

Edward Winters. *Aesthetics and Architecture*. London: Continuum, 2007, 179 pp. ISBN 0826486320

Aesthetics and Architecture, by Edward Winters, a British aesthetician, painter, and teacher at West Dean College, England, is an introductory volume in the Continuum Aesthetics Series. Winters's attempt to confront the discourses of architectural theory, aesthetics, and philosophy is commendable, since architecture is not often a subject of philosophical reflection, and even more rarely is it a subject of aesthetic analysis.

The book comprises fourteen brief chapters in three parts. In Part I, presenting some architectural theories, contrasted and compared with philosophical aesthetics, Winters outlines his own ontology of architecture based mostly on Kant's remarks on the subject. The second part consists of a polemic with non-architectural theories that had a considerable influence on architecture. In the third part, Winters turns his attention to the reception of architecture. Taking issue with the mainly language-based theories introduced in the previous part, he constructs his own concept of understanding architecture and its reception, foregrounded by the philosophy of mind, Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, Nelson Goodman's semantic theory of art, and Roger Scruton's aesthetics of architecture.

One of the aims of Winters's book is to arrive at 'a conception of architecture broad enough to accommodate all or most of the corpus of works of architecture' (p. 7). The underlying question is ontological: What is architecture? The question itself is central for Winters, though it is explicitly present only in the first part, remaining implicit in the rest of the book. Winters tries to demonstrate that our aesthetic judgement of architectural works is determined by our understanding of what architecture is, or, more precisely, that judgement depends on what we consider to be a 'work of architecture' (which differs from a mere building).

In the first three chapters, Winters introduces three different conceptions of architecture: Classicism, Modernism, and Functionalism. Those theories, he claims, give an implicitly philosophical answer to the question 'What is architecture?'. He employs them in his search for the 'essential characteristics of works of architecture', while demonstrating that these three conceptions are exclusive and insufficient for an understanding of architecture in its totality.

He begins with Classicism (Ch. 1), the basis of which is imitation; architecture is understood as 'imitative of the process of building' (p. 17). This conception is, however, rejected by Winters as too narrow, because it excludes many architectural works. Like Classicism, Modernism (Ch. 2) 'suffers from being

exclusive'. Winters turns to Kant, in a short exposition of his three *Critiques*, which is hardly useful in clarifying the notion of Modernist architecture. He contrasts Kant's ideas from the third *Critique* with the aesthetic formalism of Clement Greenberg (p. 32), and emphasizes the fact that formal aesthetics and all Modernist art focus on the means by which each art is made (p. 34). But what is essential to architecture, according to Winters, is that it, unlike sculpture, another spatial art, must be understood as 'an art of purpose', as Kant conceived it and as formalists tend to ignore. Throughout the book, Winters accentuates purposiveness as an essential characteristic of architecture conceived not only as a field of human activity but also as a visual art. Consequently, formal aspects are insufficient to define its essential characteristics. In the following chapter, on Functionalism, Winters goes even further, stating that architecture 'engages our aesthetic understanding by its functional aspect prescribing its form. And this functional prescription just is what provides architecture with its status as an art' (p. 41). Nevertheless, the visual aspects are still essential, since the 'visuality of the building is the location of its aesthetic interest' (p. 39). Winters owes the reader a justification, however, for his selection of these three particular architectural theories. The selection makes sense only as a means of moving towards his own conception of architecture.

In the following chapter, 'Residual Problems', he deals with the differences between theory and practice, pointing out their 'different aims' and 'different status', without any attempt at questioning their mutual relations. The role of architectural theory, according to Winters, consists in appreciation of the architectural work by considering its theoretical aspect; consequently, theory is not understood in terms of the truth of a particular theory, but 'in terms of the contribution of the theory to the visual experience the work affords' (p. 55). This concerns not only architectural theories, but also those theories which have been applied to architecture from other fields (such as linguistics and philosophy).

