic’, which I define (no doubt crudely) as whatever differences of heritage and culture, including language, religion, dress, cuisine, and so on, by means of which people divide themselves or are divided into different groups or, supposedly, different nations (although after World War I this principle was applied more to the defeated Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires than to the victorious British or French empires, which took another world war). She means something more like activities and ways of living that need to take place in some kind of space or venue, activities that may be collective or are in varying degrees more individualistic. I put it this way because the difference between collective and individualistic activities is more on a spectrum than binary distinctions. The collective end of the spectrum includes the kinds of activities or ways of life such as collective worship that people might use to divide themselves into ethnic groups in the current sense. However, this has nothing to do with what Langer means by ‘ethnic’, as in ethnic domain. Similarly, the more individual end of the spectrum of what she means by ‘ethnic domain’ is no doubt influenced by cultural differences among groups, e.g., people from one culture who are influenced by it might prefer one kind of bedding, such as mattresses and box springs, whereas people from a different culture are acculturated to tatami mats, and *mutatis mutandis* with regard to foods, clothing, and so on. So ‘individual’ preferences may not be strictly individualistic, yet collective tendencies are not necessarily determinative here and there may be plenty of room for development of individual preferences and practices.

But again, it is not any part of Langer’s argument that different groups or cultures must have different ethnic domains. All that she means is that both more collective and more individualistic practices take place in certain kinds of places, spaces or venues, often certain kinds of structures. Whether these vary between different groups in ways correlated with their differing languages, religions, cuisines, and so on, as they often do; proves irrelevant to Langer’s ‘ethnic domains. Her concept is more general than what we ordinarily think of as built structures: it includes campsites, the larger spaces through which nomadic groups pass over the course of the year and even ships.¹² She thus associates architecture with the creation of an ethnic domain or venue for ethnic activity through the construction of some sort of enduring structure, although again what counts as enduring follows a spectrum, such that tents might last for decades even though they are frequently moved, igloos that melt come summer require replacement in winter, commercial buildings that have planned useful lives live forty or fifty years, while temples or cathedrals of stone and masonry might be intended to last hundreds or thousands of years, although wars or earthquakes might bring them down long before that. The general point is that since humans engage in both more collective and more individualistic activities, architecture’s ethnic domains range in scale

from private structures such as individual homes to public venues, such as temples or churches housing the group activities of dozens or hundreds or thousands of people.

Despite this breadth of human activities, Langer states that the great architectural ideas have rarely, if ever, arisen from domestic needs. They grew as the temple, the tomb, the fortress, the hall, the theatre. The reason is simple enough: tribal culture is collective, and its domain is therefore essentially public.¹³

This point needs to be stated with care. Surely much of the historiography of architecture does concern public buildings such as temples and tombs in antiquity, cathedrals and fortresses in the middle age or capitals and courthouses in modernity. This is in part, no doubt, because societies have been willing to invest their resources collectively to build the ethnic domains for the collective activities they have regarded as most important. Similarly, societies are willing to invest the resources necessary to maintain such structures for long periods during which they continue to regard these activities as important, or at least as worth commemorating. But in part it will also be true because such large structures, made of materials that are expensive but often also more enduring than others, are more likely to survive longer than ordinary houses, barns and shops. For example, with the very rare exceptions such as Pompeii, we know more about ancient houses from descriptions, such as Vitruvius's, than from actual survivors or ruins. Then again, the size of monumental structures sometimes puts them at risk. The Ottomans' defending their control of Athens against the attacking Venetians chose the Parthenon over private homes for their ammunition dump with the unfortunate results that we all know.

