

MUSEUM MAKING

NARRATIVES, ARCHITECTURES,
EXHIBITIONS

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BEYOND NARRATIVE: DESIGNING EPIPHANIES

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to move through a treatment of the role of narrative in the creation of architectural and cultural experiences, while at the same time exploring the limitations of narrative as it has been understood and used in recent practices.¹ I will draw upon a variety of sources and examples to outline the definitions of narrative in relation to architecture, philosophy, psychology, science, music, and other fields, and then go on to introduce the notion of epiphany as a goal that can take us beyond narrative to meaning making in the design of both exhibitions and buildings.

I will attempt to demonstrate how specific built experiences utilize narrative to embody meaning. In particular, I will cite churches, concert halls, and other purpose/concept/polemic-driven structures that have been exemplars of embodiment. However, I will try to amplify the goal of meaning making by expanding on the idea of epiphany as a particular, revelatory moment that is the cumulative result of already received information. In so doing, I will explore the possibility that a spatial experience can grow organically from content and intent, and propose that the achievement of epiphany is only possible if the creator has an understanding of how the participant might respond.

Had Enough of Narrative?

A word or an idea can be so overused that it starts to lose all its meaning or begins to mean its opposite. I still remember when bad meant bad, before it started meaning good. I used to enjoy being an architect, before I had to read about someone being the ‘architect of the economic meltdown’, or the ‘architect of the attacks on the World Trade Center’ or the ‘architect of the Iraq war’. And, years ago, when I stumbled upon narrative as an idea to describe and codify a critical organizational and conceptual aspect of the kind of communication and experience we seek to engender through design, I thought I had uncovered the Holy Grail. And perhaps I had. I have spent many years preaching about the virtues of narrative as a critical and extremely useful – and user-friendly – tool in conceiving and designing built experiences – that is, buildings, exhibitions, public places, environmental graphics, even media and print communication. It became a mainstay in my efforts to promote a larger agenda – that of understanding that all design is interpretation. That what we really seek through design is to impart information: themes and concepts, facts and evidence, and to incite cognition and emotion that will result in understanding and meaning-making; to forge a firm and lasting connection between content and people in order to enrich their lives. And that the link we create to achieve this is the embodiment of that content in the forms that we craft – the environments, the exhibitions, the buildings and the other communicative mediums that can make meaning manifest. And that narrative, as a hard-wired human instinct, is a sure strategy for reaching your intended receiver through a means that is completely intuitive.

1 L. Skolnick, ‘Towards a New Museum Architecture: narrative and representation’ in S. MacLeod (ed.) *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 118-130.

But you know how by the time you hear your favorite cutting-edge music playing in the supermarket (or The Who playing a medley of their greatest hits during the halftime show at last year's Super Bowl) you know it's time to move on? Well, I have heard the word and idea of narrative applied to everything but breakfast cereal and toilet paper. And I'm wondering if it's been so co-opted, distorted and misused that it has lost its speculative edge, and thereby, its operational usefulness.

It has been used as a smokescreen, in this *New York Times* piece:

voice-mail boxes inside Goldman Sachs lit up on January 21st with an unusual message from the bank's Chief Executive – a bit of Wall Street speak that sounded like the makings of a Book on Zen and the art of money-making.

'In a year that proved to have no shortage of story lines, I believe very strongly that performance is the ultimate narrative,' the Chief, Lloyd C. Blankfein, said in the companywide message. He then celebrated the bank's record profits in 2009 and discussed its plans to pay bonuses to its employees.²

This narrative had a happy ending – for Mr. Blankfein. The *Times of London* reported that his bonus might reach \$100 million!³

It has been used as an apologia for the decline in the popularity of a sport in another *Times* article, 'Running Without a Narrative'.

Some have blamed performance enhancing drugs for the loss of American dominance on the roads; others have criticized United States training methods; still others see a shifting of interest to other sports, like lacrosse and soccer. But the real reason for the decline is a failure of narrative.⁴

Of course, we've also observed many more serious efforts to re-position disciplines and re-shape people's understandings of them by sending them through a filter of narrative and having them emerge less arcane, abstract or esoteric. Sometimes. As a means of shaping the teaching of science and making it more effective, the psychologist Jerome Bruner has proclaimed that the 'process of science making is narrative. It consists of spinning hypotheses about nature, testing them, correcting the hypotheses, and getting one's head straight.'⁵

The same subject has been treated by the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, who analyzes science through the lens of narratives and meta-narratives, and argues that the postmodern incredulity toward meta-narratives demands that we resolve the conflict that has always existed between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge if science is to answer to the ultimate criterion of performativity.⁶

2 G. Bowley and Z. Kouwe, 'With Bated Breath, Rivals Await Blankfein's Bonus', *The New York Times*, February 3, 2010, p. B1.

