

IDEAS IN MOTION

Architectural Pilgrimage

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Abstract

Architectural pilgrimage is implicitly appreciated in architecture and design circles, especially by students who are encouraged to “travel to architecture,” with the focus on the Grand Tour as a means of architectural exploration. However, the expression has not been made explicit in the fields of architectural history, pilgrimage studies, tourism research, and mobility studies. I explore how pilgrimage to locations of modern architectural interest affects and informs pilgrims’ and architects’ conceptions of buildings and the pilgrimage journey itself. Drawing initially on a European architectural pilgrimage, the personal narrative highlights the importance of self-reflection and introspection when observing the built environment and the role of language in mediating processes of movement through and creation of architectural place-space.

Keywords

Alvar Aalto, architecture, architourism, Grand Tour, language and architecture, language and place, linguistic pilgrimage

Travel to and through the Built

When I visited the Finnish architect and designer Alvar Aalto’s house in Helsinki in March 2013 (Figure 1), the guide asserted that when Aalto had made the same page in an architectural textbook as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and J. J. Oud, he had ostensibly become one of the modern masters. I traveled to several of the Finnish master’s buildings on focused mobilization, engaged *architectural pilgrimage*. At the Alvar Aalto Museum, in Aalto’s hometown of Jyväskylä, approximately 250 kilometers north of Helsinki, a short film installation by visual artist Elena Näsänen titled *Passerby* (2013) (Finnish: *Ohikulkija*) played continuously and hypnotically as I perused exhibits of Aalto’s work.¹ The museum was designed by Aalto himself, and the displays honor his achievements. The film is an introspective journey that follows a young Japanese woman who is on architectural pilgrimage



to and through Aalto's work. The woman spends a day and a night in Helsinki—*Le Petit Tour* as opposed to *Le Grand Tour*.

In addition to Aalto's urban domicile, my architectural pilgrimage took me to Finlandia Hall (Figure 2) and Jyväskylä University, where I took a sauna in the swimming hall he designed. Aalto designed and built hundreds of saunas, believing in the spiritual connection between the sauna as a structure, a concept, and its ability to link

the Finnish people with their natural environment. Had I had more time I would have traveled to Espoo and other accessible locations within the time of my pilgrimage to see more of Aalto's work. I aspired to transform a small Grand Tour into a more developed architectural pilgrimage, into evolved and involved architourism. However, since returning and collecting my thoughts on architectural pilgrimage, my realizations and understandings about the boundaries which cross the physical mobilization required for



Figure 2: Finlandia, Helsinki (March 2013).



Figure 1: The author at Alvar Aalto's house, Helsinki (March 2013).

corporeal pilgrimage and more subtle processes and stages of abstract pilgrimage became advantageously blurred. I can visit Aalto's work, and indeed that of any architect, as much in the physical as the printed, the substantial, and the virtual, the gross and the ideal.

I proffer that there exist significant connections between architectural pilgrimage and mobility studies, a concept that surprisingly has not received much attention in any discipline. I go beyond work on "architourism" and space, travel, and architecture.² I am concerned with relationships

between representations of buildings—private and public—and their emplacement within a particular environment's cultural and linguistic space. This emplacement can be visited and accessed through pilgrimages of various forms, and such relationships are relevant to how we construct and are constructed by place and the built. The definition and expression of architectural pilgrimage I employ is not entirely dissimilar to other processes of secular and sacred pilgrimage.³ Architectural pilgrimage is more than architectural tourism-cum-architourism. It is an involved journey where architecture, mobility, tourism, journeying, and thinking intersect, an active, self-based, and world-revealed seeking through the agency of architecture and design.

Mobilization through Architectural Pilgrimage

Humans can move. Most often buildings cannot. However, the ability for buildings to move us forms a large element in our appreciation of the aesthetics of the built environment. Where language is a useful metaphor for exploring the action of speaking and writing, perceiving and conceiving architecture as (a) language is productive in helping us gain a better understanding of architectural environments and how they work. As a linguist I assume many metaphorical similarities between language and architecture—buildings are as much written as built, buildings are stone books, buildings are linguistic culture molded into glass and steel; before books there were buildings. Just as some linguists contend grammar is a frozen history of a people's thought and cognitive processes, one can hold that buildings are frozen culture in time and space. Architectural spaces are literal concrete spaces within the confines of a reified and parallel discourse and semioticization. Our buildings and the cultural and linguistic landscapes they create comprise a semiotic landscape, a potential battleground of concretized ideas.

The modern architectural canon presents many examples of nascent architectural outlooks made concrete through pilgrimage. One of the best-known examples involving the documentation of a group of architectural pilgrims associated with studying a particular place's architecture is Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*.⁴ Theirs is a work concerned, among other things, with the role of architectural symbolism in how we move through and perceive places. Possibly one of the most ill-understood written works in the repertoire of modernism, postmodernism, and architectural rhetoric in general, *Learning from Las Vegas* opened the floodgates and set the precedent for not only what could constitute a student-based architectural pilgrimage, but how to mobilize architecture and design and take these disciplines outside of the classroom. What began as a studio trip for design students from the Yale School of Art and Architecture in 1968 to

observe the Las Vegas Strip and examine the possibility of forming judgment-free perceptions of architecture became a (postmodern) architectural cult classic. The Strip can speak. The Strip does speak. It can speak to us about ourselves and how we build and how we perceive and judge what we build. The Strip manifests as architecture in the physical and the intellectual, in thought-based and emotionally founded movement.

