

ARCHITECTURE IS A MEDIATOR SIGNIFIER: BETWEEN MATERIALITY & VIRTUALITY

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Abstract

The architecture that settles in a place and the mark of its presence does not only impose its style and tell its time. It becomes with time a cultural mediator meaning that, by the signs it carries in it, they communicate ideas and images related to place and time. It is through the original, perceptive codes engendered by architecture that socio-cultural messages are transmitted. They are telling the story of the civilizations that have succeeded each other in this place through time. The aim is to investigate the presence of the architecture, between materiality, imagery culture, and formal ideality.

Moreover, this paper investigates existing buildings, compares and highlights their architecture materiality, culture aspects, and their existence's impact on the environment and society.

Keywords: Architecture, presence, materiality, spatiality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture's existence, at any place and within any environment, does not only reflect the architectural design trend and mark its presence. Its appearance and the images it carries initiate cultural and social interaction within that specific environment. It becomes an entity with signs, ideas, and memories. It is, therefore, a continuous dialogue that changes its interpretation with the change of times. But, it remains present as long as we preserve the architecture materiality even after the building has entered the community imagery space as a symbol or icon.

Architecture changes over time but does not disappear even if some "modernist" interventions distort it. Despite any modifications, the building continues to tell the time and the identity of its users. It transforms itself into a word in a sentence that fits into a text unfolding the story of the place but also of humanity. The story is then made of different levels of the proper signs and those accumulated by a reflected or arbitrary juxtaposition of buildings distinct to perceptual codes sometimes antonyms, which drives Bernard Lamizet (1997) to say: "*A city is a sentence*" [1]. It is in this polyphony that sometimes turns into a cacophony that the world is told through the ages and that man evolves in a logic of continuous or everlasting change. Despite the break that some architects have consciously made, it does not hinder this principle because the similarity is there, that it allows the receiver to judge the relevance of the messages by analogy.

Domestic architecture still exists in Beirut today, although fewer buildings remain intact with their original design. Since 1990, and right after the war, rising land values and intensive reconstruction, has witnessed the destruction of traditional architecture, leading to a new kind of architectural presence. This architecture presence has ignored the relationship between architecture and culture by introducing high rise and large size project. Architecture activist and city lovers have been prompted. They took action in listing and

protecting traditional domestic architecture while the government gave little attention to it. Local architecture shaped the identity and the image of the city while many new architecture projects are being constructed regardless the specificities of the environment, the culture, and the urban fabric of the town. What is the impact of the existing local architecture and the new one? How is the building being perceived by the local communities and its relation to its context?

This paper addresses these questions by investigating the presence of vernacular architecture and imported architecture. The old building was considered to be a product of cultural adaptations, environmental, and social conditions in the evolving nineteenth century Beirut. This study aim is two faceted. The first argument is that far from architectural ornamental, the traditional building was considered a spatial and cultural mediator, arbitrating between dwelling and city, private and public spaces, shaping its own environment while in the second argument aims at highlighting the presence of imported architecture project and its impact on the community socially and culturally.

Two different structures have been selected for this case study: both structures reflect strong architecture presence within them. A comparative study is laid out in order to distinguish their architecture presence within the site, their impact on users and viewers.

2. PRESENCE OF ARCHITECTURE, BETWEEN MATERIALITY, IMAGERY CULTURE AND FORMAL IDEALITY

2.1. Presence of Architecture

Presence is a prerequisite for 'existing' in Architecture as well as in communication, knowing that "being present" is proportional to the strength of material and/or the virtual presence of a being or an object. At this point, one can say that everything is a presence, but paradoxically, presence, in the context of globalization, depends especially on the goal of communication; to encourage in the audience some belief about the past, the present, or the future. Today's architecture, depends on these two essential factors: presence and communication; a puzzling communication of polysemy taking place as a consequence of the socio-cultural and identity issues of contemporary architecture, and a multi-faceted presence that is not substantially related to the material used in the architectural object.

The Robert [2] defines the etymology of the word presence as follows: comes from the Latin word *Praesencia* "*designating being present, being there and, with a characterizing value, being effective, powerful ...*"

"To be there," for architecture, in a first sense, is the fact of being built, existing in the real, the concrete, the material.