3 Ibid., p. B1.

4 C. Stracher, 'Running Without a Narrative', *The New York Times*, October 30, 2009, p. A21.

5 J. Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 126.

6 J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi. See also E. Skolnick, *The Legitimation of Scientific Knowledge in the Postmodern Age*, place of publication and publisher, October 2009.

And witness the emergence and growth of conferences and programs on narrativity, which further dissect the subject into diverse aspects of the overarching theme. A recent conference held by the State University of New York, Stony Brook, was entitled 'Narrativity' and included sessions on the 'Implications of the Temporal and Spatial Nature of Hypertext Narrative' and 'Metaphor and Memory: Nietzsche's Narrative of Self-Overcoming'.⁷

In the 1970s, the profession of medicine decided that its strictly scientific approach to problem-solving needed to begin taking into account the specific psychological and personal history of patients. Thus was born the narrative medicine movement, which demands an understanding of the highly complex narrative situations among doctors, patients, colleagues and the public, and concerns itself with the phenomenal form in which patients experience ill health and, ultimately, allows for the construction of meaning. It aims not only to validate the experience of the patient, but also to encourage creativity and self-reflection in the physician.

Perhaps less surprisingly, the field of music has embraced the use of narrative. From the program music of Saint-Saens, Ravel and Debussy, to opera, to movie scores, to the recognition by Professor Fred Maus in his essay 'Narratology' that in the late 20th century, music theory and criticism began to explore the possibility of narrativity in non-texted, non-programmatic music.⁸ He observed that these studies lie not just at the intersection of music theory and criticism, but also of semiotics and the philosophical study of expression and representation, and that one of the most compelling aspects of the relationships among these fields stems from their shared purpose of communication.

In 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', Bruner regales us with a list of others who have been working in what he calls 'the vineyards of narratology', including anthropologists, psychologists, linguists and literary theorists.⁹ I could go on and on. As I said before, it is difficult to find an area of study or life which has not been enveloped by, or filtered through the seemingly limitless fabric of narrative.

I guess it's time to set the record straight. I didn't actually set out here to trash narrative. Unlike Antony's treatment of Caesar, I'll probably do more praising than burying. As I mentioned earlier, narrative has been of great help to me in formulating and understanding an approach to making spatial experiences. But let's be clear about one thing. Narrative can never be an end in itself. Our job as designers is to interpret.

7 'Narrativity: 2nd Annual Philosophy and the Arts Conference', New York: Stony Brook University, Masters in Philosophy and the Arts Program, March 2009.

8 F. Maus, 'Narratology, narrativity', *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 2001.

9 J. Bruner, 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1991, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 5.

Narrative as Interpretation

So, if we are to fully appreciate the operative use and potential of narrative as a tool in the work of museum-making, we must understand it as a means of interpretation. We interpret when we explain or conceptualize; when we translate or explain the meaning or significance of something; when we reveal or disclose. And it is well known that for human beings this revelation is often best achieved through storytelling. A story is an 'incident, experience or subject that furnishes or would be interesting material for a narrative'.¹⁰ What Bruner and others have illuminated is the potential for narrative as a form not only to represent reality, but to constitute reality.

The coalescing of this notion had been brewing in me for a long time. But it began to really crystallize several years ago, when I travelled to the University of Leicester to participate in the 'Creative Space' conference. It was billed as an international conference exploring museums and gallery space as a creative medium and was a wide ranging look at the interaction between design and museology. I gave a paper at the time called 'Towards a New Museum Architecture: Narrative and Representation', which was subsequently included in Suzanne MacLeod's book *Reshaping Museum Space*.¹¹ I put forth in that paper that, no less than exhibits, museum architecture is an interpretive medium – one which can communicate ideas and content both general and specific. I suggested that architects must mine each situation to unearth the stories that could form a narrative, and that moving from the more superficial model of representing that narrative to the deeper challenge of embodying it was the surest way of designing an experience that conveyed meaning.

