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# The Beautiful Necessity:
## Seven Essays on Theosophy and Architecture

Claude Bragdon

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## SEVEN ESSAYS ON THEOSOPHY AND ARCHITECTURE

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# PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

*The Beautiful Necessity* was first published in 1910. Save for a slim volume of privately printed verse it was my first book. I worked hard on it. Fifteen years elapsed between its beginning and completion; it was twice published serially—written, rewritten and tre-written—before it reached its ultimate incarnation in book form.

Confronted now with the opportunity to revise the text again, I find myself in the position of a surgeon who feels that the operation he is called upon to perform may perhaps harm more than it can help. Prudence therefore prevails over my passion for dissection: warned by eminent examples, I fear that any injection of my more mature and less cocksure consciousness into this book might impair its unity—that I "never could recapture the first fine careless rapture."

The text stands therefore as originally published save for a few verbal changes, and whatever reservations I have about it shall be stated in this preface. These are not many nor important: *The Beautiful Necessity* contains nothing that I need repudiate or care to contradict.

Its thesis, briefly stated, is that art in all its manifestations is an expression of the cosmic life, and that its symbols constitute a language by means of which this life is published and represented. Art is at all times subject to the *Beautiful Necessity* of proclaiming the *world order.*

In attempting to develop this thesis it was not necessary (nor as I now think, desirable) to link it up in so definite a manner

with theosophy. The individual consciousness is colored by the particular medium through which it receives truth, and for me that medium was theosophy. Though the book might gain a more unprejudiced hearing, and from a larger audience, by the removal of the theosophic "color-screen," it shall remain, for its removal now might seem to imply a loss of faith in the fundamental tenets of theosophy, and such an implication would not be true.

The ideas in regard to time and space are those commonly current in the world until the advent of the Theory of Relativity. To a generation brought up on Einstein and Ouspensky they are bound to appear "lower dimensional." Merely to state this fact is to deal with it to the extent it needs to be dealt with. The integrity of my argument is not impaired by these new views.

The one important influence that has operated to modify my opinions concerning the mathematical basis of the arts of space has been the discoveries of Mr. Jay Hambidge with regard to the practice of the Greeks in these matters, as exemplified in their temples and their ceramics, and named by him *Dynamic Symmetry*.

In tracing everything back to the logarithmic spiral (which embodies the principle of extreme and mean ratios) I consider that Mr. Hambidge has made one of those generalizations which reorganizes the old knowledge and organizes the new. It would be only natural if in his immersion in his idea he overworks it, but Mr. Hambidge is a man of such intellectual integrity and thoroughness of method that he may be trusted not to warp the facts to fit his theories. The truth of the matter is that the entire field of research into the mathematics of Beauty is of such richness that wherever a man plants his metaphysical spade he is sure to come upon "pay dirt." *The*

*Beautiful Necessity* represents the result of my own prospecting; *Dynamic Symmetry* represents the result of his. If at any point our findings appear to conflict, it is less likely that one or the other of us is mistaken than that each is right from his own point of view. Be that as it may, I should be the last man in the world to differ from Mr. Hambidge, for if he convicted me of every conceivable error his work would still remain the greatest justification and confirmation of my fundamental contention—that art is an expression of the *world order* and is therefore orderly, organic; subject to mathematical law, and susceptible of mathematical analysis.

CLAUDE BRAGDON

*Rochester, N. Y.*
April, 1922

# I

# THE ART OF ARCHITECTURE

ONE of the advantages of a thorough assimilation of what may be called the theosophic idea is that it can be applied with advantage to every department of knowledge and of human activity: like the key to a cryptogram it renders clear and simple that which before seemed intricate and obscure. Let us apply this key to the subject of art, and to the art of architecture in particular, and see if by so doing we may not learn more of art than we knew before, and more of theosophy too.

The theosophic idea is that everything is an expression of the Self—or whatever other name one may choose to give to that immanent unknown reality which forever hides behind all phenomenal life—but because, immersed as we are in materiality, our chief avenue of knowledge is sense perception, a more exact expression of the theosophic idea would be: Everything is the expression of the Self in terms of sense. Art, accordingly, is the expression of the Self in terms of sense. Now though the Self is *one,* sense is not one, but manifold: and therefore there are *arts,* each addressed to some particular faculty or group of faculties, and each expressing some particular quality or group of qualities of the Self. The white light of Truth is thus broken up into a rainbow-tinted spectrum of Beauty, in which the various arts are colors, each distinct, yet merging one into another—poetry into music; painting into decoration; decoration becoming sculpture; sculpture—architecture, and so on.