But architectural innovation, or in Langer's words 'great architectural ideas' do not always take place in the public rather than the private domain. Young architects often start out with commissions for private homes, or even renovations of period homes. In a period like ours where so much public architecture such as office buildings, shopping malls, warehouses and the like are often banal and routine, private homes may remain the domain for more interesting architecture than that of the public sphere. It may not be an accident that the *Architectural Record* publishes a house of the month, though not an office building or warehouse of the month.¹⁴

Moving past this issue, however, Langer's main point is not merely that architecture results in designed structures that are ethnic domains. Architecture also provides images of ethnic domains, whose image is not a sign or depiction of an ethnic domain but 'a physically present human environment that expresses the characteristic rhythmic functional patterns which constitute a culture.'¹⁵ Such expressions are what makes architecture symbolic. To understand this claim, it is necessary to explicate two other notions associated with Langer's account of architecture: her concept of the virtual or 'illusion'

and that which the virtual expresses through feeling, specifically the feeling of life. In Langer's view, all art creates an 'illusion' or 'semblance'.

Langer does not, however, think of semblance as involving any sort of *re*-semblance to something already perceived, even the kind in which a two-dimensional depiction is experienced as resembling a three-dimensional object, let alone as involving any element of deception or delusion. She rather conceives of semblance as using a medium to create a 'look' for an object, 'and the emotional import of its form', while non-artists, and therefore non-artistic symbols, 'only "read the label" of its actual nature, and dwell on its actuality'¹⁶ Semblance is not mere representation, but rather the creation of a visual or other sensible expression for something that is not intrinsically visual or otherwise sensible.¹⁷

Natural signs may refer us to an object through causal connections, such that smoke alerts us to fire and discursive symbols label their objects. But artistic, presentational symbols capture the look of the object and through that look, the way it captures the object, it also conveys its emotional import to us. This is how Langer's second and third concepts are connected. Emotion, ultimately the feeling of life, is conveyed through semblance or form. This is why I consider Langer's notion of symbolism part of the same family as Croce and Collingwood's conceptions of expression, rather than, say Goodman's more formal notion of a symbol-system.

This analysis applies readily to two forms of plastic art, namely painting and sculpture, the one creating semblance in two dimensions, the other in three (though of course, many examples of visual art, such as Robert Rauschenberg's 'combines', blur this neat distinction). But what about architecture? Most architecture is not symbolic in any ordinary way, that is, it does not represent anything, *a fortiori* something other than itself. And as already been suggested, those fringe cases that do project meaning, if they get built at all, are not particularly significant. So, in what sense does architecture traffic in 'illusion' or 'semblance'?

III. ARCHITECTURE AND VIRTUAL SPACE

Langer's answer is that architecture creates 'virtual' space out of 'real space'. Her underlying assumption is that real space, either as we experience it in everyday life or as we conceptualise it in science, is 'amorphous', that is, it has no determinate shape or extension:

Space as we know it in the practical world has no shape. Even in science it has none, though it has 'logical form'. There are spatial relations, but there is no concrete totality of space. Space itself is amorphous in our active lives and purely abstract in scientific thought. It is a substrate of all our experience, gradually discovered by the collaboration of our several senses—now seen, now felt, now realised as a factor in our moving and doing—a limit to our hearing, a defiance to our reach. When the spatial experience of everyday life is refined by the precision and artifice of science, space becomes a coordinate in mathematical functions.¹⁸

But, she continues, 'the space in which we live and act is not what is treated in art as well'. Art creates the semblance of determinately shaped and sized space, or spaces, and in the case of a visual art such as painting, this is 'an entirely visual affair; for touch and hearing and muscular action it does not exist'.¹⁹ She continues, 'Being only visual, this space has no continuity with the space in which we live'.²⁰ Further, 'Virtual space, being entirely independent and not a local area in actual space, is a self-contained, total system'.²¹ This definition might sound as if it could be satisfied by 'virtual space' in the contemporary sense of 'virtual reality', i.e., a computer-generated perceptual illusion. Such a sense of 'virtual space' is certainly nothing like Langer's conception of virtual space in architecture. For architecture, even though it is 'generally regarded as an art of space', at least includes 'actual, practical space and building is so certainly the making of something that defines and arranges spatial units',²² that is, demarcated divisions of ordinary, real space, such as the volumes contained in the separate rooms of a house or office floors of a skyscraper.