The foundation for accepting narrative as a means to our communications goals is easy to construct. Bruner has extensively explored the meaning of narrative and its foundational role in creating and interpreting human culture. In *Acts of Meaning*, he discusses characteristics of storytelling which relate directly to museums and to design.¹² He focuses on how people learn. Human beings are natural storytellers; they make sense of the world and themselves through narrative, a form shared both by storytelling and history. From the time they are very young, children learn that the way to integrate their own desires with their family's norms and rules is to construct a story about their actions; this push to construct narrative, Bruner maintains, shapes how children acquire language, and the habit persists into adulthood as a primary instrument for making meaning. These storytelling skills ensure our place within human society and probably mean that information which is not structured narratively is more likely to be forgotten. Museum designers, take note!

What becomes clear from this hermeneutic cycle is that if our goal is interpretation, and the most natural mode of communicating is storytelling, then narrative is the architecture that both structures and conveys the intended meaning. In narrative, as in interpretation, we construct by selecting, gathering and reassembling information and evidence within the framework of our own ideas. As interpreters, we may receive content in any range of modes, but we attempt to translate and send the synthesized messages out in a coherent, comprehensible language. Where narrative comes in is in providing the choreographic structure that follows a storyline – a series of events that form a meaningful pattern.

10 "Story." Def. 4. *Third Edition of the American Heritage College Dictionary*. 3rd ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.

11 L. Skolnick, 'Towards a New Museum Architecture', pp. 118-30.

12 J. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

And, as in architecture, the ultimate synthetic manifestation of the intended communication is the constructed experience, which both conveys and embodies meaning.

Given the fact that one can easily substantiate the fundamental role that narrative plays in communication, and if we accept that like every art, architecture communicates wittingly or unwittingly, I have been continually surprised that museums – institutions dedicated to the interpretation of cultural content – have so often been so devoid of appropriate messaging in the design of their buildings. Certainly, we can partially ascribe this condition to the multiple aims to which museum buildings are put: as isolated artistic expression; as civic monument; as source of community pride; as fundable entity; as destination; and as postcard. And yet, because of or in spite of these myriad demands, there have been attempts by some architects to represent or even embody specific themes in museum buildings: the ethereal mysteries of the cosmos (Figure 1); the chaos and anxiety of the Holocaust (Figure 2) the joy of creativity (Figure 3); and the authentic materiality of the natural sciences (Figure 4).

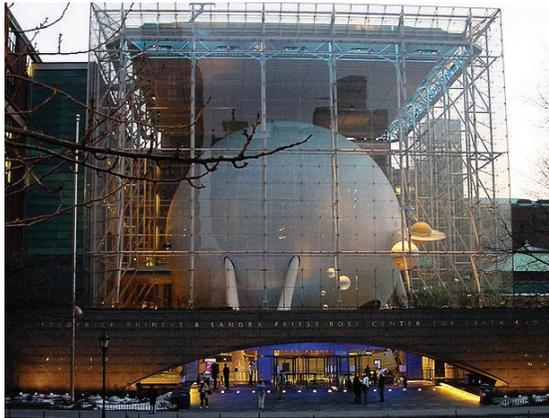


FIGURE 1
The Rose Center for Earth and Space, New York.
Photo: Spherioide, Wikimedia

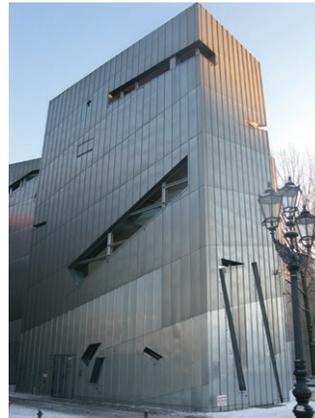


FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4

Beyond Narrative

Still, I find myself plagued by the excruciating possibility that buildings can reach further beyond symbolic representation and fulfill their potential to embody content and meaning. That by employing narrative in a much deeper way, we can reach beyond it. Fortunately, I am not alone. In *The Architecture of Happiness* Alain de Botton reminds us that 'John Ruskin proposed that we seek two things in our buildings. We want them to shelter us. And we want them to speak to us – to speak to us of whatever we find important and need to be reminded of'.¹³ That sounds like narrative to me. But de Botton goes on to say that 'beautiful objects... embody good qualities rather than simply remind us of them'.¹⁴ That 'to call a work of architecture or design beautiful is to recognize it as a rendition of values critical to our flourishing, a transubstantiation of our individual ideas in a material medium'.¹⁵ How much closer to our definitions of interpretation can one get?

