

PIN-UP



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Why Buildings Make Me Happy

The emotional impact of architecture.

By Suleman Anaya

A pivotal scene in 2008's *Dark Knight*, the latest big-screen installment of the Batman series, takes place in a penthouse overlooking the fictional city of Gotham. A glass box perched on a Modernist high-rise, the space is home to the superhero's alter ego, Bruce Wayne (like the rest of the movie's prominently featured urban backdrop, it was filmed in Chicago). Its Mies-ian sophistication produces one of the more uplifting moments in this otherwise gloomy tale, along with a dizzying aerial view of the Hong Kong skyline and shots of the hero's lair, an impossibly elegant bunker with raw concrete walls and a low, luminous ceiling. In these sequences, architecture enriches a film that's already ripe with layers and memorable moments, providing a hopeful counterpoint to the story's doomed ambiance and

fortuitous location are all factors, but they can't fully explain the ineffable quality that truly affecting buildings possess. Ultimately, there is no formula for a great building.

Living in New York, I constantly notice buildings and their details. The effect such discoveries can have is remarkable: unpaid bills become a little less troubling when I see the Chrysler Building; one look at the spectacular Woolworth tower and relationship problems shrink in importance. By the same token, some buildings can have the opposite result. Every time I take a bus upstate, I can't help thinking that Manhattan's Port Authority Terminal has to be among the most demoralizing buildings anywhere (hospitals and jails excluded).

While the emotional nature of my response to architecture ought to pre-



Scene from the 2008 film *Dark Knight*: “An impossibly elegant bunker with raw concrete walls and a low, luminous ceiling” © Warner Bros.

Heath Ledger's sinister deranged villain. For a few subconscious seconds, the strategically chosen buildings transport the viewer to faraway cities, glittering towers, and aeries. In short, they evoke a better existence and promise a happier ending. Architecture can have that effect. A good building — whether real, remembered, or fake (the Batman bunker doesn't exist other than as an expensive film set) — has the power to alter a person's mood, like Prozac or alcohol does. But what exactly makes for an emotionally impactful building? The architect's skill, the quality of materials, and a

clude its explanation in rational terms, I do nonetheless wonder if there's an underlying logic to my affection for certain buildings and visceral distaste for others. One could argue that my feelings for buildings are based on pure aestheticism and are thus no different from my obsession with, say, Catherine Deneuve's face, or a new pair of Margiela sneakers. I would like to think it's more complicated than that. To find out, I've put together a rambling list of some of the buildings that matter to me.

No place marks a young mind like Mexico City, where I spent every summer

when I was growing up. Seen from the backseat of my uncle's Volkswagen Beetle, the immense metropolis was by turns rapturously beautiful, repulsively ugly, colorful, refined, and rough. Architectural gems stood out from the indistinct jumble of concrete: Baroque churches, International Style skyscrapers, Italianate opera houses, and big, un-adorned walls, both modern and Aztec, all amid the Brutalist futurism that Paul Verhoeven would later use so effectively in *Total Recall*. Two of the wonders I found there are still among my favorite buildings anywhere: the Metropolitan Cathedral and the Minería Palace. The cathedral embodies better than any other edifice I know a very appealing quality of permanence. Despite the rich ornamentation of its façade, this ponderous building, with its two heavy bell towers and unpretentious gray stone, exudes nothing so much as virility, a symbol of its Spanish builders' triumph over paganism (and over the glorious, thriving city that was Tenochtitlán, razed to make way for it). The cathedral is particularly impressive at night, when its exterior is dramatically lit, making it seem even more monumental.

Few things are stranger — simultaneously humbling and elating — than to stand next to several-hundred-thousand tons and 500 centuries of ecclesiastical history. The building's solidity is reassuring, its perceived masculinity attractive. The idea — perhaps naïve — that this building isn't going anywhere anytime soon is especially comforting in times of change. If the cathedral represents enduring power, the Palacio de Minería is a study in sober elegance. A pedimented shoe box of perfect proportions, its enviable poise makes me go back to it every time I'm in town. My fondness for it puts me in illustrious company: a fellow fan was Baron Alexander von Humboldt, one of the most erudite and well-traveled men of the early 19th century (it is said only Napoleon Bonaparte was more famous at the time), and the Mexican government itself honored the palace by featuring it on a 500-peso bill in 1936. I've never quite understood how the palace's architect, the Valencia-born Manuel Tolsá, achieved the building's harmonious effect, but it must have something to do with mathematics.