Conceiving

Architectural pilgrimage involves embarking on a pilgrimage into any architect's or designer's intellectual past and possible present. This mobilization can be both a nourishingly practical and emotional experience, as well as connecting us to theoretical implications. Designers, landscape architects, architects, linguists, and the mobile citizenry are all engaged in creating and maintaining ideas of place and reconciling the contradictions between built or social environments and natural environments. Whatever these creations may be, they are all to an extent pilgrimage and mobility-based considerations of place-space. We travel to sites on field trips and we travel to places to look at buildings. When we travel to new or old places to see buildings, we are partaking in place-creation relationships. We take part in the physical and intellectual interpreting and reinvention of these buildings.

Traveling to and through architecture is participating in cultural mixing and regeneration. The International Style and its many realized projects demonstrate how cross-cultural exchange can be visited through architectural pilgrimage. Many architects built in foreign lands, and their work was appraised beyond the places where they were built. One of the most famous buildings of the modern movement, Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavillion (1929), is a structure and symbol where the original can only be visited through photographic means. The original was dismantled in early 1930 and has now been painstakingly reconstructed by a group of Spanish architects between 1983 and 1986 from black-and-white images and original plans. Do we visit the building in its original integrity when we visit the now permanent Barcelona Pavilion, or should we abide by the strict adherence to architectural purity and clarity of form required by the architect in this building by returning to the original artistic representations and his original published plans? Architectural pilgrimage reveals a different project brief of architecture and our engagement with(in) it. The architectures we traverse appear less about building and more about understanding liminalities and the fuzziness of categories and boundaries. Completed in 1968, Mies van der Rohe's monumental New National Gallery (Neue Nationalgalerie) in Berlin exposes this haziness between the built (physical) and the mind (abstract). The architect never saw his completed work. However, he is present in this

realized architectural thought form. A trip to take in the master's work is as much a pilgrimage of ideas as a reconceiving and reinvigorating of the building's actual form.

Architectural Pilgrimage and Language: Before Books There Were Buildings

I apply and extend the study of architectural types to linguistic levels. Taking the lexicon, there are architectural words—windows, columns, cantilevers—while buildings can make obvious lexical statements about power, control, wealth, and violence. Buildings must have syntax, a structure, and be ordered. They are put together according to rules and methods of construction and fabrication. The law of gravity can be compared to laws of grammar and sentence construction. Extending the syntax analogy to buildings and built environments, the human-made exists either in consonance or dissonance within the “sentence” of nature. Green design, ecohousing, and sustainable communities aspire to produce and exist within natural architectural syntax. Structural properties of buildings inform the semantics of architecture. Different materials, placements, ordering, size, and orientation alter the message and meaning portrayed in a building and an architect's work. The meaning of buildings can transform over time, and our judgment of them can become enhanced or tainted with age—ours and the building's—and experience. And these meanings are colored by increased knowledge and more refined readings of architectural language permitted and permeated through architectural pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage aspect of traveling to and discovering places of architectural interest through scientific observation—for example, when on fieldwork—and architectural study—for instance, during building documentation and aesthetic endeavoring—poses the role of ecological engagement in processes of site creation and reinterpretation through practices of pilgrimage. Certain types of architecture tend to be more embedded or suited to the surrounding environment than others. Le Corbusier's Chandigarh is less embedded than other examples of colonial architecture on the Indian subcontinent (e.g., the UNESCO World Heritage town of Kandy in the mountain region of Sri Lanka and the former French enclave of Pudicherry [formerly Pondicherry] in Tamil Nadu, India). This champions the possibility that there is a direct relationship between the built architectural (non)vernacular of a place, the spoken or cultural vernacular of the built, and the ways the built in a particular environment are spoken about and acted on in specific environments. Processes of architectural embedding take place both as an architectural fact—buildings are required and need to be built—and through a cultural and spatial need. Language and space need to be used to describe environments.

Building Names and Building Names: Ending the Journeying

The cultural economy of attributing history and names to buildings ascribes a defined cultural and linguistic marking of identity on architectural form and space. These names are both part of and separate from the building. Big-name architects such as Gropius and their associated famed buildings—for example, the Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany—can be traveled to in the realm of the physical (corporeal), abstract (ideas, images), and virtual (online). Internet video sites offer us ways of viewing buildings virtually, enabling moving through buildings as remote architectural pilgrimage. Although perhaps merely extending older mediums of nonphysical travel rather than being fundamentally different, online means offer for the first time the possibility to visit buildings without the need for physical travel. Such changes in the possibilities of architectural pilgrimage and mobilities concur with other advances in cyberpilgrimage,⁵ science fiction pilgrimage,⁶ and amusement park pilgrimage.⁷ They all reinterpret the Durkheimian notion of encountering the sacred as nonordinary experience.⁸ Like the centuries of secular pilgrimages, such as when younger authors visit the homes of their literary favorites or when aspiring seekers follow the footsteps of admired explorers, online architectural pilgrimage reinterprets and reinforces a movement away from a pilgrimage invented and warranted by religion to one borne of fresh high-tech ideals and industrialized journeying.