In 'The Fiction of Function', Stanford Anderson declares that 'architecture is... a bearer of meaning'.¹⁶ He discusses how fragments of stories are carried in details, how features of buildings reveal function, that building elements have metaphoric qualities: portals loaded with the significance of arrival, windows as the eyes through which a controlled view of the world is afforded. He concludes this treatment by saying that only when an architect has a larger vision do these individual, sometimes unavoidably metaphorical details attain a higher level of organization that we might call a story. So how can a space grow organically from its content and intent? Is it possible to achieve what the painter Francis Bacon spoke of when he posited 'a complete interlocking of image and paint, so that the image is the paint and vice versa'?¹⁷ Can we, as designers, tap into the power of narrative and interpretation as innate human tools used for understanding, as design-generators, and as methods for embodying the conceptual and thematic within the experiential, spatial and material?

For the answer, I had to move away from the museum. I looked to the architecture of religion and music, because in my own experience, those have come the closest to transcending narrative through a synthesis of the cognitive and sensual to embody and communicate meaning. Churches attempt a pure expression of spirituality. They embody faith, the particular beliefs of a religion, their rituals and their icons, and they are simultaneously viscerally and emotionally inspirational.

In *Theology in Stone*, Kiekhefer suggested that 'entering a church is a metaphor for entering into the presence of the holy'. That the intended experience of a medieval Christian church was multi-sensual: 'to the eyes, in its dazzling artwork and in the ritual acts performed; to the ears, through both word and music; to the nose, in 'divine fragrance' of incense and flowers'.¹⁸ Or as a monk once said of his church: 'It prays for itself'. De Botton wrote that 'it is the world's great religions that have perhaps given most thought to the role played by the environment in determining identity'; 'that the very principle of religious architecture has its origins in the notion that where we are critically determines what we are able to

13 A. de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*, New York: Vintage International, 2008, p. 26.

14 Ibid., p. 97.

15 Ibid., p. 100.

16 S. Anderson, 'The Fiction of Function', *Assemblage*, February 1987, no. 2, pp. 18-31.

17 M. Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998, p. 150.

18 R. Kiekhefer, *Theology in Stone: church architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 97, 98

believe in'; 'that we require places where the values outside of us encourage and enforce the aspirations within us'.¹⁹ He relates an experience he had in London, venturing from a crowded, noisy McDonald's into Westminster cathedral (Figure 5):

Drawn by rain and curiosity, I entered a cavernous hall, sunk in tarry darkness, against which a thousand votive candles stood out, their golden shadows flickering over mosaics and carved representations of the Stations of the Cross. There were smells of incense and sounds of murmured prayer. Hanging from the ceiling at the centre of the nave was a ten-metre-high crucifix, with Jesus on one side and his mother on the other. Around the high altar, a mosaic showed Christ enthroned in the heavens, encircled by angels, his feet resting on a globe, his hands clasping a chalice overflowing with his own blood.

The facile din of the outer world had given way to awe and silence. Children stood close to their parents and looked around with an air of puzzled reverence. Visitors instinctively whispered, as if deep in some collective dream from which they did not wish to emerge. The anonymity of the street had here been subsumed by a peculiar kind of intimacy. Everything serious in human nature seemed to be called to the surface: thoughts about limits and infinity, about powerlessness and sublimity. The stonework threw into relief all that was compromised and dull, and kindled a yearning for one to live up to its perfections.

After ten minutes in the cathedral, a range of ideas that would have been inconceivable outside began to assume an air of reasonableness. Under the influence of the marble, the mosaics, the darkness and the incense, it seemed entirely probable that Jesus was the Son of God and had walked across the Sea of Galilee...

Concepts that would have sounded demented forty metres away, in the company of a party of (rowdy) teenagers and vats of frying oil, had succeeded – through a work of architecture – in acquiring supreme significance and majesty.²⁰



FIGURE 5

Westminster Cathedral, London. Photo: Adrian Pingstone, Wikimedia.

19 de Botton, *Architecture of Happiness*, pp. 107-8.

20 de Botton, *Architecture of Happiness*, pp. 109-11.

