

# THE AESTHETICS OF SETTLEMENT

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Britain, like Europe, is suffering from a spiritual decay

which manifests in the deterioration of its built environment.

**Category:** [Essay](#)

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It is not uncommon to hear genuine conservatives bemoan the lack of quality urbanism whilst deriding the works of celebrity architects like [Norman Foster](#) and [Richard Rogers](#) (even if they're blissfully ignorant of the names of the erstwhile desecrators of the urban fabric). As with many things, conservatives behave as passive recipients, punch bags if you will, for the body blows of the cultural works of their progressive peers. There is a sense in which bad architecture is something that is being done to them, rather than something to which they are a part. This is a mistake.

Conservatives hold immense financial and human resources at their command but have, in the Anglophone countries in particular, failed to create any physical structures of real and lasting value in recent decades. The cultural energy of the conservative movement is moribund and takes the form merely of a criticism of the culture—or more appropriately anti-culture—that is offered to them by those of a progressive persuasion. We seem to have made the decision to move away from the hard process of creation in order to snipe from the side lines at a culture we refuse to accept responsibility for, and by our quietude we have become active participants in the degradation of our societies.

There is no shirking this responsibility. Our phenomenal experience, as attested to from works as varied and as broad as those of St. Augustine and Nietzsche, is determined by our active participation in the development of culture. This can be seen empirically, as our attention and energy directly correlate with our artistic output, be it through painting, literature, sculpture, music or architecture. Architecture just so happens to be the most universally visible sign of this output as, unlike a painting—which is housed in galleries only for those who wish to pay pilgrimage—all people are daily participants of the experience of the built environment. Through these surroundings we can see the

fingerprints of the past and the imprints that we ourselves will leave to posterity.

In the slopes and gradients, the corners and alleyways, we begin to discern the relationship between a city and the spirit of the eras that have formed it. Only a small fraction of people go into the Saatchi gallery and see the artistic fruits of post-modernism, but everyone is daily invited into discourse with the architectural legacies that are derived from a cultural moment. Saatchi's collection is entirely avoidable. For the people of London, The Shard is not.

The Shard, also referred to as the Shard of Glass, Shard London Bridge, and formerly London Bridge Tower, is a 72-storey skyscraper in Southwark, London.

Take as a concrete example, Edinburgh, where I have spent a lot of time recently. It's a beautiful city and is the doyen (alongside the equally beautiful Prague) of online aesthetica-posting on Instagram and Twitter. Even as you look down through the plastic and neon mishmash that has in recent decades invaded Princes Street—the main artery demarcating the New and Old Towns—you are swept up in a vista that is shadowed by the castle, running directly through Georgian grandeur to the spectacle of Calton Hill and its admirable acropolis. One immediately has a real sense of place and identity that has evolved through time. The castle perched on the hill shows the original purpose of the place as a redoubt in the ongoing wars between the English and the Scots—wars that still tinge politics in the lands north of the Tweed.

The Royal Mile, Edinburgh.

Further, as you head down the Royal Mile, stretching from the castle to Holyrood Palace, you pass late medieval townhouses repurposed as tenement flats and now mostly shops. One of these homes belonged to Protestant firebrand John Knox, founder of the melancholy Presbyterianism that defined Scottishness—at least in the lowlands—until the modern age. Knox himself ministered at the large and foreboding St. Giles' Cathedral, itself a relic of Scotland's Catholic past. Just before you reach the palace, you come to the Cannongate Kirk, completed in 1691—just three years after the revolution of 1688—and Queen

Elizabeth II's church of choice when she visits Edinburgh.

All of this on just one stretch of road, joined by a warren of interlocking bridges and staircases into a real, thriving, living city. Each year tourists come in millions flock to experience it, and for many it becomes one of their favourite places.

That people feel this way about Edinburgh, but not for, say, Derby or Sheffield or Newcastle, is no accident. Each city stands as a representation of the thoughts, feelings, and aspirations of the generations that have lived there. Each city imbibes the various characters and idiosyncrasies of each succeeding custodian of the city's keys. It stands to reason then that as are the people, so is the city. We can distill Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to this: the city is a shrine, and it is our duty to perfect it and ourselves in honour of the divine.

Does this mean that the people of Edinburgh are culturally and spiritually superior to the people of Derby, Sheffield, and Newcastle? Not necessarily. In many ways, Princes Street is a den of iniquity, marred by drunkenness, addiction, and all the tattiness and neuroticism of modern life. The city, like many others, is trading on the reputation of generations gone by. As with Sheffield, so soon with Edinburgh? Ancient Edinburgh is beginning to see its share of modern high rises, not least the galleria-style shopping mall of the St. James's Quarter. The spiral monstrosity of the W Hotel batters the senses along the eastern edge of the generally more pleasant George Street.

These are not merely aesthetic changes. Edinburgh—like Britain, like Europe—is suffering from a spiritual decay which manifests in the deterioration of its built environment. It metastasized in the 1970s in Brutalism, and today proliferates not merely in the senseless glass and stainless steel towers of the global elite, but in the daily entropy that accumulates in all of the corners of our lives. From bi-weekly bin collections, littering and people's lack of pride in cleaning their front porches (when was the last time you saw someone under-70 do this?) that just makes everything look shabbier, meaner, and more disconnected.

I am not the first social observer to have made this connection between aesthetic decline and social decline. I am not even the first to observe that we often appear as squatters, or perhaps parasites, within a far superior civilisation whose original inhabitants have all mysteriously disappeared, but there I am in smaller company. These two thoughts are described—the first explicitly and the second implicitly—in the architect Marwa Al-Sabouni's account of the breakdown of the built environment of her hometown of Homs and the advent of the brutal Syrian civil war. She describes in detail the gradual slackening of the Syrian people's moral character and its consequent detrimental effect on the physical appearance of the city. The disconnect from the root of an agreed and accepted Islamic culture as presaging the calamity that was to, in a few short years, consume them.

