Although the theme of this talk is the idea of affordance within the humanities today, I would like first to consider the idea in an economic sense. Designers have limited time and money to put into the conception and realization of a building, and the question I would like to pose is on what exactly should they spend this time? What is the role of the architect in designing, documenting, and overseeing the project? A score of talented engineers can now provide nearly all of the technical specifications that go into a design, and a team of good contractors are capable of building almost any creation or aberration that the architect may concoct. So, what role does the architect play?

Some may argue that designers come up with the overarching “idea” of the design—that is, they provide the framework or what is sometimes referred to as the “aesthetic” expression of the building’s functions. Yet this view rings somewhat hollow to me, because it leaves out many other things. It seems to reduce the designer’s role—if I might borrow the binary option of the late Robert Venturi—to designing the wallpaper for the decorated shed, or sculpting the feathered locks of the duck. Wherein resides this so-called aesthetic idea, in any case? Even philosophers as deliberate as Immanuel Kant, as we shall see, were unable to find it. A little more than sixty years ago the great Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, in a lecture entitled “The Architect’s Dream of Paradise,” offered what I think is a more gallant and noble response to the question of the designer’s role, when he noted that “Every building, every architectural product that is its symbol, is intended to show that we wish to build a paradise on earth for man.”

Now these are high aspirations, because the notion of paradise is fecund with both lush images and historical meanings. The lost or future paradise stands at the core of the Hindu, Buddhist, Judeo-Christian, and Islamic religions. The Greek word *paradiseos*, which appears twice in the Alexandrian translation of the Hebrew bible, comes from the Persian word *paridaeza*, which mean an enclosed or walled-off garden. Thus, the word paradise is most generally associated with the garden.

This is also true with the great rulers of the ancient world. The famed Hanging Gardens of Babylon, as we now know, were actually located in the Assyrian city of Nineveh (present-day Mosul), and King Ashurbanipal went to great lengths to describe not his palace but the gardens that he had designed. The great imperial cities of China were built around

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the emperor’s palace, which was generally centered within or adjacent to the imperial garden. The city of Kyoto, the one-time capital of Japan, exists today as a city defined almost entirely by its imperial and monastic gardens. Plato and Epicurus gave their lectures in gardens. Hadrian built his imperial city at Tivoli (for a resident of one) in a vast garden. And the mesmerizing mosaic depiction of the wide-eyed Empress Theodora in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna is portrayed inside a garden pavilion. Early Christian monks who left their towns for the isolation of desert caves or forest huts alluded to them as paradises. Later in the Middle Ages, the reform-minded Cistercians referred to the cloisters of their austere stone abbeys as paradises. Imagine for a moment how indeed paradisiacal were their churches with their extremely high reverberation times, the aural spectacle of one hundred monks in a candle-lit midnight mass interlacing the precisely times phrases of their Gregorian chants (Figure 3.1). They must have imagined the collective sound as emanating from heaven above.

Does this mean that Aalto was misguided in his hope that designers could build another paradise? Or have we, as designers, lost our way in the muddy philosophical backwaters of semiotics, postmodernism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and computer-generated software—all of which at least has had the benefit of wringing the last molecule of life out of a tedious and exhausting line of architectural theory. Like the Sirens of the Odyssey, theory has lured architects into the belief that the purpose of design is to play conceptual games or be edgy, as it were, through the manipulation of society’s cultural emblems. In doing so, we have overlooked the fact that architecture is predominantly a “whole body” experience—a multisensory, emotional, hormonal, and phenomenal one grounded in the entire bodily organism. This experience also arises in the dynamic interplay of the ecological, social, and cognitive environments. If design studios have emphasized the need to be creative in a fashionable display of glass boxes or twisted cutting-edge objects, Aalto’s notion of paradise was much simpler. He was simply voicing the desire to create an environment in which people would thrive and be happy.

II.

Yet how do we save our ship from being pummeled on the rocks of our own unchallenged design premises? The problem is not an easy one because of the great complexities of what we now refer to as global culture.