In this particular case, we cannot ignore the fact that it is "there" in space and time. What kind of presence is it? The quality, the aesthetics, the character, the frontage, the content, the intention, and the idea induced? What determines the presence of architecture in the same way as a physical existence? If The building is stripped from its metaphysical dimension it can, at a certain stage, become an asset of the presence much more important than the material existence. The presence of multiple buildings marked the history of humanity. Some, were there and others no longer existing, yet they remain anchored in the collective memory to such an extent they continue to mark deeply humanity by images that substitute for the original (real) object:

"These representations or images, by their wide distribution, will replace" stand-alone imagery culture replacing the work as a substitute for its reality: the representation will become the work, and the work will disappear as a virtual reality that is inaccessible or simply ignored." [3]

Some of these "autonomous imaginary cultures" marked the space and time or even the history of their presence without even having been completed, remaining at the stage of ideas, but ideas full of symbols. By not existing in the concrete, these images or representations dissociate themselves from place and time. Their Virtual Presence goes beyond the real world; it becomes iconic, and a carrier of a thought or a philosophical idea that goes beyond the initial idea generating the project. From mythical ideas or images to utopias or heterotopias, the examples of symbolic architecture that have marked collective consciousness are numerous. From the Tower of Babel to Solomon's Temple to the Berytus Law School, these architectures are more present than many existing buildings around the world, dissociating themselves from the place and the time to become universal. Likewise, the Bastille prison, like any other symbolic architecture, was physically destroyed, but it remained nonetheless present in the collective memory such as an "autonomous imagery culture" that exceeds the narrow meaning of the material existence to become symbolic.



Fig. 1. St. George's Cathedral sits on the axis of Beirut's ancient *Cardo Maximus*. The law school used to be located next to the Byzantine Anastasis church, a precursor of the cathedral



Fig. 2. The Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1563)

2.1.1 Materiality

Structural properties are essential in the construction of a building. Yet materiality plays a vital role in establishing contact with its environment. It initiates a dialogue with the viewer through its aesthetics, visual qualities as well as its association with social, cultural and historical significance. Building with the correct material requires not only knowledge and experience about the different material characteristics but also feeling and awareness while considering their meaning and value over time. The architecture and the material are considered inseparable. They express age and history, power, communication that reflect human interaction and intervention and the story behind their existence.

If the material and idealistic presence of architecture is definable in one way or another at different levels and in multiple aspects; according to Robert, how would one determine the "efficiency" of an architectural work and its "power"? Is it the effectiveness of the function? That is, how does it provide for the space requirements of the sponsor or society? Is it the power of form? That is, the effect of volume? Projected image, material and proportions? The impact it has on the public? Is it the loyalty or the authenticity of the message it provides? The communication it establishes?

Presence is nevertheless a condition for a work to be perceived and the possibility of being received or accepted. Therefore, architecture has a presence only by the concretization of its "being", by its real and tangible existence, and thus by its materialization. Before being completed, the work cannot prevail of any real presence (to exist here) in the minds of its creators: the master of the work, the socio-political bodies, etc. Those, however, can express a design, an intention or even an idea that they mark in the space and the time (future), projecting on a given place at a given time the image of a work presented to the public in a virtual form. If eventually the work is not realized and does not exist; if it does not have a presence in the material sense of the term, it is, therefore, a question of the outcome, of the dream, the imaginary or utopia, depending on its potential representativeness, the possibilities of its realization in the near and far future. Louis Kahn (1996) calls this "formal ideality":

"Formal ideality has an existence, but no presence and the project tends towards presence. But this existence is mental, so we do the project to make things tangible. If we do what we might call a drawing of formal ideality, a drawing, which in a way reveals the nature of something: we can show it." [4]

It is this relation of relativity and continuity between the idea and the achievement of every work in space and time that induces the presence of the object as a work of architecture. One without the other leads the presence and communication to an impasse: The Idea without realization is restricted to a mental exercise, an unfinished work, while the different risks are leading to regrettable aberration. Indeed, realization without a conceptual idea generating spaces and volumes "thought" does not prevent the building from existing in the sense of being present. But whose presence is it?