In the second part, 'Theory in Architecture', Winters argues against the 'intellectualisation of architecture' (p. 75). He proposes that theories such as Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and semantics can only promote particular works of architects, and, like other architectural theories, reveal little about architecture itself. He accentuates the difference between the sphere of language and 'other cultural artefacts' including architecture (the sphere of visuality). Winters raises the same objection to all these language-based theories – namely, that they separate architectural works from our experience, reducing them to mere means of communication (in a political and social

context) or to the textual sphere in the hands of the Deconstructionists. Unfortunately, Winters's discussion of Post-Structuralism does not ask why so many architects have been attracted to the projects and writings of Jacques Derrida, Peter Eisenman, or Bernard Tschumi.¹

Winters concludes with a slightly more sympathetic exposition of Goodman's semantic theory of art, which is followed by a comparatively long chapter on the politically minded Situationist International. That is not surprising, however, since it was clear from the beginning that Winters tends to promote a more socially and morally responsible view of architecture, which, by definition, is connected primarily to human life and not just a single field, language. In the concluding chapter of the second part, 'Architecture as Public Art', Winters emphasizes the communal, 'existential' value of architecture and its connection with our lives, offering a detailed analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, by Maya Ying Lin.

In Part III, 'Architecture in Mind', Winters switches to the problem of the reception of architecture, oscillating between our understanding and our experience of architecture. In the first chapter of this part, he provides the basis upon which he builds 'a positive account for architectural understanding' (p. 109). His aim here is to overcome 'the shortcomings of the language views' (p. 109) by the tools of the philosophy of mind. He provides what he calls the 'mental terminology' ('propositional attitudes', 'propositional content', 'objective content'). The account is, however, too removed from architecture and is also philosophically undeveloped.

In his treatment of architectural experience, Winters emphasizes the dual nature of perception, distinguishing the content of perception, as the objective part, from the act of perceiving, the subjective part. The pleasure of architectural experience, he asserts, is constituted by sensation as well as by 'propositional attitude' (p. 115), by perceptual as well as imaginative features. What proves to be crucial to the rest of the book is his introduction of the term 'imaginative experience'. In imaginative experience, 'perception puts us in contact with that which is present in our environments, whereas imagination calls to mind that which is absent' (p. 118). So the imaginative experience is related to content not present to us (p. 120), though it is dependent on perception in this sense: what is seen (perceived) sets limits to what can be imagined, 'propositional content'.

With the chapter 'Architecture, Mind and Language' Winters turns to the language-based theories of Part II, confronting them with his own account of

¹ A similar point is raised by Harries. See Karsten Harries, review of *Aesthetics and Architecture*, by Edward Winters, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, posted February 15, 2008, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=12384>.

experience. Winters reiterates his critique that these theories fail 'to give due weight to the experiential feature of our apprehension of meaning in architecture' (p. 130); this is in fact also the formulation of his aim for the rest of the book. Winters turns for support to Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language against approaches treating language as if it were isolated. Despite being highly critical of the advantages of language-based theories for architecture, Winters constructs his own concept for understanding architecture on the background of his debate with Goodman.² He objects to Goodman's concept, asserting that it does not give due weight to experience, which, as we have seen, is his general objection to language-based theories. This, however, can hardly be seen as appropriate, since Goodman aims at a conception of the arts as autonomous symbol systems, accentuating cognitive aspects of art, leaving aside the perceiver's experience or aesthetic judgement.

In his treatment of Goodman's theory, Winters first examines representation, a denotative type of reference, which, for Goodman, was marginal in architecture. He then proceeds to a discussion of expression (a metaphoric case of exemplification). While discussing expression, however, Winters nearly omits exemplification, which is crucial to Goodman's understanding of architecture. This corresponds to Winters's strong rejection of formalism in Modernist and Post-Modern architecture.