That conception of the space or spaces of architecture would go along naturally with the assumption that *utilitas* is ordinarily an important aspect of architecture. At the same time, the space of architecture is more than that, and here is where it becomes virtual in Langer's sense. For her, 'architecture is a plastic art, and its first achievement is always, unconsciously and inevitably, an illusion; something purely imaginary or conceptual translated into visual impression'.²³ She remarks, '[t]he architect, *in fine*, deals with a *created space*, a virtual entity: the primary illusion of plastic art effected by a basic abstraction peculiar to architecture'.²⁴ This virtual, created space must give us an illusion of its own determinateness and completeness, of a space that is not merely a carved-off bit of the space of science, which is unbounded and non-perspectival, or the space of everyday life, which is often only indeterminately bounded. Then, to go back one step, this virtual space is in turn 'an ethnic domain made visible, tangible, sensible. . . [a] functional realm—made visible as the center of a visual world, the "ethnic domain," and itself a geographical semblance'.²⁵ On the one hand, the virtual space as an ethnic domain is indeed 'an illusion of self-contained, self-sufficient, perceptual space', because perceptual space, that is, actual space as we ordinarily

perceive it, is not 'self-contained' and 'self-sufficient', and, on the other hand, this space will express the emotions connected with the ethnic domain, as for example the lofty space of a cathedral might, or the activities that constitute the ethnic domain, which fall under the rubric 'feeling of life' because the 'ethnic' in 'ethnic domain' connotes a form of life, although, again, not necessarily a particular culture in our contemporary sense of 'ethnic'.

There is much to be said for this conception of space in architecture, but it also needs to be qualified. Much traditional architectural theory and history, perhaps especially seventeenth- and eighteenth-century work based on Greek and Roman architecture, does indeed focus exclusively on architecture as an object of visual experience. For example, both Claude Perrault's work from the seventeenth century on the five orders²⁶ and Julien-David Le Roy's work from the eighteenth century on ancient Greek monuments²⁷ focus on the elevations of buildings and their organisation, treating works of architecture more like the two-dimensional engravings by which they were represented than as containers of volumes of space at all. They treat the designs of the surfaces enclosing volumes as the primary objects of the aesthetic experience of architecture and the enclosed volumes themselves as very much secondary.

Langer's approach reverses this priority, and in many cases that seems right: in a cathedral or a theatre, the interior space of the building, experienced as the space for an ethnic domain, seems more important to us than the surface treatment of either its interior or exterior walls, although those will certainly be decorated to a greater or lesser extent. Indeed, in cases like these the interior space may seem not so much carved out and cut off from the exterior space surrounding the building, but simply independent from it. Conversely, the surroundings may seem irrelevant to the interior space of the building. Once one enters a cathedral or a theatre, or more precisely enters into its ethnic domain, the form of life characteristic to a cathedral or a theatre; one enters as it were into a world of its own, to which what exists and what may be going on outside its walls, or even right against its walls, such as the shops that line one wall of the cathedral in Ferrara, Italy, are largely irrelevant. (Of course, the wail of a siren may occasionally penetrate the illusory world of the theatre—virtual space is not soundproof.) Perhaps we would have a similar experience inside an ancient temple if any but the Pantheon were still intact, though no doubt we would also have to be pretty well informed about Roman religion and ideology to get anything like the appropriate experience even in the unusually intact Pantheon.