Where I am in a smaller company still is in positing that the built environment correlates directly with a society's collective experience of the world. By collective experience I mean the whole gamut of things necessary in the creation of what we would determine to be a culture in and of itself.

We speak of 'Arabic culture,' 'Christian culture,' 'Chinese culture' as if these were real and existing things, either extant or historical, to mean a specific way and mode of being in the world for a particular group of people, either through time or at a particular point in time. We do this off-handedly, but we also know that it has implications for something even if we can't put our finger on exactly what the constituent parts of it are.

Take Arabic culture. Arabic culture is contained in a language first and foremost, largely because Arabic is the language of the Koran, but also because the area of the world where it is spoken is the area conquered by the Arabic tribes at the start of the mediaeval period. Arabic, like all languages, offers a unique window into the world that is not the same as the window offered into it by other languages. Over time this has helped shape and reinforce the thinking of the people who have adopted it as their own, giving them a point of view on the world akin to that of an individual, it is internally coherent and cannot be adopted by subjects from other cultures without that other subject engaging with the world in the light of the Arabic language.



A culture is not fully understood by merely listing things associated with it: the Middle East, for instance, is not just the accumulation of Arabic, the Koran, sharia's law, and hijabs. A culture, in reality, is the holistic frame through which the world is experienced and the cultural life of a people is lived. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and it is because of this that all attempts to define Englishness, Britishness, and Europeanness all appear so nebulous when discussed merely as a litany of things. All this is to say that there is—to use the Husserlian terminology—a *lebenswelt*, a 'life-world,' from which we draw our point of view on the world that is only accessible if the subject agrees to live under the auspices of certain conditions.

These conditions determine the resonance from which culture can develop. The development of a cultural style, over time, creates a tradition that then becomes the framework within which a civilisation continues to reference itself—including through future artistic styles. The tradition itself however originates in a great bursting forth of collective phenomenal excess; a positive overflowing of the spirit and energy of a people bound to a collective feeling, a collective rhythm of the world. Think, for instance, of how Arabic culture burst forth from the desert and out into the world on the wings of Mohammed's grand revelation, or of how Edinburgh has been so physically marked and defined by the epochs that have created her. As G.K. Chesterton put it, "men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because they had loved her."

If what I say is true, we should be able to judge a civilisation on its architecture alone. When we see Roman ruins we know them for Roman ruins, so too with Persia, so too with the mediaeval culture of Europe. When we see Ely Cathedral, we clearly see it was built by a culture more Christian, if we are educated, more Catholic, than our own. So too in our own cities we see manifest the giant hydra of the commercialism. In a magisterial essay entitled *Catholicism and the Bourgeois Mind*, Christopher Dawson documents the development of our own culture, which came into being through the absolute victory of the town over the agricultural civilisation that preceded it. We have internalised the commercialism, along with its great flattening of difference, and as a result, we build its aesthetic equivalent. The rhythm of life is set; we will follow the path until the culture that set us on that path is overthrown or transformed.

*The Birth of Tragedy*—what Roger Scruton described as Nietzsche's only genuine work of philosophy—examines this phenomenon of the bursting forth of culture, through the narrow prism of the performance of tragic drama. Nietzsche writes of the transmutation of the tragic age into an age of sophistry, in which the holy fire of earlier generations is subsumed into a culture of criticism. This template is paralleled in every culture in all times and in all places.

But as in all times and all places there has been a renewal of this spirit, this fire, this internal thunder that has an outward face in our built environments as with our civilisation consolidating and artistic achievements. I have [previously](#) argued in the pages of *The European Conservative* that our emotions and intuitions are ontologically prior to our reason. This intuitive realm is the repository of cultural memory, which is the font of inspiration for the development of our aesthetic sense. If this is the case, it presents a genuine solution to our seemingly permanent downward spiral: in remaking ourselves, we can remake the world. That is, our moral fortitude, our bearing, and our standing to count in the world matter. Volunteer, start a club, go to church, involve yourselves in your communities. It is only there in the free association of determined persons that we can learn what needs to be learned for the times ahead, to act on the future in a purposeful manner and define the culture of our times for posterity.

This is a dramatic claim in our statist times, for it asks us to reject the assertion of progressives that change starts at an institutional level. Although political victories are important, they are often fleeting phantoms in the grander project of human flourishing. The conservative should seek less to determine the outcome of specific events or policies than to seek to reframe and reinterpret the rhythm of life continually. This rhythm is—I believe—the wellspring of our collective experience of the world. It is Nietzsche's Dionysiac spirit differentiated in its Apollonian form across cultures; or as the Indian sages would have it, the Atman roaring forth from the undifferentiated cloud of Brahman.

By effecting this revolution of the individual in culture, we can begin to proselytise it across our European homeland and build a new rhythm like those of Circadian quality that silently determine the cycle of night and day within our embodied world. Although an

internal revolution of the individual, it is a revolution that demands to be thrust outwards, as from the crucible of Rome, the deserts of Arabia, or the porticos of Florence, so too from the place where we stand.

Take heart in the immortal prayer of St. John of the Cross "What do you ask, then, and seek, my soul? Yours is all of this, and all is for you. Do not engage yourself in anything less or pay heed to the crumbs that fall from your Father's table. Go forth and exult in your Glory!" We must assume the responsibility to develop new art and new culture. We must build new buildings that can stand as the flag on which a vanguard may move forwards and disseminate the world we wish to see, not as ashes of the past, but as a living fire. From this, everything else will follow and even our fallen culture may yet be renewed.