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## **Silence in Architecture**

YVONNE FARRELL

From the first human voices in caves, the acoustic properties of space and the impact of materials on space continues to affect us all. With the earliest human footprints on the mud floor of caves still visible, we can imagine the collective sounds of our early human ancestors amplified by the containing cave walls. Imagine the sounds and its opposite: the *silence* within those cave spaces. What meaning and power must silence have had to those early humans? What magic did it hold?

The acoustic properties of architecture describe how sound is trapped, held, amplified or softened by the texture of surfaces, by the volume, by the shape of an enclosure, by the quality of the atmosphere.

When landscape and human ingenuity combine, we have the proof of how sound and silence can be orchestrated. Ancient Greece amphitheatres are carefully selected, acoustic containers of modified stone, nestled into hillsides. Sitting in the silence of an empty amphitheatre, the combination of the carved rock, geometry and sky act together to hold space, time and silence.

The amphitheatre at Epidaurus, built in the late 4<sup>th</sup>. century CE – a perfect example of human engineering, symmetry, and beauty – proves a deep understanding of the physics of acoustics. The architect, Polykleitos, made this stone container for an audience of 14,000 people, which held music, singing and dramatic games, that were included in the worship of Asclepius, the Greek God of Medicine. In ancient Greece, observation of dramatic spectacles was thought of as a means of healing patients, as it was believed that the acoustics positively affected mental and physical health.

The largest amphitheatre ever built, with its capacity for 50,000 spectators, the 1<sup>st</sup>. century CE Colosseum holds silence. It's oval shape, it's travertine and brick-faced concrete, it's framing of the sky combine to create a spectacular arena. Imagine what the silence felt like, if you were the person standing in the centre of that arena, waiting for the 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' verdict from the surrounding crowd.

The Pantheon, embedded in the complex web of streets of Rome, originally built in 27 CE, has an extraordinarily powerful architectural presence. Entered off a small piazza through a portico, it is a circular space, in plan and section, with a simple, small

circular opening in its roof, through which Roman light transforms the interior and rain falls to be gathered in the water ‘nostrils’ carved into the centre of the stone floor beneath. This space is one of the great examples of architecture in the world. This human construction is a building I visit whenever I am in Rome. Each time it continues to display its magnificence in its spatial simplicity. On a New Year’s Eve several years ago, I had the opportunity to visit that wonderful building again. As we entered, a choir happened to be singing. That familiar space, which I had only ever experienced as a silent space, was transformed. It was perfect. The void was full of the beauty and power of ephemeral human voices in harmony. Stone and marble were transformed, melted into one vessel – a perfect acoustic container.

Architecture could be described as *a silent language that speaks*. It is the role of architecture to translate need into built form, into the silent language of space.

In 2002, we won a competition for a new building to add to the existing campus of Bocconi University in Milan, Italy. Following the completion of its construction, the University held an Open Day on 1 November 2008 for the public to have an opportunity to walk in and experience the new building for themselves. The University had commissioned a photographer to record the building process throughout the course of its construction. With the agreement of a resident, over the years the photographer had recorded each stage of building from her apartment windows overlooking the site. During that Open Day, Shelley McNamara and I were invited by the photographer to meet that resident, who had kindly permitted access to her home. We went with him to her apartment and met her and her extended family. We invited her to come with us to visit the new Bocconi building. Initially, she declined, but when we were leaving she changed her mind and agreed to come with us. We made our way to the entrance level, then went down together to the 5 meters below ground level and further down to the 9 meters below ground level. Reaching there and taking my arm, she said in Italian: “the structure is immense, but it embraces you!” With these words, it showed us that she had understood the building perfectly. In its own silent language, the building had spoken to her directly and – what is deeply significant – she had the ability to articulate her physical and emotional response to the new building.

Castelvecchio in Verona, Italy is a wonderful overlap of old and contemporary spaces stitched together by the Venetian architect, Carlo Scarpa, each era complimenting the other. Once when visiting this beautiful place, I turned towards a tiny stairs with beautifully crafted steps and had the distinct experience of hearing the silent stairs say : “Yvonne! Walk up me!” In a clear and unambiguous way its silent language communicated. On another occasion, late one evening as I returned to Berlin from Hannover, some distance from my hotel I got off at the wrong station by mistake. It was dark. I was tired. I looked up and beside me was an imposing structure. It was menacing. It made me feel vulnerable. Maybe it was because I was lost, alone, tired and

it was dark and late at night or maybe I was experiencing exactly what the silent language of that structure had originally intended to convey?

### **Architectural ideas can be silenced**

The Bauhaus was a place of making, of doing, of thinking, where the workshop and the studio were the focus of education. Existing between 1919 and 1933, the Bauhaus was viewed negatively by the Nazi regime. In April 1933, police arrived with trucks and closed the school, carrying off some of the Bauhaus members. This modernist utopia was silenced by a regime that considered the whole spirit of the Bauhaus as degenerate. Even though The Bauhaus only lasted for fourteen years, it is extraordinary that it still lasts. Its work and values were not silenced and after all these years still appear fresh and contemporary. In *Bauhaus Art as Life Exhibition* catalogue of one of the world's most famous art school, Kate Bush, Head of Art Galleries at the Barbican Centre, London writes:

The Bauhaus was inspiring not just because of the extraordinary group of brilliant , visionary people who worked and made art there, but because it was fuelled by idealism and a commitment to creativity and experiment that remains, in our market-driven times, ever more relevant.

The sculptor, Anish Kapoor in an essay entitled: *Void, Silence and Transition* in Sophie Walker's book: *The Japanese Garden*, talks about the void garden which he maintains holds more space and in doing so enlarges time and silence. Referring to the Rinzai Zen temple of Daitoku-ji and the garden of the Mind at Tokai-an Tofuku-ji Zen temple in Kyoto, he writes:

Something is happening: an event takes place as we look. The object in transition is not static, yet it may be still. It is my contention that this quality of the inbetween objects induces silence. Silence, then is the occupation of space with self-reflection. In the self-reflective flow to and from meaning, silence happens. This, like the void, is silence in immanence. It is silence pregnant with possibility.

During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, my garden became very important to me. It became a place where Nature somehow took on the solid form of sound, which held silence at bay. The buzz of a lone bumble bee, a blackbird's melody, a wren's thrill, the rustle of silver birch leaves punctuated the silence. On my walks to Sandymount beach close by, when I stood on the sea shore, I became aware that there are intermittent moments between folding waves where silence exists.

YVONNE FARREL

Walking through the empty streets of Dublin during that pandemic lockdown, like everyone throughout the world, I witnessed silence in its eery form, its lonely-for-people form. The empty buildings did their best to hold the city, doing it by their very presence – their empty, eye-socket facades enclosing the streets and squares. The silence of the streets emphasised the very thing that makes cities so special. Silence told the story of what was missing: people and the hustle and bustle of daily life.

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**Ascolta l'audio**