



# The Style of Substance

Architecture for a Post-Material Culture

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## Ceremony

*Handwashing sink in entry hall: Villa Savoye, Poissy, France  
Le Corbusier, 1929*

Those who desire or appreciate architecture sometimes forget that the building does not do all the work. Many people (certainly, those in the critical press) believe that a good building should be a thing of *stunning* beauty and meaning.

While I can enjoy and respect stunning architecture, I believe that a good building more quietly actuates attention to the practice of everyday life, and as a result idealizes the possibilities of pleasures and insights within our existence.



*House of the Infinite: Cadiz, Spain.*

*Alberto Campo Baeza Architect, 2014. Photo ©Javier Callejas*

A good building is a ceremony: it lightly formalizes the patterns by which we engage in our life, allows us to meet ourselves through our activities, and to realize that our life itself is the thing of beauty and meaning.

As the space of the room is to its physical walls, a building may be more about what it is not than what it is. Such buildings are about nothing and about everything. In modern literary works by authors like James Joyce or especially Virginia Woolf<sup>18</sup>, a kind of artistic alchemy allows the inner life and the most ordinary activities an otherwise indescribable appreciation: as an animal and as a human, as an individual and as part of the collective. It does this by leaving space, by saying less. There is only attentive perception and little intellectual discourse in these works. The reader is left to resonate with accurate impressions of being and discover a similar consciousness within themselves. It is found in the act of reading, not the book as object.

The “presence” of a great building is realized through the presence of the inhabitant. A building can permit its inhabitants to feel fully present by a quiet emptiness. This can include more open physical space, actual emptiness, or the fact that the design is unobtrusive, non-assertive, and without a fixed agenda.

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<sup>18</sup> For example, Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, or *Mrs. Dalloway*



Consciousness is unobstructed by the architecture and, by extension, being is less obstructed by thinking. Physically and metaphorically, these spaces are characterized by less figure and more ground.

Within our enclosure, a single activity is freed from imposed context as if upon a nearly empty stage (a blank slate) or upon an altar (something made for specific activities, like bathing or cooking).

Please suspend disbelief for a moment and imagine some normal activities are outdoors and that there is no building at all, A dining room as a picnic, a living room conversation in a forest clearing, a bedroom under a tree with pillows, blankets, and a lover. Back away from these temporary events and consider the substantial life in these “made environments.” They are spontaneous creations and present a poetic instance of wholly human moments.

Design a building to enhance the human contents of the moment. For instance, allow a table with wine, food, flowers, place settings, people, and what is in their hearts and minds to be alive, with little else. *This* is the substance of even the most dramatic building.

Inside, with filtered awareness of the world outside, the immediacy of activities is freed, with enough quiet surrounding space to leave room for self-reflection and appreciation of the inner and outer life. We are safe and attentive. The ceremonies are present to an individual consciousness, but they seamlessly connect to the collective state of all humanity, all animals, and all nature. We are not an ephemeral fragment but a part of a continuous and eternal whole.



*Dressing and bedroom: original portion of Elghammar Manor, Bjornlunda, Sweden*

*As in some modern literature, a kind of artistic alchemy allows the inner life and the most ordinary activities an otherwise indescribable appreciation.*