But perhaps we should start by admitting that we have, in recent years, been a little intellectual lazy. After theory crashed and burned sometime around the start of the new millennium, we have been coasting along a little too smugly. We continue to view the world in Cartesian dualities, such as the belief that we have material bodies into which are crammed the gray matter of thinking minds, or that we are subjects cast within an objective world somehow standing apart from us, something that we can manipulate at will. We continue to characterize culture as something out there in the world, something given and not of our making, something over which we have little or no control. We continue to ignore the fact that in the last quarter-century philosophy, the humanities more broadly, and the biological sciences have undergone a significant paradigm shift—to borrow a phrase from Thomas Kuhn. It is one that has uprooted many centuries-old ways of viewing the world. If we wish to start fresh in our pursuit of Aalto’s paradise, then perhaps the first thing that we do is to work with an up-to-date understanding of who we as living organisms.

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In part, this new view of ourselves can be summarized by this passage of the philosophers Evan Thompson and Francisco Varela:

The nervous system, the body and the environment are highly structured dynamical systems, coupled to each other on multiple levels. Because they are so thoroughly enmeshed—biologically, ecologically and socially—a better conception of brain, body, and environment would be as mutually embedded systems rather than as internally and externally located with respect to one another.¹

There are two crucial points for architects that can be extracted from this summation. First, we cannot extract the organism from the environment in which it is embedded; our very existence is bound with it. Second, because architects build environments, they contribute largely to the environmental and social cultures in which our lives unfold. A little over a year ago, a group of European architects and planners at the annual gathering of world leaders in Davos, Switzerland, issued the proclamation that we urgently needed a holistic, culture-centered approach to the built environment. What does such an approach entail? We might start with the underlying premise of the new biological field of niche construction— that is, when an organism alters its environmental field, it also changes the natural-selection pressures of that organism. Saying it another way, every time we pollute the environmental field with poor objects of our own design, we demean ourselves as a species.

Three interrelated terms stand in the forefront of the contemporary humanistic discourse: embodiment, enculturation, and enactivism. To say that we are embodied organisms by virtue of our bodies borders on a tautology, yet from a cognitive perspective it is important to clarify one essential point. Cognition in itself does not exist in the brain somewhere alone or apart from the body. Every thought, every course of action, every meaningful affordance is a function of the whole organism. If you at semester’s end have not slept for three days, your life is diminished and your compacity for thinking is lessened. Thought is therefore limited, or rather said another way, every time we pollute the environmental field with poor objects of our own design, we demean ourselves as a species.

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The idea of enculturation or culture is another term whose meaning has radically shifted in recent years. According to the anthropological models of the 1960s, culture was simply the “nurture” factor of the nature/nurture equation—that is, culture was something imposed upon the human genetic structure from the outside, from the social environment that humans themselves have created. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz in the early 1970s, for instance, defined culture as “extragenetic, outside-the-skin” control mechanisms, which distinguish the behavior of our species from other species.⁴ Contemporary philosophy, however, views culture in a very different light, as we have seen with Thompson’s characterization of the brain, body, and environment as dynamically structured systems mutually embedded. The original meaning of the word “culture,” taking it back to its Latin root, is growing or cultivating something in the soil or a prepared medium. The humanities and sciences are today actually returning us to this meaning. In architectural terms, culture is tending to the human organism within its built and social environments—the inseparable environmental and cultural medium in which our particular organism either thrives or diminishes.

The idea of culture is also related to that of enactivism, which is the idea that we are not bodies separate from and cognitively assessing an objective world apart from us. Rather, there is a dynamic interplay between the two, which cannot be suspended. Our constantly changing cognitive systems, through each individual and generational change, enacts or constructs the meaning of what we perceive. Each of us, living in a cultural medium, enacts a somewhat different world. And our different experiences, in turn, are a result of the mutual interaction between our sensorimotor capacities and the environment in which we dwell.


III.

And here we come to the idea of “affordance,” the theme of this particular seminar. In 1934, the biologist Jakob first approached the idea with his notion of the Umwelt, the surrounding world, or how our perception is defined by the sensory carriers of meaning particular to our organism. In 1979 the psychologist James Gibson carried this notion forward when he defined a “niche”—that which we as architects are presumed to design—as “a set of affordances.” He also noted that a “niche” stands apart from the idea of “habitat, because it refers more to how an animal lives than to where it lives.”