Having almost rejected the symbolic functions of representation and expression, Winters proposes his own concept, architectural allusion (p. 144): 'Allusion, as that is to be found in the literary arts, is the means by which an author deliberately makes reference to another work, or to an historical event or to whatever it is that the reader takes up as reference from the work he is considering' (p. 144). Since architecture is a visual art, we ought to locate allusion in the relation between perception of the architectural work and the imaginative experience grounded there. Surprisingly, however, Winters's discussion of allusion stops at the straightforward statement that 'architecture [has] the capacity of allusion' (p. 145).

Winters then goes on to refer to architecture as the 'framing' that provides us with experiences that do not fix our attention on the building itself, but that organize our experiences as we look away from the building (p. 146). One can, from this, understand Winters's negative assessment of the individualistic

² Winters's polemic is aimed mainly at Goodman's paper 'How Buildings Mean'. Nelson Goodman, 'How Buildings Mean', in Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1988), 31–48.

architectural work of Daniel Libeskind or Zaha Hadid who are, according to Winters, 'vastly overrated' (p. 103). Their work is certainly the opposite of the view of architecture as framing. Architecture thus understood has much in common with the concept of environment. Following Asger Jorn (a founding member of the Situationist International), Winters argues that architecture implies the construction of an environment and also the establishment of a way of life (p. 147).

In chapter 'Architecture as a Form of Life', Winters, following Scruton's lead, begins with a discussion of 'architecture in terms of its vernacular' (p. 148).³ Though he does not share Scruton's passion for the Classical, he does share his disdain for Modernist architecture and also his understanding of architecture as a communitarian (vernacular) concern where architectural forms constitute the background of our everyday life and do not require our 'constant and undivided attention' (p. 149). Architecture supports the importance of the world in which we live through its visual character – 'visuality' is made to reveal the status of our selves' (p. 151). Architecture is thus connected with a form of life. Visuality and purposiveness (function) come together here.

When looking at buildings, rather than, in his words, merely 'read them off', we project a form of life onto them. Winters regards buildings as continuous with one's life, giving it visual forms, which he calls 'quiet architecture'. That is why he strongly opposes formalistic (individualistic) aesthetics of any kind. This embodiment of a way of life is what he considers the 'enduring principle of architecture' (p. 159), which is supposed to overcome the particularities of the different theories as well as historical styles. Consequently, Winters sees the significance of architecture in establishing aesthetics 'by instantiating a moral view' (p. 161). He concludes by giving an example of this kind of architecture: an energy-efficient house in London designed and owned by Jeremy Till and Sarah Wigglesworth.

To conclude: Although one might agree with Winters's approach to architectural works (and also with his aesthetic predilections), and although one may share his plea for a 'quiet architecture' and his effort to bring together the aesthetic and moral aspects of architecture, his argumentation remains disputable. Despite his intention to write a comprehensive theory of architecture, he is sometimes too limited by his own conception, which is manifested both in his theoretical inquiries and also in his selection of the theories which he deals with. The title of the volume, *Aesthetics and*

³ See Roger Scruton, *The Classical Vernacular: Architectural Principles in an Age of Nihilism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen and Co., 1979).

Architecture, suggests a general introductory treatise on the aesthetics of architecture. The way Winters would make this intention a reality, however, remains questionable. *Aesthetics and Architecture* is an uneven combination of argumentative essay and introductory passages. Readers familiar with architecture and architectural theory will be disappointed, and so will those who expect the more philosophical approach to architecture initially promised by Winters. Most of the arguments and discussions, interesting though they seem, are sketchy and, despite the title, few aestheticians are discussed. Often what needs to be explained is presupposed and what is understandable by common sense is explicated. The presentation of the architectural theories in the first part, as well as the non-architectural theories in the second part, is too brief; the exposition of their contribution to architecture is superficial. Except for the detailed analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, no other informed discussion of architectural works or any serious effort to confront theory and the actual practice of architecture is attempted. Furthermore, there is no reference to other books related to the topic within architecture, except for Scruton's. Overall, *Aesthetics and Architecture* does not deliver what it promises.

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