Langer's conception of architecture as both housing distinctive forms of human activity, while also expressing, or in her terms symbolising such forms of activity, and connecting them to emotions is illuminating, at least for many, if not all cases. Nevertheless, her distinguishing the ethnic domain from the virtual space of architecture and ordinary space seems too sharp. Still in the grip of the representation of buildings through the engravings, diagrams and

photos of floor plans and elevations in traditional architectural publications, she may have overemphasised the purely visual aspect of the experience of architecture. Only in passing does she note that the experience of architecture can be tangible and more generally sensible as well as strictly visual. The experience of architecture is surely in good part visual, and although as we have already seen Langer associates such senses as touch and hearing with real space, she does not associate these senses with the virtual space of the plastic arts, architecture included. This is too restrictive. Even if for most of us, we mostly experience works of architecture only visually, through illustrations, the full experience of a work of architecture in many cases is or should be more than just visual: it can be tactile, kinaesthetic, acoustic, even olfactory and indeed gustatory if the architecture of a restaurant or bar cannot be fully experienced (and remembered) without eating or drinking there. No doubt our experiences of both painting and sculpture in museums is restricted to the purely visual by the rules and the guards, and our movement through the museum are entirely incidental or instrumental to viewing the works it contains.

Nevertheless, in the case of many works of architecture, including perhaps museums as works of architecture in their own right; we are meant not only to look at, but also to feel the materials, to feel what it is like to move through the building, and sometimes even to hear in a particular way—obviously so in a concert hall, perhaps less obviously so in a curved bench designed to communicate whispers from one end to the other, and so on.

Phenomenological approaches to architecture, such as that of Steen Eiler Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture*, published in 1951 just two years before *Feeling and Form*, tend to emphasise architecture's multi-sensorial potential. More recent examples include Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, as well as the built architecture of Peter Zumthor, whose famous thermal baths at Vals, Switzerland are surely intended to engage bathers' many senses, not just their sight. Other philosophers, for example Jenefer Robinson, address architecture's kinaesthetic experience, that is, what it is like to move through a building.²⁸ Not every building is intended to be or is successfully experienced through multiple senses, including the sense of our own motion, but certainly some are. It thus appears that Langer's stressing the visual is overemphasised, even for her era.

A further concern is that her distinction between the virtual space created by a work of art and the ordinary space of everyday experience is too sharp. As I already conceded, in some cases the work of architecture really does seem to be intended to create and to succeed in creating its own space, for example a sacral space that feels like its own little world to us rather than feeling like just a part of the larger, indeed endless real space. But only sometimes. In many other cases, works of architecture are meant to blur or efface the limit between indoors and outdoors, thus between the virtual space created by the architectural work and the real space already created, whether by nature or

by other, previously built structures, whether in a smaller precinct or a larger cityscape. This has varied with climate, of course: in inhospitable climates, both very hot ones and very cold ones, buildings have been designed with thick walls to keep heat in, or out as the case may be, with small openings to limit solar gain or heat loss, but with some form of ventilation, and so on. But in temperate climates, designers and builders have been able to play with the boundary between inside and out. In antiquity, further, apparently some Greek temples were roofed while others were open to the sky; this may well have been linked to the particular ethnic domain to be housed in the temple, i.e., what god it honoured and how that god was supposed to be worshipped.

In the domestic rather than public spheres, both Greek and Roman homes, at least those of the wealthy included atria, as do many contemporary homes in favourable climates.²⁹ And even in more northerly climes, apartment blocks typical of European cities, though not rowhouses typical of Britain, Holland, and the British-colonised towns of the eastern seaboard of the U.S., have generally featured courtyards. Rather than being experienced only as architectural features of buildings, the air shafts of New York tenement buildings afford interior-facing rooms or apartments additional light and air. Moreover, courtyards, atria, patios and balconies have certainly been intended for use and are used by the tenants of the buildings as extensions of their living space, and should be regarded as very much part of the building's architecture alongside French doors, sliders and accordion window-walls, which are typically meant to efface the boundary between inside and out, while admitting light and air to an interior space.