I will make the case that this distinction between “how we live,” as opposed to “where we live,” is crucial to a more responsible approach to design. It is pivotal because it suggests that we should be focusing less on what a building means to the occupant or to the designer (for the latter, usually a reaffirmation of the latest fashions), and more on how people experience them. Take these two somewhat random images.

One is the almost prototypical American urban street: little direct sunlight within the canyons of the tall buildings, concrete sidewalks, glass boxes with no detailing—in short, a cold, boring, and lifeless design offering no sensory spark or engagement. Various studies have shown that people pick up their pace when walking past such buildings, in order to move away from them as quickly as possible (Figure 3.2). Unfortunately, the glass box adjacent to it typically provides only more of the same. The American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, back in the 1960s, made the observation that the failing of modern architecture was precisely its lack of scale and tactile stimulation. As he described the problem: “Our urban spaces provide little excitement or visual variation and virtually no opportunity to build a kinesthetic repertoire of spatial experiences. It would appear that many people are kinesthetically deprived and even cramped.” This statement was made fifty-three years ago, and yet we seem content with making the same mistake. Perhaps an even more embarrassing question is why are we content with designing with the architectural palette of a half-century ago?

The other image, admittedly situated in a better climate, has, by contrast, sunlight, greenery (so important in relaxing the optic nerve), texture, scale, history, and of the affordance of multiple transportations, which allows us the healthy exercising of our biological organism (Figure 3.3). Why is it that architects, and even those studying architecture I dare say, still tend to gravitate toward the so-called solution on the left? It is because we are focused on the object and not the experience of the urban inhabitant. Designers are looking for a technological solution rather than creating a human niche that allows people a set of affordances.

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points of high congestion, and shadowed streets on which many people walk past these glass boxes in a very unhappy frame of mind. Parisians, living within a different cultural niche, interestingly still restrict their high rises to the outskirts of the city.

I once lived in Chicago, and from the 35th street station on the Red Line, one can look north to the impressive skyline of Chicago. People commuting into the city on freeways from the west also view the skyline as they are arriving, no doubt with some pride or sense of self-importance. Yet over many months of the year, people walking those downtown streets do so with little joy. The cardinal grid channels the howling winter winds into the glass-and-concrete canyons at great intensity. Trash litters the sidewalks. The ambient noise level of the overhead mass-transit system and the horns of the automobiles are only slightly less disturbing than standing at the end of a runway at O’Hare Airport. The air is fowl, and the tens of thousands of commuters emerging from their parking garages or bleak subway stations, twice a day, have to endure this hellish experience of walking to or from their offices—where, if their desk is less than twenty feet from the window walls, they will shiver away their body heat all day long. I think my point is now rather obvious. Architects radiate a distinct glow when asked by fawning critics to expound upon the inspiration behind their glass towers, aesthetically fashioned with the latest twists and bends. Yet the experience of the residents negotiating the city on a daily basis is more often than not a hellish one—even if their iPhones can direct them to the nearest pub or pizza parlor. How did we come to this present state of affairs? Why do we employ such vacuous standards in our designs? There is a line from a Clint Eastwood movie that pretty much explains it: “We became civilized.” The legacy of these dumb glass boxes plopped in every city across the globe will nevertheless remain with us for quite a while. Whatever happened to Aalto’s dream of paradise?

IV.

Just what can designers afford? Andy Clark defines affordance this way: “Affordances are the possibilities for use, intervention and action which the physical world offers a given agent and are determined by the ‘fit’ between the agent’s physical structure, capacities and skills and the action-related properties of the environment itself.” I like in particular the idea of a “fit” between the human organism and “action-related” qualities of the environment. And because one perceives the built environment through one’s sensory and emotional engagement with it, the architect’s task would seem to be creating environments that are intriguing or compelling in some manner, environments that are adaptive to our organisms, environments that are restorative or restive, or more simply, environments that make us happy. Conversely, people shun environments that are dangerous, annoying, tedious, and injurious to their health.