2.1.2 New Paradigms

The building by its presence can negatively mark a place if the idea that generates it is not of the required level or does not take into account the criteria or the elementary architectural paradigms. These criteria, generally or particularly should relate to the problems of the place and the theme - like the climatology, orientation, geography, functions, the needs of society, the image, the message all that gives the project a

soul a character or even a mission. André Ravéreau establishes a relationship between the paradigms linked to the place and adds to it the economic dimension that manages the world of today:

"I like talking about architecture located. From one valley to another, we cannot build identical. This is the condition of our grandparents who have been forced to this logic for mainly economic reasons. Today we feel obliged to do the opposite, according to considerations, also economic, only the basic constraints have changed ... the architecture of the North has imposed its way of building in the whole world as a sign of modernity, this which is an aberration." [5]



Fig. 3. Manhattan, view from Empire State Building



Fig. 4. View of Bilbao City

In deliberating this "situated" architecture that is both time and place, Ravéreau accuses what he calls Northern architecture of having imposed its standards on the world. A world, that looks like Manhattan city. It also notes with relevance that even the criteria of the sustainable economy have been reversed between:

- A "situated" architecture that is based on sustainability criteria (energy and economic) by synchronizing the needs of the architecture and the values of the site.
- A globalized architecture according to the (modern) criteria of the North which is not based on economic sustainability but on the contributions of Presence and Contemporary Image as profit-enhancing factors of valorization. In this case, we cannot dissociate the economic factor by speaking of presence in a given place and time. Bilbao is one of the many examples of this presence that goes in the direction of a "marketing" promoter of the place.

Knowing that Bilbao is not the first architectural project that imposes a time, an image and a foreign communication instead, or even that seeks to change the place - Beaubourg having preceded it by a few decades - the new economic-architectural challenge of the presence by the architecture is the promotion of the place at the global level and therefore the "marketing". The place is sold in a way by introducing it into the circuit of curiosities or "image-architecture" on a global scale. The goal is clear, but the means are questionable: is it essential and indispensable to detach it completely from the place, and to create the event? A combination of place and time is, of course, possible for those who are willing to make an effort to introduce the place into the phenomenon of presence by speculation. It is up to the architect to define the paradigms and constraints related to the presence of its architecture, and the project in function of the ideas and images subsequently.



Fig. 5. Centre Pompidou in aerial view of Paris

It is, therefore, first and foremost a desire of the architect himself to consider the place in his architectural design. But this must also be part of a generalized atmosphere, a trend or fashion, stating that it is through the Idea and according to its adaptability to time that the Presence of Architecture gains in intensity and grows to wonder. The presence is, therefore, a circumstantial act that allows the Idea to become an architectural work in a given place for a fixed period. Some architects are uncompromising at this level, such as Renzo Piano (2007), who asserts with critical reflection towards those who want to take into account only the "now": "But how can one be insensitive to the point of imagining a project that may be suitable in New York as well as in Paris, for example." [6]

Louis Kahn also links the presence of the project to more concrete elements: the time, the place the budget. Only the "knowledge" it adds to the list of essential remains abstract and for good reason: to ensure a presence it is necessary to create a work that is an "offering to the spirit of Architecture" and this can only be done by the genius or the creative spirit of the architect and therefore the idea. I quote:

"The project is a circumstantial act, how much money we have, the site, the client, the extent of knowledge: Architecture has no presence except as an architectural work. It is the work that gives it a presence; it is an offering to the spirit of architecture in the hope that it becomes a part of the treasure recognized as architecture, which nevertheless does not turn into presence." [7]

It is, therefore, an architecture that deserves to be "work" that gives a presence, but how to define a work? According to the vocabulary of aesthetics, a work is at the same time material, resulting from a productive activity and fruit of thought.

"The work of truly being itself and thus a work and not a juxtaposition of several works, necessarily contains a principle which connects it with itself and delimits it in relation to the rest of the world; and it is a principle of internal organization. This is why the work has been compared to a living being." [8]

This character is typical of the architecture that exists by itself regardless of its juxtaposition with other buildings. This effect is also amplified by the followers of the Globalized Architecture who advocate a total detachment of the object from its environment. The second character that brings the work closer to the person according to Souriau is autonomous autonomy or individuality:

"The work then appears as an organic system of requirements. Internal requirements vis-à-vis itself [...]

requirements also vis-à-vis its author. This is why the work as an autonomous individual in value could be considered as a person. If the work is not a simple thing, the opposition between the two is the same as that between a thing and a person." [9]