Furthermore, many of the most accomplished works of architecture in the last century or so have clearly been aimed at breaking down any strict boundary between interior and exterior, between the space of the architectural artifact and the space of nature. In the domestic work of Frank Lloyd Wright from the houses of his high Prairie School period in the first decade of the twentieth century to the masterpieces of the 1930s such as Fallingwater, the first Herbert Johnson House and the great Paul and Jean Hanna house, patios and balconies were not only a frequent feature of his designs, with easy access from the inside to the outside through those features, but the views from inside out and outside in were carefully calculated to provide both vistas and privacy, or in the terms of the brilliant analysis of this aspect of Wright's domestic architecture by Grant Hildebrand, 'prospect' and 'refuge'.³⁰

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe also played with the boundary between indoors and outdoors, though not in every building. Unlike his Lake Shore Drive Chicago apartment buildings or the Seagram's Building in New York, several of his domestic buildings do. A great example is Villa Tugendhat³¹ in Brno, CZ, which has a plate glass windows between the main living area and the garden that opens the house to the garden. Much like a car window, the windows along one edge disappear into the basement by means of a complicated mechanism in this fabulously expensive house, thus completely effacing

the boundary between indoors and outdoors. Other relevant examples are his Barcelona Pavilion (1929),³² which was intended as an exposition pavilion to be visited for a few minutes, not as a permanent, inhabitable structure, and his last work, the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, beautifully restored by David Chipperfield Architects, where the lower-level galleries are separated from the exterior sculpture garden again by sheets of plate glass that visually disappear, though they do not physically disappear. While standing inside, one feels as though one is at the same time looking at paintings inside and looking at sculptures outside.

To be sure, there is something virtual about such experiences, because one is not indoors and outdoors at the same time. Although one must pass through an actual glass door to go from indoors to outdoors, and vice versa, the virtual space of the building is precisely the one that effaces the distinction between indoors and outdoors—the ethnic domain, that is, the culturally appropriate activity of this building. Looking at modern painting and sculpture requires precisely this sort of virtual space, if one still wants to call it that, and not the virtual space of the cathedral or theatre. This makes it seem as if it is an entirely different world than the world of ordinary, natural space. To interpret Langer charitably, we might say that her concept of virtual space, at least in the case of architecture, should not be strictly identified with an indoor space that feels cut off from the ordinary outdoors, but it is meant precisely to link these two kinds of space. On this interpretation the virtual space of architecture is never merely the actual space of nature, but can sometimes include it.

IV. ARCHITECTURE AND THE FEELING OF LIFE

This brings us to the third of Langer's concepts for understanding architecture, the concept of the feeling of life, or the linked concepts of the expression of emotion, but particularly the expression of the feeling of life. Sometimes Langer suggests that expression or 'expressiveness' in art consists in a 'wordlessly presented conception of *what life feels like*', and she associates her conception of expression with Clive Bell's conception of 'significant form'.³³ Each medium of art would have its own way of expressing what life feels like, so painting would do this through two-dimensional arrays of colour, sculpture through three-dimensional objects and architecture through three-dimensional structures that enclose virtual spaces. Presumably, different artists would have their own ways of expressing the feeling of life, namely their style such that works express the feeling of life through some variant of a particular artist's style. But there would be one thing, namely the feeling of life, that gets expressed in different ways. The problem with this view is that it assumes there is just one way that life feels like. That seems completely implausible.

In fact, Langer's more careful formulations suggest that the idea of the expression of the feeling of life is an abstraction or generalisation, a way of saying that different works of art express different ways or aspects of what it feels like to be alive. Thus, in her introduction to the topic of expression in *Feeling and Form*, she uses plural rather than singular terms.

In some sense, then, feeling must be *in* the work; just as a good work of art clarifies and exhibits the forms and colors which the painter has seen, distinguished, and appreciated better than his fellowmen could do without aid, so it clarifies and presents the feelings proper to those forms and colors. Feeling 'expressed' in art is 'feeling or emotion presented as the qualitative character of imaginal content.'³⁴

However, there is no one feeling that all art expresses. Plastic or visual art expresses feeling through its creation of form, whether 'semblance' in the case of painting or 'virtual space' in the case of architecture, but such semblance or virtual space expresses emotion. Langer writes that...