In such a spectrum of the arts each one occupies a definite place, and all together form a series of which music and architecture are the two extremes. That such is their relative position may be demonstrated in various ways. The theosophic explanation involving the familiar idea of the "pairs of opposites" would be something as follows. According to the Hindu-Aryan theory, Brahma, that the world might be born, fell asunder into man and wife—became in other words *name and form*.* The two universal aspects of name and form are what philosophers call the two "modes of consciousness," one of time, and the other of space. These are the two gates through which ideas enter phenomenal life; the two boxes, as it were, that contain all the toys with which we play. Everything, were we only keen enough to perceive it, bears the mark of one or the other of them, and may be classified accordingly. In such a classification music is seen to be allied to time, and architecture to space, because music is successive in its mode of manifestation, and in time alone everything would occur successively, one thing following another; while architecture, on the other hand, impresses itself upon the beholder all at once, and in space alone all things would exist simultaneously. Music, which is in time alone, without any relation to space; and architecture, which is in space alone, without any relation to time, are thus seen to stand at opposite ends of the art spectrum, and to be, in a sense, the only "pure" arts, because in all the others the elements of both

* The quaint Oriental imagery here employed should not blind the reader to the precise scientific accuracy of the idea of which this imagery is the vehicle. Schopenhauer says: "Polarity, or the sundering of a force into two quantitively different and opposed activities striving after re-union, . . . is a fundamental type of almost all the phenomena of nature, from the magnet and the crystal to man himself."

time and space enter in varying proportion, either actually or by implication. Poetry and the drama are allied to music inasmuch as the ideas and images of which they are made up are presented successively, yet these images are for the most part forms of space. Sculpture on the other hand is clearly allied to architecture, and so to space, but the element of *action,* suspended though it be, affiliates it with the opposite or time pole. Painting occupies a middle position, since in it space instead of being actual has become ideal—three dimensions being expressed through the mediumship of two—and time enters into it more largely than into sculpture by reason of the greater ease with which complicated action can be indicated: a picture being nearly always time arrested in midcourse as it were—a moment transfixed.

In order to form a just conception of the relation between music and architecture it is necessary that the two should be conceived of not as standing at opposite ends of a series represented by a straight line, but rather in juxtaposition, as in the ancient Egyptian symbol of a serpent holding its tail in its mouth, the head in this case corresponding to music, and the tail to architecture; in other words, though in one sense they are the most widely separated of the arts, in another they are the most closely related.

Music being purely in time and architecture being purely in space, each is, in a manner and to a degree not possible with any of the other arts, convertible into the other, by reason of the correspondence subsisting between intervals of time and intervals of space. A perception of this may have inspired the famous saying that architecture is *frozen music,* a poetical statement of a philosophical truth, since that which in music is expressed by means of harmonious intervals of time and pitch, successively, after the manner of time, may be translated into

corresponding intervals of architectural void and solid, height and width.

In another sense music and architecture are allied. They alone of all the arts are purely creative, since in them is presented, not a likeness of some known idea, but *a thing-in-itself* brought to a distinct and complete expression of its nature. Neither a musical composition nor a work of architecture depends for its effectiveness upon resemblances to natural sounds in the one case, or to natural forms in the other. Of none of the other arts is this to such a degree true: they are not so much creative as re-creative, for in them all the artist takes his subject ready made from nature and presents it anew according to the dictates of his genius.

The characteristic differences between music and architecture are the same as those which subsist between time and space. Now time and space are such abstract ideas that they can be dealt with best through their corresponding correlatives in the natural world, for it is a fundamental theosophic tenet that nature everywhere abounds in such correspondences; that nature, in its myriad forms, is indeed the concrete presentment of abstract unities. The energy which everywhere animates form is a type of time within space; the mind working in and through the body is another expression of the same thing. Correspondingly, music is dynamic, subjective, mental, of one dimension; while architecture is static, objective, physical, of three dimensions; sustaining the same relation to music and the other arts as does the human body to the various organs which compose, and consciousnesses which animate it (it being the reservatory of these organs and the vehicle of these consciousnesses); and a work of architecture in like manner may and sometimes does include all of the other arts within itself. Sculpture accentuates and enriches, painting adorns, works of

literature are stored within it, poetry and the drama awake its echoes, while music thrills to its uttermost recesses, like the very spirit of life tingling through the body's fibres.