Yet because we, as a society, seem unable to repair the impoverished or dilapidated parts of our cities, or maintain our dark and filthy mass-transit stations where we are jammed into overcrowded trains, or relieve our suburban commuters of their two hours of bumper-to-bumper travel on so-called expressways—we run up against the difficult question of what can architects really afford? Can we really think of changing the patterns that have been set down over generations, as it were? Can we any longer contemplate, as Aalto once did, a vision of something different? In what way can we realistically provide a better “fit” or attunement of the human organism with the action-related prospects of its surroundings?

Although there may be no timely or inexpensive solutions to the many failings of our present environments, we can at least start by reforming our profession, and in this regard, I would like to begin with a radical reform of architectural education. For a start, I would like to see significantly less studio time devoted to coming up with the “idea” for a design, or how we might ape the latest trends in our glass boxes, and more on research into the human experience of designed environments—that is, serious research funded by federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation or National Institute of Health, or private foundations. It should be research carried out with the very sophisticated technologies we have at our disposal today to evaluate better how we engage with our environments. In the 1960s the Green Movement first articulated our shortcomings with regard to the impact our poor designs were having on our natural environments. Today it is time to address the equally pernicious effects our designed environments are having on us—how we think and how we socially engage with each other. Some may argue that this time spent on research will lessen our skill as designers and thwart creativity, yet I believe the opposite to be the case. Architecture students are very smart and can handle both tasks, and school is a time for learning and not to suffer an indoctrination into the unwritten rules of the profession.

Understanding better who we are and our intensely social natures will open up fresh and creative approaches to the design of our cultural niches. Moreover, without such documentation, architects will never have credibility with zoning boards, planning commissions, or the heavy arm of the ever-expanding and oppressive political state. We should reinforce the point that our ultimate objective is good design, or even better, beautiful design. And in considering design from a human perspective, we will put an end to the intellectual fashions that seem perpetually to plague the field of design.

Now what kinds of research do I mean? The range can be quite extensive but let me give you a couple of examples. You are a mostly young audience, who have not entered into the tedium of the workforce, and therefore you have not yet been forced to come to terms with the idea of a precious two or three-week vacation each year, where people go fishing, rent a cabin in the mountains, visit a foreign country, or stay at a seashore resort. Now why do people feel the need to do such things? We of course have the appropriate technological metaphor for needing such a thing; we say we do so to recharge our batteries. We mean by this that we need periodically a place to relax, to relieve our anxieties and tensions, to take in new sensory stimulation, and forget the fact that we are nine thousand dollars in debt on our credit cards. Yet we are also saying something else when we take on these annual treks. We are saying that beaches, golf courses, mountains, or a trip to a foreign country are in their own way paradises, which are remote from our everyday designed or built environments. The more dismal our local urban environments are, the more these trips are necessary to maintain biological equilibrium and good health.

Yet these trips also tell us something else, which can inform our everyday environments. A few decades ago the psychologist Roger Ulrich looked at the recovery rates of patients after a surgical procedure that on average required six days in the hospital. He looked at patients in a hospital wing that had two different outside views. One part of the wing faced a brick wall; the other part of the wing opened onto a green meadow. He discovered that the view of nature, in and of itself, has a restorative effect on the human body. Those patients with a view of the meadow stayed in the hospital one day less, had few complications after surgery, and took fewer pain medications. This study not only told us something important about ourselves, but, as it turned out, it also had a profound effect on the design of hospitals, which today are being designed and built around gardens, which I, following the ancient Persians, will call paradises. It also opened a new realm of design thinking—biophilic design—or the integration of nature into all of our designs. Think of this the next time you design a building with a view of a brick wall, or worse, a parking lot.

We have many other areas in which research is needed today. Ulrich’s study of hospital rooms concerned the homeostatic regulation of the body within the built environment, through the medium of evidence-based design. Yet with the same techniques we can study the effects of poor environments, or what might be called environmental deprivation. They are many, well-documented studies of the negative effects of such environments, among them, obesity, disease, depression, stress, crime, drug addiction, alcoholism, asocial behavior, psychological and personality disorders, and higher rations of morbidity. We have known these problems for years, yet we as a society seem to be incapable of improving our poor urban environments—helpless as we seemingly are. Conversely, we have done virtually no research on what constitutes good or enriched environments, although studies with rats have shown that sensory and socially enriched environments can double the size of brain cells and greatly enhances synaptic connectivity. Does this mean that good environments can make us smarter?