Here again, we are in a typical character of architecture in its relationship with itself and with its author. Individualism coupled with autonomy is the precepts related to the architectural work in its presence and the communication it induces and especially, in large independent groups. Thus

2.1.3 Presence in Science

Presence is a notion that can be found in the information and communication sciences in opposition to an unsatisfactory presence/virtual coupling, the presence is a manifestation in space and in time but it also manifests itself through a symbolic scope. In this sense and another context, digital technologies, nomadic, are often commented in CIS in a coupling or even asymmetry between presence and absence rather than between virtual and presence. It is assuming that social mobility in digital social networks in particular asserts a new complexity of relationships and social presence. So to say as such, the dematerialized presence on the web can refer to an absence of social link in the physical and synchronous social fabric (Durampart, 2013, Jacquinet Delaunay, 2001). In this sense, the presence of architecture refers in our analysis to a critical dimension which allows us to raise the absence of links and the continuity between the forms and architectural projects and their relation with the space.

We retain from this theoretical approach that a work consists of a body and a soul that make it assimilable to a living being or even a person. According to Souriau (2006), a work is, therefore, necessarily alive and manifests itself first and foremost by what it includes as intrinsic values and not according to what juxtaposes itself to it. His only existentialist obligation is that of responding to the demands of his creator and consequently to the vocation and the message he wants to give him. If an architecture work is comparable to a person, then we can speak of presence as personality, character and material and moral communication. This approach allows us to say that, in addition to what Souriau proposes: a work exists by itself as an object independently of what is juxtaposed with it, but it cannot materially dissociate itself from what surrounds it. Especially when it is the presence of a massive building, it thus coexists or cohabits, by juxtaposition, with its environment; and a dialogue is necessarily established between them. It remains to be seen whether this

dialogue is intended or planned by the architect.

If a work "even if it is part of the recognized treasure" does not become a presence, then we return to the precept of quality in materiality. For architecture to be Present following an Idea, as valuable as it may be, must necessarily be measurable:

"A building must begin in the unmeasurable aura and go through the measurable to be accomplished. The only way we can build it, the only way we can get it to be, is by the measurable. We must follow the laws, but in the end, when the building begins to be part of life, it uses qualities that can not be measured." [11]

Kahn (1996) thus joins in his interpretation of the Presence of Architecture the definitions of the different lexicons: Independently of the fact of existing in space or place (here) the architectural work must also claim to exist in the time (now) hence the notion of contemporaneity to which we refer the dictionary of aesthetics. But the work continues to live its life and develop according to time. It acquires by this "unmeasurable qualities" as Kahn says so well. These qualities, which are also unpredictable, give it a new identity, a legitimacy often different from that imagined by its creators (all parts). It is somehow the patina of time that prints an image, good or bad, depending on its course and the memories or values it generates.

3. BEIRUT

3.1. Brief History

Beirut once called "Paris of the Middle East" is the capital and largest city of Lebanon with a population of over two million. With nearly 5,000 years of history, it is considered one of the oldest cities in the world where many civilizations have shaped its life, culture, and identity. Beirut is a cosmopolitan city embracing many religious and sect and considered as one of the most diverse in all of the Middle East. After the damaging Lebanese civil war, between 1975 and 1990, Beirut reconstruction took place.

An extreme architectural transformation has been going for the last fifteen years and still going in downtown Beirut. Just two decades ago, the Lebanese capital was no man's land: dozens of bullet traces, shell-holes buildings are still standing — testimony to a brutal conflict that raged for 15 years and took the lives of 150,000. Traces of bullet holes in nearly every building, shell fragments facades, and homeless people living in scattered structure.

Old houses, villas and Ottoman-style buildings are gradually disappearing, and they are being replaced with modern high rise buildings paving the way to losing Lebanon's architectural heritage. Investors have destroyed the city by building without any concern for the heritage. The environment is modified and damaged, and Village-like neighborhood barely exists anymore in Beirut, and people are unaware of the seriousness of the situation that our architecture history is vanishing.