Such being the relation between them, the difference in the nature of the ideas bodied forth in music and in architecture becomes apparent. Music is interior, abstract, subjective, speaking directly to the soul in a simple and universal language whose meaning is made personal and particular in the breast of each listener: "Music alone of all the arts," says Balzac, "has power to make us live within ourselves." A work of architecture is the exact opposite of this: existing principally and primarily for the uses of the body, it is like the body a concrete organism, attaining to esthetic expression only in the reconciliation and fulfilment of many conflicting practical requirements. Music is pure beauty, the voice of the unfettered and perpetually evanishing soul of things; architecture is that soul imprisoned in a form, become subject to the law of causality, beaten upon by the elements, at war with gravity, the slave of man. One is the Ariel of the arts; the other, Caliban.

Coming now to the consideration of architecture in its historical rather than its philosophical aspect, it will be shown how certain theosophical concepts are applicable here. Of these none is more familiar and none more fundamental than the idea of reincarnation. By reincarnation more than mere physical re-birth is meant, for physical re-birth is but a single manifestation of that universal law of alternation of state, of animation of vehicles, and progression through related planes, in accordance with which all things move, and as it were make music—each cycle complete, yet part of a larger cycle, the incarnate monad passing through correlated changes, carrying

along and bringing into manifestation in each successive arc of the spiral the experience accumulated in all preceding states, and at the same time unfolding that power of the Self peculiar to the plane in which it is momentarily manifesting.

This law finds exemplification in the history of architecture in the orderly flow of the building impulse from one nation and one country to a different nation and a different country: its new vehicle of manifestation; also in the continuity and increasing complexity of the development of that impulse in manifestation; each "incarnation" summarizing all those which have gone before, and adding some new factor peculiar to itself alone; each being a growth, a life, with periods corresponding to childhood, youth, maturity and decadence; each also typifying in its entirety some single one of these life-periods, and revealing some special aspect or power of the Self.

For the sake of clearness and brevity the consideration of only one of several architectural evolutions will be attempted: that which, arising in the north of Africa, spread to southern Europe, thence to the northwest of Europe and to England—the architecture, in short, of the so-called civilized world.

This architecture, anterior to the Christian era, may be broadly divided into three great periods, during which it was successively practiced by three peoples: the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans. Then intervened the Dark Ages, and a new art arose, the Gothic, which was a flowering out in stone of the spirit of Christianity. This was in turn succeeded by the Renaissance, the impulse of which remains to-day unexhausted. In each of these architectures the peculiar genius of a people and of a period attained to a beautiful, complete and coherent utterance, and notwithstanding the considerable intervals of time which sometimes separated them they succeeded one another

logically and inevitably, and each was related to the one which preceded and which followed it in a particular and intimate manner.

The power and wisdom of ancient Egypt was vested in its priesthood, which was composed of individuals exceptionally qualified by birth and training for their high office, tried by the severest ordeals and bound by the most solemn oaths. The priests were honored and privileged above all other men, and spent their lives dwelling apart from the multitude in vast and magnificent temples, dedicating themselves to the study and practice of religion, philosophy, science and art—subjects then intimately related, not widely separated as they are now. These men were the architects of ancient Egypt: theirs the minds which directed the hands that built those time-defying monuments.

The rites that the priests practiced centered about what are known as the Lesser and the Greater Mysteries. These consisted of representations by means of symbol and allegory, under conditions and amid surroundings the most awe-inspiring, of those great truths concerning man's nature, origin and destiny of which the priests—in reality a brotherhood of initiates and their pupils—were the custodians. These ceremonies were made the occasion for the initiation of neophytes into the order, and the advancement of the already initiated into its successive degrees. For the practice of such rites, and others designed to impress not the elect but the multitude, the great temples of Egypt were constructed. Everything about them was calculated to induce a deep seriousness of mind, and to inspire feelings of awe, dread and even terror, so as to test the candidate's fortitude of soul to the utmost.