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A third area in which we, over the past few decades, have made important progress about ourselves is the recognition of how profoundly we are social animals. Only very few architects, such as Christopher Alexander, have wandered into this terrain, and he did so with only modest and sometimes questionable social-science models. Today we have made major advances into understanding the parts of the social brain allowing us to network with others, the environmental factors imperative for the full development of the social brain, our much longer evolutionary history, and the ubiquity of human rituals, which lie at the foundation of our behavior. Once again, I ask the question: Where is this topic within your design-studio curriculum?

There is far too much here to discuss today, so I will limit myself to two areas of interest to architects. One is the role that emotion or mood plays in the experience of a designed environment. The second is the seemingly quaint idea of beauty, which I will obviously not be discussing by the standards of architectural design juries.

VI.

The idea of emotion and mood actually has had a lengthy pedigree in architectural discussions going back through architectural history—that is, before the advent of the modern movement short-circuited it. Aestheticians of the 19th century also seem to have had a good grasp of mood and perception, matched only by what we have learned in the past few decades. Both Robert Vischer and Heinrich Wölflin, for instance, argued that the experience of architecture was emotional and physiognomic—a process by which we feel ourselves into and understand the world around us. August Schmarsow made precisely the same argument with architectural space—that is, spatial perception is not a neutral or Euclidean field but something that changes with the position, orientation, and affordances of our bodies.

Traditional psychology textbooks of just a few decades ago defined mood or emotion as a response of an organism a sensory stimulus, the way we typically think of emotions such as love or anger. Present models, however, view mood in a much more complex way. For many within the field of affective psychology, mood is defined as an ongoing, endogenous kinesthetic activity onto itself, the predisposed movement of an organism within an environmental field. Mood is not something that rises up from some mysterious place below; rather, it is a “whole-organism” event motivating our movements and actions. If we walk into a social environment of other people, for example, we immediately understand the mood of the room. If we walk into a boring architectural environment, our first impulse is to leave or tune it out.

Just as the appearance of a morning sun seems to brighten the prospects for our day, or a drizzling rain seems to dampen it, so does every architectural environment alter our mood or way of thinking. Upon entering a room in a northern climate, for instance, we might instinctively move toward a sunny window, both to enjoy the warming heat of the sun and to rest our eyes if there is a pleasant view of paradise outside. Again, if it is spring and the window is open, we might enjoy a whiff of a fragrance emanating from a garden, without being aware that this sensory experience in itself puts us into an amiable state of mind. Please note that inoperable windows do not allow this affordance. Maxime Sheets-Johnstone has emphasized that “affective feelings and tactile-kinesthetic feelings are experientially intertwined.” Mood is already “a postural attitude” or “corporeal readiness to act.”

We might then think of the open window as more than just sunlight or view of a garden; it is an affordance that swells our mood, perhaps with memories. Giovanna Colombetti argues that emotion pervades cognition through and through, and thus emotion “is integral to both perception and action.”


Architects can exploit this connection. We can design spaces that are permeable, or offering different courses of action. We can modulate these spaces through the play of light, scale, color, texture, relation, materiality, movement, sound, olfaction, and the depth of layering effect upon effect. A long and indirect approach to a building or a narrow path into an expansive room—both build a mood of anticipation or arousal, thereby intensifying the hopeful emotion of delight upon one’s arrival. Similarly, beautifully crafted detailing also pleases everyone. Why? Because with our mirror systems we emulate the talent or hand-crafted effort that went into the ingenious result.