Fig. 6. Shell holes. Beirut, Lebanon



Fig. 7. Bullet traces. Beirut, Lebanon

Now, however, Beirut has risen and has become the place to some of the most expensive real estate in the world. Pritzker Prize winners like Foster, Piano, Koolhaas, Nouvel, Herzog, De Meuron, and Tohers have all designed one, if not more, unconventionally shaped buildings for Beirut. Hundreds of heritage buildings and archaeological sites have been destroyed to make way for these unconventionally shaped structures that prefer speculative real estate over architecture presence relating to the past or the people. Architecture presence has been absent in the reconstruction of downtown Beirut. Human interaction with the environment is minimal, and the new city has become a ground for the rich; security, barriers, and checkpoints around new buildings prevent pedestrians from getting closer wiping the traditional Beirut street life that existed before. The presence of these new buildings are considered to be foreign and do not connect with the people and the surrounding. They hold no history within them but the style and design trends reflecting modernity and western architecture. Reconnect with both human and natural surroundings has become a desire and a need, and it can only be possible through architecture presence and specific paradigm respecting the city needs and its people.

3.1.1 Barakat Building. Beit Beirut.

The neo-ottoman style building known as the "Yellow House" or the "Barakat Building" was built in 1924 by the Lebanese architect Youssef Afandi Aftimos. Later in 1932, two additional floors were added to the building by the architect Fouad Kozah. The building stood on the crossroad of Damascus Street and Independence Street consisting of two bourgeois style houses with four-stories high plus a roof terrace with two ochre-colored sandstone facades joining the building by raised decorated columns with beautiful ironwork.

Located on the former "green line," separating the city into east and west Beirut, the Yellow House was an essential sniper base during the civil war. Its strategic location and the geometry of the building with its open facades made it easy for military personnel to control the surrounding area from all sides. The building witnessed two different kinds of architecture design, the first by the original architect (domestic architecture) and the second by the snipers who occupied the building during the civil war (War architecture). When the war ended, the Barakat family sold the building to a development company, and they planned to demolish it, but with the help and conviction of the people and the commitment of the City of Beirut action was taken to preserve it.

A few years later, in 2006, a restoration project was started, after the signing of a Memorandum of Cooperation between the cities of Beirut and Paris. The Barakat Building was to become a Museum of the History of the Lebanese capital and home to a library dedicated to urban issues and an Urban Observatory.



Fig. 8. Barakat Building



Fig. 9. Barakat Building in 2018. Now a civil war museum, the structure is one of the few buildings preserved in its war-damaged

Presence of architecture in the "Yellow House" or the "Barakat Building" proved to exist in time (before and now). The building demonstrated to be different and continuously in conjunction with its time and its people. At first, the building had a unique architecture presence and considered as the bourgeois building because of

its architectonic elements and space interrelationship with the outside and the inside and its occupants. Later and during the wartime, the building happened to fall between two areas in Beirut- East and West separated by a boundary called the green line. The building continued to exist, preserving its presence while a new architecture was being born within it (war architecture). Bullets holes, sandbags and facades deterioration shaped the interior and the exterior of the building while snipers added their layers of architecture presence by changing the identity and the image of the Barakat building and transforming it from being once a sign of freedom and cross-cultural dialogue to a hostile and dangerous killing machine.

When the war ended, the Barakat building started another fight of presence, and it was the threat of being demolished. The building, by its architecture presence, marked its place. First, because of the idea that generated it and upon the criteria and architectural paradigms that took into account like the geography, functions, the needs of occupant, the architecture, the message, all give the project a soul a character or even a mission.

Therefore, architecture took another act of presence; a mission to strike a balance between the past, the present and the future respecting heritage preservation and technological innovation providing a platform for a newborn; a cultural center named Beit Beirut (the house of Beirut). A public place and a platform for debates and ideas exchange with no restriction to anyone and place for social and cultural exchange and for reconnecting the city with its inhabitants.

3.1.2. Beirut Souks. Zaha Hadid

Anyone who has been to Beirut Souks recently, he would have probably noticed that the North part of Beirut Souks that is currently under construction is starting to take shape. Beirut Souks designed by Zaha Hadid and consists of a 5-story development of 26,370 m² usable area consisting of a department store at the northern end and a mixed-use facility – retail at ground and lower-ground levels and apartments on upper levels with a rooftop restaurant at the southern end. The project located in the heart of Beirut's city Centre referred to as the Souks area. The Souks form a part of a reconstruction master plan, being built and developed by Solidere [12]. The presence of architecture in Beirut Souks and more precisely, Hadid's building regardless of the building architecture design is somehow confusing. The building sits within an environment that is not set for it and looks as an intruder to this specific neighborhood. It does not represent past and present and yet not sure if the building does represent the future. Its presence is camouflaged by modernity and by western architecture, and no sense of context or locality is respected. The building design outcome is more likely to serve the client's needs and the designer image as a 'global architect.' The building forms are eye-catching but unpleasant within the context.