The avenue of approach to an Egyptian temple was flanked on both sides, sometimes for a mile or more, with great stone

sphinxes—that emblem of man's dual nature, the god emerging from the beast. The entrance was through a single high doorway between two towering pylons, presenting a vast surface sculptured and painted over with many strange and enigmatic figures, and flanked by aspiring obelisks and seated colossi with faces austere and calm. The large court thus entered was surrounded by high walls and colonnades, but was open to the sky. Opposite the first doorway was another, admitting to a somewhat smaller enclosure, a forest of enormous carved and painted columns supporting a roof through the apertures of which sunshine gleamed or dim light filtered down. Beyond this in turn were other courts and apartments culminating in some inmost sacred sanctuary.

Not alone in their temples, but in their tombs and pyramids and all the sculptured monuments of the Egyptians, there is the same insistence upon the sublimity, mystery and awefulness of life, which they seem to have felt so profoundly. But more than this, the conscious thought of the masters who conceived them, the buildings of Egypt give utterance also to the toil and suffering of the thousands of slaves and captives which hewed the stones out of the heart of the rock, dragged them long distances and placed them one upon another, so that these buildings oppress while they inspire, for there is in them no freedom, no spontaneity, no individuality, but everywhere the felt presence of an iron conventionality, of a stern immutable law.

In Egyptian architecture is symbolized the condition of the human soul awakened from its long sleep in nature, and become conscious at once of its divine source and of the leaden burden of its fleshy envelope. Egypt is humanity new-born, bound still with an umbilical cord to nature, and strong not so much with its own strength as with the strength of its mother. This idea is aptly symbolized in those gigantic colossi flanking the entrance

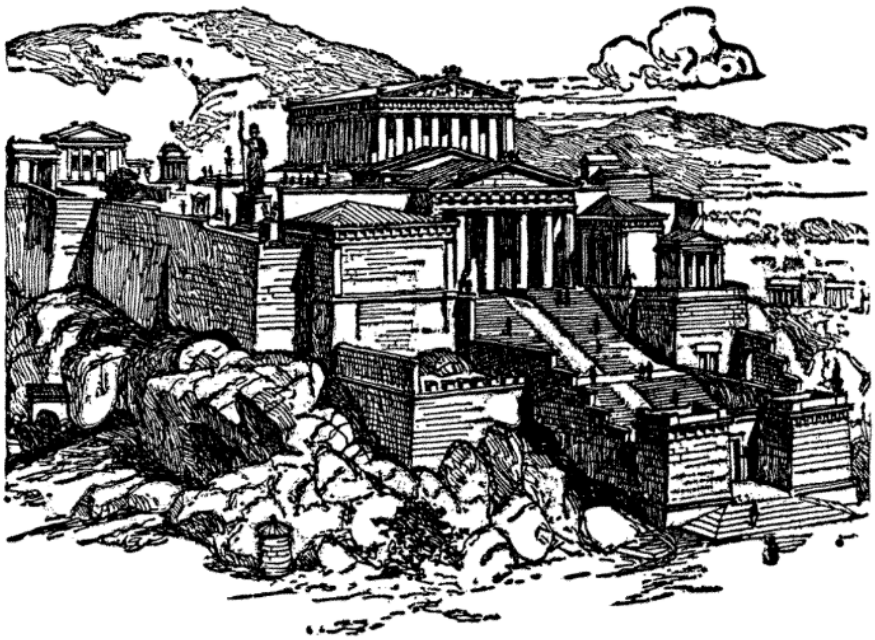
to some rock-cut temple, which though entire are yet part of the living cliff out of which they were fashioned.

In the architecture of Greece the note of dread and mystery yields to one of pure joyousness and freedom. The terrors of childhood have been outgrown, and man revels in the indulgence of his unjaded appetites and in the exercise of his awakened reasoning faculties. In Greek art is preserved that evanescent beauty of youth which, coming but once and continuing but for a short interval in every human life, is yet that for which all antecedent states seem a preparation, and of which all subsequent ones are in some sort an effect. Greece typifies adolescence, the love age, and so throughout the centuries humanity has turned to the contemplation of her, just as a man all his life long secretly cherishes the memory of his first love.