Architecture and the names of buildings and the places the buildings exist within can exist embedded in the landscape. I am concerned with a double meaning, both the verbal and nominal of how *building names*—the action of creating building names (verbal) and the existence of linguistic ephemera representing and being connected to specific architectural form (nominal)—are managed and thought about in terms of the spatial and architectural domains they inhabit. These names as places and buildings as representations existing in space can form pilgrimages themselves. The names of buildings and architects' names can inhabit spaces just as much as the physical buildings. Mies van der Rohe's aesthetic is ever present at the New National Gallery in Berlin. Gropius and the Bauhaus and Aalto and Finlandia can in some circumstances be synonymic. Aalto's own museum is named Alvar Aalto Museum. These involve heavy cultural weight and social tagging, with a building's or architect's history associated in parallel with particular people, names, and events. Some names, buildings, and cultures belong in specific places; some do not. Like the Grand Tour idea, architectural pilgrimage offers means to access, solidify, and reconcile relationships involving personal and building names and what the buildings themselves actually represent. Issues of the belonging of buildings and connexions of language and buildings to a place can be mediated through a large architectural pilgrimage (e.g. *Le Grand*

Tour—through India or Europe) or a smaller and more intricate architectural pilgrimage (e.g., *Le Petit Tour*—directed movement to one particular building and its architectural and linguistic materialization).

Architectural pilgrimage can be a mythologizing of pasts. Buildings have myths surrounding them—those who built them are associated with the political and social histories of their being built. Chandigarh is as much Le Corbusier’s as Le Corbusier is Chandigarh’s.⁹ Pilgrimage and visitation opens up the buildings for public and personal scrutiny, a probing encompassing both self-in-the-world and self-abstracted-from-the-world relations. Not only does the architectural pilgrim potentially document architectural history and possibly bring about its reinterpretation, he or she brings forth events from the past and stages them in terms of their relevance to present scientific and cultural endeavors. Architectural pilgrimage is as much mobility creating, mobility creation, and mobility participation in active research as it is a method of cultural documentation.

I maintain architectural pilgrimage is both an activation process involving travel and mobilization and a practice of travel to culture and undeniably “travel to language.” Differing modes of travel and methods of communication to and through architecture lead to diverse pilgrimage outcomes. As a lover and teacher of architecture, linguistics, and architectural and design language, I hope the virtual mobility offered to a new generation of architectural pilgrims will be successfully amalgamated with actual architectural travel involving tactile and less abstract engagement and movement-cum-pilgrimage. It is in the fusion of virtual pilgrimage and physical travel that richer and more developed possibilities are offered to the modern architectural pilgrim.

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Notes

1. Elena Näsänen, *Ohikulkija* [Passerby] (Jyväskylä, Finland: Alvar Aalto Museum, 2013).

2. Jilly Traganou and Miodrag Mitrašinović's edited volume *Travel, Space, Architecture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) presents recent work into relationships involving architectural tourism and mobility.
3. Among modern work on pilgrimage, religion, and spatial encounters, Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman's *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), David Conradson's "The Experiential Economy of Stillness: Places of Retreat in Contemporary Britain," in *Therapeutic Landscapes*, ed. Allison Williams (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 33–48, and Peter Margry's "The Pilgrimage to Jim Morrison's Grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery: The Social Construction of Sacred Space," in *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred*, ed. Peter Jan Margry (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 143–171, comprise work similar to my conceptualizing of pilgrimage and the sacred.
4. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbol of Architectural Form*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).
5. Connie Hill-Smith, "Cyberpilgrimage: A Study of Authenticity, Presence and Meaning in Online Pilgrimage Experiences," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 21 (2009): 1–16; Mark MacWilliams, "Virtual Pilgrimages on the Internet," *Religion* 32 (2002): 315–335.
6. Jennifer E. Porter, "Pilgrimage and the IDIC Ethic: Exploring Star Trek Convention Attendance as Pilgrimage," in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, ed. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 160–179.
7. Joy Hendry, "Old Gods, New Pilgrimages? A Whistle Stop Tour of Japanese International Theme Parks," in *Pilgrimages and Spiritual Quests in Japan*, ed. María Dolores Rodríguez del Alisal, Peter Ackermann, and Dolores P. Martinez (London: Routledge, 2007), 84–93.
8. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912; repr., New York: Free Press, 1965); Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986).
9. Vikramaditya Prakash, *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier: The Struggle for Modernity in Postcolonial India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).