In his *Ten Books on Architecture*, Leon Battista Alberti cast his exploratory net wide enough to seek a narrative of a superior cosmic harmony in both design and music.²¹ By studying the correspondence between architectural proportions and harmonic musical ratios, he found that the very same numbers that cause sounds to have 'concinnitas' (to be pleasing to the ear), also fill the eyes and mind with wondrous delight. He, too, sought to interpret through the relationship between symbol, meaning and the real, the purest expression of semantic reference.

As we all know, Goethe proclaimed that architecture is frozen music.²² Certainly, both are abstractions of meaning that manifest themselves in real experience. Both can be powerful, both effectively and affectively. Architecture for music, particularly the best concert halls, like the best churches, embody their themes while enhancing appreciation and understanding through experience. While functional issues like acoustics and harmonic proportion vie with expression for prominence in their design, buildings for music can aspire to be purely musical, even as they impact and are impacted by the music of their time and place.

In *Buildings for Music*, Michael Forsyth develops this theme and places it in historical context by demonstrating the powerful effect of musical taste and style on architecture and the reciprocal influence that buildings and their acoustics have had on musical performance and composition.²³ In his essay, 'Their Master's Voice', the architectural scholar, critic and curator Kurt Forster submits that 'the design of concert halls is among the greatest challenges in architecture'.²⁴ He says, 'in a word, it is the task of the architect to bring the listeners assembled in a hall to the threshold of an experience beyond architecture by means of the architecture around them'.²⁵ He goes on to cite Hans Scharoun's drawings of his Berlin Philharmonie with their 'billowing vaults and vertiginous skywalks', as 'amalgamating with the propulsive power of music'.²⁶ He ends by inextricably dissolving the musical into the architectural when he observes that, in this project, as in Frank Gehry's Disney Concert Hall (Figure 3):

across decades of divergent evolutions, Scharoun's and Gehry's concert halls share in this spirit of improvisation in a manner deeply akin to the practice of musical improvisation, which knowingly loosens control in order to create the occasion when the grace of coincidence matches mastery beyond rules.²⁷

And he concludes by saying: 'I would not hesitate to embrace the Disney Hall with the words by which Theodor W. Adorno did justice to Scharoun's achievement, characterizing the hall as 'beautiful, because, in order to create ideal conditions for orchestral music, it becomes similar to music without borrowing from it'.²⁸

21 L. B. Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. J. Leoni, London: Alec Tiranti, 1965.

22 J. W. V. Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann* (1823 – 1832), New York: M. Walter Dunne, 1961, p. 300.

23 M. Forsyth, *Buildings for Music: The Architect, the Musician, and the Listener from the 17th Century to the Present Day*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985.

24 K. Forster, 'Their 'Master's Voice': Notes on the Architecture of Hans Scharoun's and Frank Gehry's Concert Halls', in A. Vidler (ed.) *Architecture: Between Spectacle and Use*, Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005, p. 27.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., p. 33

27 Ibid., p. 39

28 Ibid., p. 39



FIGURE 6
The Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, California. Photo: Carol M. Highsmith, Wikimedia.



FIGURE 7
The Villa Savoye, Poissy, France. © 2006 Mary Ann Sullivan, Blufton University.

While pouring over Anderson's work on fiction and function, I was reminded that there is another obvious project type worth examining in this regard; one much closer to home – the home. Anderson analyzes the Villa Savoye (Figure 4) of Le Corbusier in relation to its 'interpretation of the quality of life that was coming about through, or was potential in, the conditions of modern times.'²⁹ He writes:

the same vision informs Le Corbusier's still lifes, the spatial and formal ingenuity of the Villa Savoye, or yet again the select perception of the kitchen of that same villa. Le Corbusier offered a vision of certain eternal goods; the loaf of bread, the can of milk, the bottle of wine, light and air, access to the earth and sky, physical health, all made available more fully and to greater numbers thanks to new potentials that were both spiritual and technical. There is hardly a detail of the Villa Savoye that does not contribute to the story.³⁰

²⁹ Anderson, 'The Fiction of Function', p. 24.

³⁰ Ibid.

Designing Epiphanies

In this research on building types and their communicative potential and power, you will notice that I have sought something that goes beyond symbolic or even literal representation; something that achieves, or at least approaches the holy grail of embodiment. Why? It's not just my natural, annoying tendency to want to provoke the reader by offering a chapter declaring narrative dead and useless. Well, it's not only that. It's that I, myself, have had experiences in places – museums, other types of buildings, landscapes – where all of a sudden, or even gradually, understanding washes over me like a warm pleasurable wave. And my heart beats faster. And my nerve endings are all firing. And the world seems brighter. And life seems a bit clearer. And for that moment things are a little less confusing. And I go forward with that understanding, which can never be fully extinguished. Assuming I haven't recently ingested illicit substances, been born again, or eaten something bad, what's going on?