An impassioned sense of beauty and an enlightened reason characterize the productions of Greek architecture during its best period. The perfection then attained was possible only in a nation whereof the citizens were themselves critics and amateurs of art, one wherein the artist was honored and his work appreciated in all its beauty and subtlety. The Greek architect was less bound by tradition and precedent than was the Egyptian, and he worked unhampered by any restrictions save such as, like the laws of harmony in music, helped rather than hindered his genius to express itself—restrictions founded on sound reason, the value of which had been proved by experience.

The Doric order was employed for all large temples, since it possessed in fullest measure the qualities of simplicity and dignity, the attributes appropriate to greatness. Quite properly also its formulas were more fixed than those of any other style. The Ionic order, the feminine of which the Doric may be considered the corresponding masculine, was employed for smaller temples; like a woman it was more supple and adaptable than

the Doric, its proportions were more slender and graceful, its lines more flowing, and its ornament more delicate and profuse. A freer and more elaborate style than either of these, infinitely various, seeming to obey no law save that of beauty, was used sometimes for small monuments and temples, such as the Tower of the Winds, and the monument of Lysicrates at Athens.



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Because the Greek architect was at liberty to improve upon the work of his predecessors if he could, no temple was just like any other, and they form an ascending scale of excellence, culminating in the Acropolis group. Every detail was considered not only with relation to its position and function, but in regard to its intrinsic beauty as well, so that the merest fragment, detached from the building of which it formed a part, is found

worthy of being treasured in our museums for its own sake.

Just as every detail of a Greek temple was adjusted to its position and expressed its office, so the building itself was made to fit its site and to show forth its purpose, forming with the surrounding buildings a unit of a larger whole. The Athenian Acropolis is an illustration of this: it is an irregular fortified hill, bearing diverse monuments in various styles, at unequal levels and at different angles with one another, yet the whole arrangement seems as organic and inevitable as the disposition of the features of a face. The Acropolis is an example of the ideal architectural republic wherein each individual contributes to the welfare of all, and at the same time enjoys the utmost personal liberty (Illustration 1).

Very different is the spirit bodied forth in the architecture of Imperial Rome. The iron hand of its sovereignty encased within the silken glove of its luxury finds its prototype in buildings which were stupendous crude brute masses of brick and concrete, hidden within a covering of rich marbles and mosaics, wrought in beautiful but often meaningless forms by clever degenerate Greeks. The genius of Rome finds its most characteristic expression, not in temples to the high gods, but rather in those vast and complicated structures—basilicas, amphitheatres, baths—built for the amusement and purely temporal needs of the people.

If Egypt typifies the childhood of the race and Greece its beautiful youth, Republican Rome represents its strong manhood—a soldier filled with the lust of war and the love of glory —and Imperial Rome its degeneracy: that soldier become conqueror, decked out in plundered finery and sunk in sensuality, tolerant of all who minister to his pleasures but terrible to all who interfere with them.

The fall of Rome marked the end of the ancient Pagan world.

Above its ruin Christian civilization in the course of time arose. Gothic architecture is an expression of the Christian spirit; in it is manifest the reaction from licentiousness to asceticism. Man's spiritual nature, awakening in a body worn and weakened by debaucheries, longs ardently and tries vainly to escape. Of some such mood a Gothic cathedral is the expression: its vaulting, marvelously supported upon slender shafts by reason of a nicely adjusted equilibrium of forces; its restless, upward-reaching pinnacles and spires; its ornament, intricate and enigmatic—all these suggest the over-strained organism of an ascetic; while its vast shadowy interior lit by marvelously traceried and jeweled windows, which hold the eyes in a hypnotic thrall, is like his soul: filled with world sadness, dead to the bright brief joys of sense, seeing only heavenly visions, knowing none but mystic raptures.

Thus it is that the history of architecture illustrates and enforces the theosophical teaching that everything of man's creating is made in his own image. Architecture mirrors the life of the individual and of the race, which is the life of the individual written large in time and space. The terrors of childhood; the keen interests and appetites of youth; the strong stern joy of conflict which comes with manhood; the lust, the greed, the cruelty of a materialized old age—all these serve but as a preparation for the life of the spirit, in which the man becomes again as a little child, going over the whole round, but on a higher arc of the spiral.

The final, or fourth state being only in some sort a repetition of the first, it would be reasonable to look for a certain correspondence between Egyptian and Gothic architecture, and such a correspondence there is, though it is more easily divined than demonstrated. In both there is the same deeply religious spirit; both convey, in some obscure yet potent manner, a sense