Mathematical rigor is a recurring element in buildings I find inspiring. Geometry clearly informs the design of Richard Meier's Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt-am-Main,

the dimly drab German city I called home as a high-school student. There's a couple of reasons why I love this building so much: a) Meier composed the museum as a series of white near-cubes arranged along a grid in the garden of an existing 19th-century villa; b) seen from a moving car from the opposite bank of the River Main — my weekly escape route from adolescent boredom — the museum becomes a tableau of gleaming, white planes framed by green trees. I love how a very brainy plan produces something that's so eloquent and simple, like a Rothko canvas.



Catherine Deneuve, ca. 1968:
“Feelings for buildings based on pure aestheticism”

Geometry is also at the root of my affection for an office tower that few would consider to be a candidate for greatness: the Torhaus, also in Frankfurt, by the late rationalist master Oswald Matthias Ungers, a man obsessed with squares. There's something naïvely futuristic about this building — it has been likened to a guillotine, but I've always thought it looks more like a bad Tetris move. To me, it stands for a romanticized notion of the future, like the Jetsons cartoon or skywalks. It's also a gateway to the city's exhibition center, whose yearly book fair and biennial car shows — massive affairs that make the dreary town exciting for a week — were among the highlights of my nerdy teenage years. Still, what is it about geometry that speaks to me on a deeper level? I guess I feel drawn to the idea of order that it conveys, the illusion that life — inherently messy and unpredictable — can be as neatly arranged as Meier's cubes or Ungers's squares.

Geometry and architectural memory come together at the Palais Royal, in Paris. Its rectangular, building-lined garden is perhaps my favorite architectural space anywhere. On frequent trips to

the French capital when I was a kid, my mother and I went to the Palais to play and read among the park's fountains, gravel, and trees. While I had a sense that our playground was unusually chic, back then it felt quaint, almost like a secret place only we knew about. Little did I know about its gilded history, or that it would become one of the world's most fashionable shopping addresses, as it has in the last couple of years. Some 15 years later, I returned to Paris as a student and museum intern. Living in a tiny rented room in posh but boring St.-Germain-des-Prés, I crossed the river on many nights to the more exciting Marais district or to go dance at Le Queen and Les Bains, the city's hottest *boîtes* at the time. It was on such nighttime excursions that I found another perfect courtyard, not far from the Palais-Royal: the Louvre's Renaissance-style Cour Carrée, a haunting square (Ungers must have loved it) that seems made for a reenactment of a famous scene in the Fassbinder film *Martha*. The movie's wordless sequence is fabulously over-the-top: a man and a woman check each other out intensely as the camera does a double 360-degree spin around them.



The Torhaus in Frankfurt by the late Oswald Matthias Ungers:
“A man obsessed with squares”

is very attractive, with its sweeping curved façade and projecting balcony floors that slice it into thin horizontal bands. Visually, the overall effect is almost abstract, and magically unmarred by practical concerns: railings, for example, seem absent (they're there, just transparent, thanks to Plexiglas). But much of its appeal stems from the glamorous associations its appearance triggers in my imagination. With its cosmopolitan air, the complex looks to me as if it were transplanted from Rio de Janeiro. When I get carried away, I imagine Truman Capote hosting a swell party in one of the pent-



Palacio de Minería as pictured on Mexico's 500-peso bill: “The pedimented shoe box of perfect proportions is a study in sober elegance”

But choreographed melodrama and a clever tracking shot wouldn't be nearly as effective without the great architecture surrounding it all, an old Roman palazzo that heightens the encounter's significance. The Cour Carrée, with its endlessly repeating columns inching in from all sides, has a similar effect: it's so theatrical, it appears to exist solely as a stage for grand, portentous moments.