In his 1967 neon wall sign, the artist Bruce Nauman has said that 'the true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths'. I want to do that. I want to know how to do that. So I look beyond narrative; beyond the assembling and amalgamating. Beyond the bits of information and the ordering of experience. To what? To a synthesis wherein the individual elements are dissolved, where the sequence gives way. Where revelation produces epiphany.

An epiphany is 'a sudden, intuitive perception or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something'.³¹ It is a point where past experiences come together. It is a particular moment that is the cumulative result of already received information. And so I focus on embodiment because narrative implies moving through conceptual and physical space in time but epiphanies are the product of all of our temporal experiences. I think that successful embodiment produces epiphanies because content, messages and themes are unified. In *Architecture and Narrative*, Sophia Psarra distinguishes 'between the conceptual and the perceptual characteristics of space, between patterns we can hold in our mind at once and those we grasp gradually through movement'.³² I have come to believe that these can actually be one and the same thing. That in the mind conceiving of an experience, and in the senses living the experience itself, there can be a simultaneity. And that this is when epiphanies occur. Achieving epiphanies is necessarily hard work. Is it worth it? It is if we believe how it is defined.

Derived from the Greek, the word epiphany means 'a sudden manifestation of deity'.³³ In Christian theology, it also means 'the manifestation of a hidden message for the benefit of others, a message for their salvation'.³⁴ And if we look at history, we see that artists have always sought to produce epiphanies. James Joyce gave the name epiphany to certain short sketches he wrote. He even suggested that there was a certain resemblance between the mystery of transubstantiation in the Catholic Mass and what he was trying to do as an artist, changing the bread of everyday life into something with permanent artistic life. On a more individual level, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, his character Stephen Daedalus says that epiphanies are a sudden and momentary showing forth or disclosure of one's

31 'Epiphany.' *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. Online. Available at: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/epiphany>. Accessed 15 March 2011.

32 S. Psarra, *Architecture and Narrative: The Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning*. London: Routledge, 2009, p. 4.

33 J. Joyce, *Epiphanies*, Buffalo: Easy Hill Press, 1956.

34 'Epiphanies.' *James Joyce Centre*. Online. Available at: www.jamesjoyce.ie/detail.asp?ID=122. Accessed 15 March 2011.

authentic inner self.³⁵ I am proposing that, through design, situations can be made to show forth their authentic inner meaning.

For creators of experience, inducing those personal epiphanies is a cherished goal. To connect people to ideas is our version of the divine. Ancient artists seemed to have an intuitive, hard-wired grasp of this. Their art was all about beliefs held true by the greater proportion of their cultures. But even in our complex society, despite a much expanded cultural diversity, we can still strive, at least in our artistic expression, to communicate both values and concepts.

Architecture, the mother of all arts, allows for the deployment of the widest range of resources to pursue this mission. And museums, the stewards of our cultures, must play a key role in attempting to bring it forth to the public. We understand how people respond to space, light, material, movement, proportion, color, iconography, detail and even media. But we know that epiphanies are produced only when the synthesis of these elements transcends their individual messaging. The ability to process input in this way is a remarkable human faculty, and we must recognize it as the key to our potential success in a quest to make meaning manifest.

The wonderful challenge, then, is to fill people's senses and minds with content-laden stimuli; to imbue every ingredient of an experience with informative suggestions and to trigger vivid yet specific associations. To use our knowledge of how people take in and process information to inform an 'intuitive' narrative. There will always be a place for explicit, even didactic, exposition. Those of us who design exhibitions are on a lifelong hunt for ever more engaging techniques for delivering content. Artifacts; graphics; hands-on mechanical interactives; role play and performance; electronic displays; audio-visual media and web-based delivery systems; handheld devices and gestural interfaces – all these and other means of presenting and sharing will continue to be refined, enhanced, updated and added-to.