Moreover, the building's function is similar to any modern building mall in any part of the world and does not reflect the "souk" as Lebanese understand it which is an open alley with shops on both sides with piles of spices, fabric shops ...etc. in traditional architectural settings.

The presence of such an architecture (Beirut souks) helps the people to disconnect from their surrounding and slowly forgetting their heritage and identity. So similar to any current project in the world, people attachment will be limited, and they will not be attached to the place. Our knowledge of architecture presence is formed by what we see; hear smell, and touch and how we feel about it.



Fig. 10. Beirut Souks Mall under construction

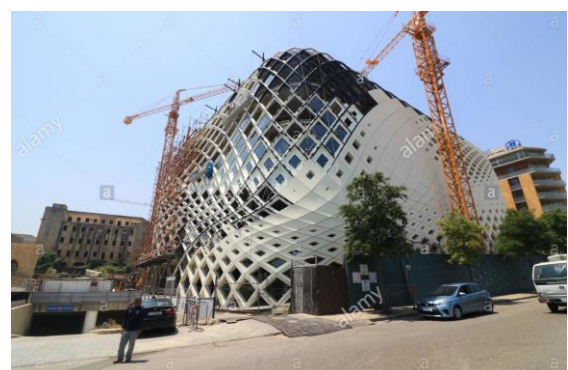


Fig. 11. Beirut Souks Mall under construction



Fig. 12. Traditional old souks of Byblos



Fig. 13. Traditional old souks of Byblos

4. CONCLUSION

As a result, architecture communicates differently depending on the image it reflects and the "stages" of its existence. The examples on this level abound: from ancient relics to "classified" works, through projects that have become "iconic" or even the image or the mark of their "nations". The Presence of Architecture has gone beyond time limit and the original function from which it has drawn the legitimacy of its existence, to become a timeless object and freed from all servitude. Only the place remains an unavoidable factor of the presence unless the object becomes (over time) the reflection of a culture or a specific design trend which goes beyond the narrow limits of a country's borders. In this case, we can consider that the presence of the architectural object can be independent of "place" and "time" omitted the present time.

So "Exist, here and now" the expression does not constitute a paradigm of presence knowing that in architecture as in art, to be present does not only mean to exist physically but also to impress, to reflect an Idea, an Image, initiate a dialogue, establish a communication. It is the precepts of all art, or Art in the broad sense of the term, which has punctuated history since the beginning of time and humanity. Moreover, time and place are not always factors in the direction of continuing to ensure the presence of the project as an "architectural work".

If the building comes from the past bearing the stigmata of a bygone era without being impregnated with an Image that allows it to communicate with the current environment, what remains of its presence? Is it an unnecessary survival of an outdated time? Is it a useless shadow in a world that no longer resembles him? Or maybe a frozen existence, inert, in suspension, in search of a new identity in an environment to which it does not belong and thus becomes generally hostile? In this context, the architectural object loses the legitimacy of its presence and consequently is abandoned. It degrades decays and dies because it no longer can exist "here and now".

It is for these reasons that the dictionaries refer us to the notion of contemporaneity. The original contemporary architecture is the one that marks the present time, "which is at the same time ... Simultaneous, synchronic current, modern" According to the definition of the contemporary by Robert. The presence of architecture "here and now" takes on a new meaning when it comes to being at the same time what brings us back to the order of the news: a contemporary architecture that reflects the image of today's world. The alternative would be to be "at the same time" (if it is old) as long as it is in symbiosis with the times and the present society. This architecture of the present carries in it ideas, images, communication, and modern, in which one lives (Modern here comes in the sense of contemporary). But it can also carry in it the ideas, image and signs of the world of tomorrow. It prepares the ground and projects the living space of a new society to come without pouring into the imaginary or the Utopian.

Since measurable presence is a condition for being perceived, we can definitively conclude that an architecture to exist, or any possible work to be considered should respect the physical perceptible in substance and form and providing the possibility to be measurable in all aspects. The immeasurable idea or concept, however important, it may not in any case prevail of its existence even if it marks the collective memory of its presence.

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