Some buildings are sexy. This is certainly the case with 200 Central Park South, in Manhattan. The building itself

houses overlooking the park, or Lee Radziwill slipping into the lobby for an important appointment. (These are pure fantasies — neither Capote nor Radziwill ever set foot in 200 Central Park South as far as I know. In reality, as I was recently told by Luis Rodriguez, the gentle Colombian who has operated the building's elevators for 20 years, the most notable tenants during its heyday were Jane Fonda, bikini icon Raquel Welch, and the great Muhammad Ali.) I feel similarly about Eero Saarinen's main

terminal at Dulles Airport in Washington, D.C., with its expansive glass curtains, low-hanging roof, and tilted columns. There's nothing remotely phallic or, for that matter, openly erotic about it, but what makes it terribly sexy in my eyes is how it perfectly conjures up a time when air travel was deemed the most sophisticated thing on earth. I'm old enough to remember that time, the Pan Am lounges, soignée attendants and, curiously, a purple carpet I cannot forget in some Florida terminal where I once changed flights. With both the Central Park South building and Dulles, my infatuation is essentially aspirational, a remnant of a time when I dreamt of owning a Citroën DS convertible and looking like a mix between Delon and Belmondo. These buildings exude the sex appeal of my ideal self.

Indeed, sometimes all it takes for me to fall in love with a building is one irresistible trait: a certain material, color, or unexpected detail. It helps if the rest of the building isn't half bad either. The impossibly sharp southwest corner on I.M. Pei's National Gallery in Washington gets me that way each time, as do the skinny chrome pillars in Mies van der Rohe's Czech villas. Another weakness is spiral staircases, above all the Vatican Museum's double helix and the well of light inside the Basurto building, an apartment tower and Art Deco gem in Mexico City. Who wouldn't find a giant snail trapped in a building pleasurable? Travertine always does the job for me, too. Its porous texture and tea-stained look are just some of the reasons I'm an unabashed admirer of New York's underappreciated Lincoln Center. While the complex is full of surprises, I especially love the slatted sidewalls of the Metropolitan Opera. The tall, slender stone slabs add rhythm and openness to what would otherwise be a bland, forbidding

wall. They look great from Damrosch Plaza, and even better when seen from the Juilliard School's balcony at night, when the Opera's starburst Lobmeyr chandeliers make it glow magically from within.

Location, location, location. Certain buildings I obsess about I've never actually seen. The archaeological site of Monte Alban in southern Mexico, the ancient city of Petra in Jordan, and Louis Kahn's Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, are examples. Thanks in part to their setting, these places embody lofty, ideal notions that are at the heart of their



200 Central Park South: "An abstract overall effect, unmarred by practical concerns" © Ian Tong



Luis Barragán's home in Tacubaya: "Shockingly simple, almost primitive" © A. S. Portugal/Barragán Foundation

stayed with me since I first discovered them in books, my fascination with them always having felt more profound while at the same time harder to explain. These walls are not gimmicky and self-conscious, the way the tower that looks like a Tetris block is, nor are they coldly calculated like my sparkly white Meier museum. In fact, they are shockingly simple, almost primitive, with color as their only luxury. Some of this work could even be expected to be depressing for its austerity, not exactly what one would call a celebration of life — yet it still manages to be mysteriously uplifting. A visit to the architect's own home in Tacubaya, for instance, reveals a secluded shelter of such monastic asceticism that it's closer in spirit to the severity of the Escorial than to the playfulness of Barragán's beloved Alhambra. The Iberian influence is striking: the Mexican master's work has always reminded me of a particularly stark production of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* that I saw on TV at a young age and have never forgotten because of the visual power of its set, which consisted of little more than heavy, bare walls. I've found the same crude thickness in Barragán's walls, and it never fails to make me happy. Perhaps the happiness I experience is a case of introspection through art, a realization that it's O.K. to be alone. It was Barragán, after all, who said:

Only in intimate communion with solitude may man find himself. Solitude is good company and my architecture is not for those who fear or shun it.

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Spiral staircase inside the Basurto building: "A giant snail trapped in a building" © Monica Murillo Gumi

importance to me. They seem to exist outside of the realm of time, and represent a sense of universality, meaning, and perfection that's almost extraterrestrial. It helps that two of them are situated on elevated platforms, one overlooking the valley of Oaxaca, the other by the Pacific. Of course, I might be disappointed once I actually visit, given my impossibly high expectations.

Still on a higher plane, it seems fitting to conclude my tour with the work of Luis Barragán. Projects like Las Arboledas and San Cristóbal have