And linear narratives will not, and should not, go away. Many stories lend themselves to a beginning, a middle and an end. Chronologies; systematic sequences; cause and effect; series of themes, concepts, sub-concepts and examples – these well-known narrative structures have their place in certain situations, particularly in the appropriate crafting of specific exhibitions. However, what architecture and other art forms can teach us is that narratives can be multi-layered, atemporal, asynchronous, sensorially immersive, and diffuse. As Alain de Botton pointed out in his moving account of his experience at Westminster Cathedral, the cumulative effect of space, scale, light, materiality, ornamentation, sound and scent produced in him a profound epiphany involving mind, body and emotion. The overwhelming and intoxicating experience of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is comprised of a narrative structure upon which is hung a staggering range of theme and variation, melody and harmony, polyphony, density and volume, poignancy and majesty, tension, chaos, longing and resolution. One emerges from this carefully crafted, masterful structure of sound completely transformed.

Similarly, great literature often plays with time, jumping around and arranging connotative allusions in an artful *mélange*. Poetry goes even further, stripping language and structure to the points of distillation and abstraction, seeking the evocation of essences. And the best plays and films fool us into entering unreal worlds by offering the comfort of familiar images, characters and situations, while allowing every other characteristic of reality to become a variable to be manipulated.

35 Ibid.

What all these art forms have in common is that they are experienced over time. Whether quick, or drawn out over great durations, the artist must grapple with the fact that the receipt of information will occur in a sequence. But the nature of the information itself does not have to parallel that order. A great teacher of mine said that the best teaching is done by osmosis. There is no suggestion of linearity or even the various natures of what is absorbed. It can enter continuously, gradually, and from all around. That is what we, as architects and designers, need to understand. Every aspect of a designed and built experience holds narrative potential. The rigid structure of linearity can be an impediment and a crutch. Limiting the range of interpretive mediums through which content is filtered will most assuredly reduce the effectiveness of communication.

That same teacher maintained that the true medium of architecture is air. Air in and air out. He claimed that great architecture had sounds that you didn't know you were hearing and smells you didn't really sense. I think he was identifying epiphany – the transcendence of narrative into embodiment. And that's what the great artists and architects are telling us. Narrative, yes. But use it as an open-ended means to connect with people. As a strategy, not as a solution or end in itself. Shuffle it, layer it, scatter it, and embed it in every part of the structure or space, so it will be fully absorbed and made an integral part of the participant's experience.

The musician and artist, David Byrne, was asked: After finishing a song, are you always able to completely grasp the meaning? He responded by saying: 'Some I'm not sure what they're about. But they have a kind of resonance. They say something to me, or they touch something, but I'm not sure exactly what it is.' The interviewer continued: 'You are the person who introduced the idea of 'stop making sense', which is a liberating thought for songwriters, that we can be freed from linear, logical thought in songs.' Byrne replied:

There was a lot of stuff I heard when I was growing up that was like that: Beatles songs, Rolling Stones songs, Bob Dylan songs. Even a lot of R&B and James Brown songs. If you took the lyrics at their face value, it was just a series of non-sequiturs. But in context, in sound and in the way they were said, whatever the gut reaction was to those particular words, it made sense on a non-logical level. It skirted your logical or rational facilities and struck a different level. A level which you can say 'that's reality'. The rational way of thinking is only a gloss that you put on reality, and if through whatever means necessary you get at what's under that, you're touching something more basic.³⁶

It is interesting to me that what we seek is always that – something so basic. Clarity. Understanding. Perhaps it's what makes epiphany so alluring. Narratives can be so complex. They may still be among the better devices we have for communication. But for me, in my own evolution of exploring how we communicate through design, narrative has become the past which is prologue. As narrative dissolves, epiphany emerges.

My next mountain is epiphany. And it's a steep one. But I take comfort in this little anecdote: Ludwig Wittgenstein, having abandoned academia for three years in order to construct a house for his sister Gretl in Vienna, understood the magnitude of the challenge. 'You think philosophy is difficult', observed the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 'but I tell you, it is nothing compared to the difficulty of being a good architect'.³⁷

36 P. Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, Cincinnati, OH: De Capo Press, 1997, p. 496.

37 de Botton, *Architecture of Happiness*, p. 26.

But, lest we forget, (and who have we found to be more likely than architects to forget this?) epiphanies are not about the creators, they are about those who experience them. Interpretation, design, architecture – they are all ways of communicating. And communication necessitates both speaking and listening in order to form a connection. The poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen summed up the relationship among the artist, his creation, the listener, and the world: 'That's what dignifies the song. Songs don't dignify human activity. Human activity dignifies the song.'³⁸

38 P. Zollo, *Songwriters*, p. 331.