... it is not, as notably Croce and Bergson have said, the actual existence of the object to be depicted, that the artist understands better than other people. It is the semblance, the look of it, and the emotional import of its form, that he perceives, while others only 'read the label' of its actual nature, and dwell on the actuality.³⁵

But different forms have different emotional import, especially in their different contexts. Langer's particular thesis regarding architecture is that '*virtual space*, appears in architecture as an *envisagement of an ethnic domain*' and so the feelings expressed through virtual space in architecture will be those associated with the particular ethnic domain associated with the particular work or structure.³⁶ The ethnic domain of a work, as we have seen, is in turn identical or connected to the kind of activity typically or properly performed within it, so the feelings that particular works express will be those associated with their characteristic activities. Thus 'symbolic expression' in architecture is something 'miles removed from provident planning or good arrangement'—what would have been prized under the Vitruvian category of *utilitas*.

It does not suggest things to do, but embodies the feeling, the rhythm, the passion or sobriety, frivolity or fear with which any things at all are done. That is the image of life created in buildings.³⁷

This image is clearly not *one* image of life, as if life were one thing that felt one way, but *images* of life in all their diversity and expressions of the feelings associated with life in all their diversity.

Certainly some forms of buildings have strong emotional associations, which we might think of as expressed through the form (and other aspects

and elements of the design and construction) of the building: it does not seem implausible to think that the virtual space created by a place of worship, a cathedral, a synagogue or a mosque will trigger and express one emotion or set of emotions, such as awe, humility, worshipfulness and so on, while another, say a dance hall or cabaret will trigger and express feelings of gaiety, desire, and so on. Still, there are two sorts of problems with this thesis in its strong form, problems that Kant clearly had in mind when he claimed that judgements of taste that rely on emotions are ‘barbaric’, although he no doubt went too far in the opposite direction in attempting to exclude emotion from proper aesthetic response altogether.³⁸

One sort of problem lies in any suggestion that everyone will experience the same building in the same way, including its emotional import, or that even the same person at different times will experience the same object the same way. Perhaps because of your upbringing you are emotionally moved by almost any cathedral, whereas I am barely moved by even Chartres. Because of my upbringing, I could be moved even by seeing an electrical shop in Poland that was obviously once a synagogue, whereas you could be moved only if Solomon’s Temple were to reappear. Or perhaps when I was young and brash, I could be moved only by buildings associated with practices with a personal connection to myself, but as I have grown older and wiser, I have come to appreciate, including emotionally, a more catholic range of objects. Perhaps, in spite of such synchronic and diachronic inter- and intrapersonal differences in response, there is still one thing that any particular object, including a work of architecture, does express, but it would need a lot of argument to demonstrate that. Nevertheless, Langer’s general position that the full experience of works of architecture often involves some emotion seems undeniable.

Still, the suggestion that any particular building or building-type is associated with at least one, but just one ethnic domain and therefore with the feeling or even multiple feelings properly associated with that ethnic domain is questionable. Perhaps this is true for some sorts of structures, for example cathedrals or for that matter sports arenas, for example football stadiums that are used just on eight or ten Sundays one season in the year, and always for the same purpose—there may be a well-defined ethnic domain for such structures and a well-defined emotion that goes along with it and that can be expressed through it. But other sorts of buildings and their characteristic activities might embody very different sorts of emotions for different groups of people, for example defence attorneys might experience court houses as pleasant places where they can earn a good living, while their clients might experience them as awesome and terrifying places where their fates will be decided. Or some sorts of buildings may have very different functions for different people at different times, and therefore function as different ethnic domains and express different emotions at those different times. One and the same house at different times might function almost as an extension of their

church for a pious family, as a place of business for a drug dealer or as a party-house for a bunch of student renters. Or the several but small parlours of Victorian houses may have seemed cosy to their original occupants (as well easy to keep warm without central heating), while for those of us now accustomed to a more ‘open concept’ they just seem cramped.