Mood also varies with the experience of atmospheric and conceptual effects. For instance, in medieval France there was a 12th-century movement called Marianism, a Christian fondness for the Madonna, which resulted in a bevy of Gothic churches dedicated to “Our Lady” or Notre Dame. Why was this the case? One reason was that Christian theology up to this time had been emphasizing the idea of the Last Judgment, the possibility of fiery and eternal damnation. Mary, with her head slightly tilted to the right, thus came to be seen a merciful intercessor on one’s behalf, someone more empathetic and approachable. Thus, this stained-glass window of Mary in the chancel of Chartres Cathedral, one of the original windows of the 12th-century church (later rebuilt after the fire of 1194), is a masterpiece of color and light, because it fosters the mood of hope and salvation. It did so with the demeanor of the Madonna, but also with the seemingly supernatural nature of light filtering through, which was entirely fitting for a building that medieval architects viewed as the doorway to paradise, if not paradise itself. Aalto no doubt applauded the efforts of this master craftsman of glass.

Mood can be manifested in many other ways. Hans Scharoun’s Berlin Philharmonic Hall, despite its cosmopolitan location, evokes the spirit of a small town’s music festival. Not only does the tent-like ceiling project the festive mood of a special holiday and its provisional structure, but the stepped tiers on all sides afford one to experience not only the orchestra and its powerful auditory vibrations but also the view of another’s response to what you are experiencing. Scharoun’s building is thus intensely social in its mood.

Not all emotional experiences, however, have to be so intense or expressive. Jørn Utzon’s own house in Mallorca achieves its emotional power or through its utmost simplicity: the social anticipation of conversational seating, exposed stonework, and a sublime Mediterranean view exploited with a deep perspectival frame (Figure 3.5). Robert Adam was another master of mood, someone who could dramatically alter one’s mood from one room to another. Can one think of a more compelling artistic production than his library at Kenwood, Hampstead, London.

Another master of mood was Henri Labrouste in this design for the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, now unfortunately retired for its original purpose. Once again, a festive mood was exploited with the books, the paradisiacal gardens depicted in the murals, and the porcelain umbrellas filtering natural light for reading. Not to be overlooked in this regard was the tactile sensation of the infill panels of the desktops—glare-free and a soft, perfectly muted surfaces for the requisite lead writing instrument. What could be more paradisiacal for the work of the scholar. Architects of the 18th and 19th century knew how to exploit mood in subtle ways that many designers have since forgotten. The library at Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon, is approached from a courtyard paradise on the entrance side, but the reading room is situated on a hilltop to survey an agricultural landscape interrupted by treescapes along rivers and streams. Aalto, it seems, viewed buildings as experiences.
Let us turn to the idea of beauty, and in an unconventional way. Architects typically do not like to speak of beauty, yet they do talk, sometimes endlessly, about the aesthetic inspiration underlying their designs. And in this regard, we already have a level of corruption creeping into practice. The English word aesthetic comes from the Greek word *Aisthetikos*, which has the meaning of “perception, feeling, or sensible cognition.” In this regard, its meaning is grounded not in reflection or judgment but in the sensory or corporeal senses. Alexander Baumgarten, who first plucked the word from the past and introduced it into the German language in the 1750s, understood this very well. He emphasized its emotional coloration by defining aesthetics as the “science of sensible cognition.”

Problems became apparent a few years later, however, when a host of philosophers debated whether the judgment of beauty was objective or subjective, whether it resided in the outlines or contours of the artistic form, or in the mind of the viewing subject. In almost all cases, the idea of beauty was bound with the idea of making a judgment. Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*, considered the issue of beauty and went to great lengths to preclude the idea of “feeling” or “emotion” from the act of judgment. At one point, as we suggested earlier, he even proffered the ghostly notion of “aesthetic ideas”—that is, conceptual ideas involving the imagination without any “definite concept.” Yet only a few pages later, he flatly contradicted himself by invoking the philosopher Epicurus, who had insisted that all aesthetic “pleasures, at heart, issue from a bodily sensation.”


