

What is Organic Architecture?

Pioneers, development and perspectives

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The term organic architecture embraces a colourful variety of architectural approaches and expressions which developed in different places at the beginning of the 20th century. Pioneers such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Antoni Gaudí and Rudolf Steiner drew, each in their own way, inspiration from the principles of living nature. This often led to free and expressive forms. These were not meant as an imitation of nature, but to support people as living and creative beings.

Within the organic movement, architecture is not only seen as an expression of culture and society, but also as something that influences the inner and outer lives of people. In this sense, the human being is seen as a physical, psychological and spiritual entity, connected to its surroundings at all these levels. At a time in which architecture is largely dominated by economics, technical possibilities and regulations, organic architecture strives for an integral approach that also comprises ecological aspects, cultural meaning and spirituality.

Origin and backgrounds of organic architecture

The externalization of form in the neo-styles and the rise of new building techniques fired many architects of that period to create a new style in line with their times. Amid Art Nouveau, Functionalism, and Constructivism the concept of organic architecture was born. The pioneers of this direction drew inspiration from principles derived from living nature. Each of them stressed different aspects, but seen in relation to one another their individual approaches constitute a coherent totality.

Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) was one of the first to introduce the concept of 'organic architecture'. After closely studying nature, he concluded that form always follows function and made this principle the guideline for his architectural designs. Moreover, he brought his geometrical building

Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959) broadened both the content and the language of organic architecture in many directions. He expanded the concept 'organic' to denote the relation between the building and its environment, the continuity of internal and external space and the use of building materials in accordance with their own nature.

Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926) was one of the first architects to express himself in sculptural form. These forms were often based on the forces at play in the construction. During the last phase of his life he developed a natural geometry of double curved surfaces that he applied in the church of the Sagrada Família.

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) introduced in architecture the principle of 'metamorphosis' that he derived from Goethe. This enabled him to express development processes that are inherent to nature, culture and the human consciousness. By contemplating these forms an awareness for interrelations and the ability to think in processes can be developed.

The transformation of modernism

Organic architecture seemed to have expired at the end of the twenties. Several of its leading pioneers such as Sullivan, Steiner and Gaudí died and in Europe the economic recession plus the impending Second World War caused a general decline in building.

In the fifties and sixties however, organic architecture underwent an unexpected revival. It is remarkably that some of the pioneers of the modern movement brought about this revival. They transformed its initially rigid geometrical character into a more lively, organic direction. In some instances, such as with Le Corbusier, this was a surprising turn, in others, such as with Alvar Aalto and Hans Scharoun, a more gradual development occurred.

Notre-Dame-du-Haut

Le Corbusier

Ronchamp, France, 1950-1955

TWA Terminal, John F. Kennedy Airport

Eero Saarinen

New York, USA, 1956-1962

Sydney Opera House

Jørn Utzon

Sydney, Australia, 1957-1973

Philharmonie

Hans Scharoun

Berlin, Germany, 1956-1963

Finlandiahall

Alvar Aalto

Helsinki, Finland, 1962-1975

Organic architecture worldwide

During the last decades of the twentieth century organic architecture experienced a vigorous revival. A new generation of architects was inspired by the work of pioneers such as Wright and Steiner, but wed their ideas with local building traditions, new techniques and their own creative impulses. In this way, a new diversity of approaches and forms of expression have originated worldwide. These projects constitute the central part of the exhibition. Depending on the availability of exhibition space, a selection can be made from about 50 projects. They are presented in the form of colour photographs, design sketches, plans, models and a concise project description, when possible by the architects themselves.

Rudolf Steinerseminariet

Asmussens Arkitektkontor

Järna, Sweden, 1968-1992

ING Bank

Alberts & Van Huut

Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 1979-1987

Roman Catholic Church Paks

Imre Makovecz

Paks, Hungary, 1986-1991

Whiting Residence

Bart Prince

Sun Valley, Idaho, USA, 1989-1991

Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre

Gregory Burgess

Northern Territory, Australia, 1990-1995

Current significance of organic architecture

Topical themes such as sustainable and healthy building, user participation and cultural identity are brought into a dialogue with the premises of organic architecture. Elements such as building materials, form, light, colour and water offer visitors the opportunity to make their own experiences.

Ecological building

In the years to come the entire building practice will face the task to achieve an ecologically sound and sustainable way of building. Organic architecture can add to this a form language that expresses consciousness for the surroundings, for ecological cohesion and life processes.

Creating a healthy environment

Sustainable architecture does not automatically create a healthy environment. By conceiving a building as an 'organism' rather than a 'machine', it can support the life processes of the people who use it.

Sensory impressions and perceptual values

The built environment offers a constant flow of impressions. These impressions have a formative effect on our constitution, they nourish our inner life and reflect cultural values. Various installations offer the possibility to make the relationship between ourselves and the built environment more tangible.

Identity

Due to the increase in scale and specialization, the architectural process has largely become detached from the users. However, the growing individualisation arouses in many people a desire to exert influence on their own living environment and to recognise themselves in its design.

Community building

The growing individualisation and related anonymity engender the need for new ways of community building. Community building projects and an increased awareness for the public space surrounding buildings, can stimulate the development of new communities.

Cultural content

Modern architecture is both in function and appearance strongly determined by economic circumstances. Organic architecture can, by its integrated approach to building, provide an additional cultural dimension, which nourishes the soul and enlivens the spirit.