In my current house, I have my desk and a wall of books behind it at one end of the living room where the previous owners had their dining table. Surely that room feels different to me than it did to them, and perhaps the whole house feels different because my wife and I lead such different lives than the previous owners did (or so we presume). No doubt my feelings about this room are different from the feelings of the previous owners, and for that matter different from my wife’s feelings about it. Some architects have recognised that different users might use the same structure differently, and that whole patterns of use may change over the lifetime of a building, thus that flexibility should be designed into the building—this was an essential insight of Mies van der Rohe, and perhaps a crucial difference at a deeper level than the obvious stylistic differences between much of his work and that of, say, Wright.

Perhaps it could count as an extension of Langer’s approach to architecture to say that one and the same structure can house different ethnic domains and therefore express different emotions over time. But perhaps the variability in responses to buildings, including emotional responses to them, is so great that it would stretch Langer’s conception of the ethnic domain and its associated expression of emotion beyond usefulness. Despite whatever reservations we might have regarding the precision of Langer’s concepts, the force of her arguments and her generalisations; her use of her concepts of symbolism, virtual space and the feeling of life bring out an important dimension of the experience of architecture that is too often ignored by architectural theorising and indeed by much aesthetic theory as well.

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NOTES

¹Goodman 1968.

²For discussions and criticism of the use of the linguistic analogy in architectural discourse, see Guyer 2021, 101-109, as well as Moneo 2004, 159-160 and Winters 2007, 84-92.

³Vitruvius 1999, Book I, 22.

⁴Kaufmann 1955, 160-166 and Kaufmann 1968.

⁵Venturi, Brown, and Izenour 1977, 88 This second edition added the subtitle ‘The Forgotten Symbolism of Architec-

tural Form’.

⁶Langer 1953.

⁷Langer 1942, 24.

⁸Goodman 1985.

⁹Langer 1953, xi.

¹⁰Collingwood 1938 and Croce 1992. For my accounts of the aesthetic theories of Croce and Collingwood, see Guyer 2014, vol. 3, 128-149; and 189-233.

¹¹See Guyer 2021 for my account of the Vitruvian values of *utilitas*, *firmitas* and *venustas*, or what I translate as functionality, good construction and aesthetic ap-

peal. Schopenhauer's unusual account of architecture excluded functionality from anything deemed aesthetically significant. Schopenhauer 1819, Book III, §43.

¹²Langer 1953, 97

¹³Langer 1953, 97.

¹⁴Although there are publications devoted to more specific building types, almost every issue of *Architectural Record* includes a feature article on several examples of new works of a particular building type, e.g., new educational or health care buildings, new libraries or museums, new apartment buildings, sometimes even new office buildings.

¹⁵Langer 1953, 96

¹⁶Langer 1953, 76.

¹⁷Kant coined the term 'hypotyposis' for something like this. Luckily, his term never caught on. Kant 2000, §59.

¹⁸Langer 1953, 71-72.

¹⁹Langer 1953, 72.

²⁰Langer 1953, 73.

²¹Langer 1953, 75.

²²Langer 1953, 93.

²³Langer 1953, 93.

²⁴Langer 1953, 94.

²⁵Langer 1953, 95.

²⁶Perrault 1993.

²⁷Le Roy 2004.

²⁸Robinson 2012.

²⁹Amelar 2023.

³⁰Hildebrand 1991.

³¹Mertins 2014.

³²Neumann 2020.

³³Langer 1957, 59, see also Bell 1914.

³⁴Langer 1953, 59. The quoted material is her citing Prall 1936, 145. Prall's 'qualitative character of imaginal content' refers to the emotional dimension, what Langer calls artistic semblance.

³⁵Langer 1953, 76.

³⁶Langer 1953, 100.

³⁷Langer 1953, 99.

³⁸Kant 2000, §13. At least Kant does so in his initial analysis of beauty and judgments of taste, illustrated by architectural examples among others (e.g., §2 and §16). But it is a mistake to identify that initial analysis with Kant's considered views about fine art in general and architecture, which clearly does contemplate emotional response (§49 and §51).

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