Yet the idea of affordance, which involves the “fit” between the human organism and the sensory or action-related qualities of the environment, allows us to approach the idea of beauty in a different way. When people outside of the arts say that their lover is beautiful or that this artistic work is aesthetically satisfying, they are not making a conceptual statement. They are referring to a sensory impression, one that fits with the action-related qualities of their immediate environments, and one whose intense feeling they have a genuine desire to express. When someone stands before this particular mural in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, one is immediately attracted to the colorful mosaics, but upon further study one is also drawn into the enlarged eyes of the people within the retinue of Empress Theodora. These are eyes into which we read the souls of people who lived almost seventeen hundred years ago. Art history books may refer to this particular mural as iconographic, but art historians often miss the point. This mural is paradisiacal because it is deeply social in its bearing. We say it is beautiful because it tells us something profound about ourselves.
the ground. Mercury stands at the far left. He was the god of medicine and is therefore another allusion to the Medicis. To his left are the three graces of pleasure, chastity, and beauty, and it is the middle figure chaste, with the trim figure, who is about to be nabbed by the arrow of Eros. Even the fact that the painting takes place in an orange grove is representational, because oranges were depicted on the Medici coat of arms.

It is when we come the haloed figure in the center—Venus, the goddess of love—that we realize something else is going on here. The intense sexual overtones of the figures surrounding her are there to induce a particular passion, a lustful feeling for love, yet Venus stands apart. The gesticulation of her right hand is a pose that many early Renaissance painters chose for the Madonna in the Annunciation, and the head tilt to the right and the facial structure of Venus is nearly identical to that of Mary we saw in the Chartres Cathedral. We have here a very interesting passage between two cultures: the high morality of Christianity and the more carnal or pagan underpinnings of the new Humanism taking hold—and not without its peril to the career of Botticelli himself.

We can see this also in Botticelli’s painting of a few years later, The Birth of Venus, also commissioned for a wedding celebration. A few of the earlier figures reappear, but here the deity born in the clam shell off the isle of Cytherea, which incidentally was always portrayed in mythology as a garden paradise, is given center stage. In her full nudity, we have a more human and sensuous figure, yet once again she has the head tilt and the somewhat Gothic appearance of the Madonna. My point is that both paintings by Botticelli are social expressions in their subject matter, expressions that we experience not through words but through our own social and emotional natures. And it is no mystery why these two works express that we experience not through words but through our own social and emotional natures. Every social compact disassembles when people are unable to dream of paradise, like it or not, is deeply imprinted within our encultured natures. Every social compact disassembles when people are unable to work within or enjoy their living environments.

Second, a viable culture of beauty has to be built on a solid social foundation. The current research on our mirror systems, for instance, is today demonstrating that we have a neurological resonance with the intentions and feelings of others, and “these other-within-self intersubjective representations,” as Jaak Panksepp and Colwyn Trevarthen explain the matter, “establish sympathetic resonances, and intersubjective contagions, probably by intrinsic affection systems situated much lower than the neocortex, making complementary adjustments to the intelligence and feelings expressed in gestures of other bodies and sensed by sight, sound and touch through neocortical processes that are epigenetically

programed by experience.”18 The gist of this statement is that we are deeply connected to each other socially or culturally, although the drift of society today seems to be moving in the opposite direction.

Joseph Rykwert, back in the era of Robert Venturi’s fascination with the Las Vegas, warned architects not to succumb to “the techniques of advertising and the righjoys of neon,” but rather attend to the physical form itself, “the stage on which the action occurs, in his words,” the “demarcation of a place as a social situation”19 (Figure 3.7). The task of good designers, he went on to say, is “to clarify, to reconcile, to fortify,” and “the savant exercise of their skill is the real contribution which they can make to the creation of a valid human environment.” Hans-Georg Gadamer has similarly argued that every genuine work of art “signifies an increase of being” or “sensuous abundance,” and when embodied in rituals or festivals, it brings people together in a swelling moment of conciliation.20

Seen in this light, the search for beauty is nothing less than a moral and professional obligation. Beauty and the architectural making of culture are, in the end, forms of ritualistic behavior. And examples of human action free of this ceremonial instinct, as Wendy James has noted, “are impossible to find, because all human action relates in some way to arenas of culturally specified significance we participate in with others.”21 Beauty and culture are in their own way social activities underlying Aalto’s vision of paradise. Both are similarly affordances—those which allow us a moment of fit and fullness, and those which the designer should have the calling to create.

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Figure 3.7: The courtyard of Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute (1972) gathers the ANFA congregation to await the equinox sunset aligning with the central water trough. Here architecture frames events of human life. (image by author).