timeless

The word flow, when discussing architectural design, often refers to circulation, and how easily one moves from space to space, or how one room "flows" into another. There is another definition for the word flow, one defined by psychology. Psychologists describe flow as that state of enjoyment experienced when unselfconsciously immersed in an activity that has been mastered; what athletes call "being in the zone." Flow can be achieved in any activity. A novelist, for example, experiences it when lost in the midst of writing.

Flow is not merely a subjective experience, either; it can be sensed in others, which is especially true when there is familiarity with the activity. Tennis players will know exactly when Serena Williams is on her game, and when she's not. Painters can intuit in a painting the flow of its artist, even if the painter lived 400 years ago.

With buildings, people are already practiced in the perception of flow, having lived, worked, played in many, and visited hundreds. Because buildings are viewed as creative works, there is an expectation for creativity, a prospect for signs or architectural brilliance. When this type of flow is found, the theory suggests, it is not the building itself that is being sensed, but the clarity of conception that is being perceived.

People who experience flow regularly report the sensation of losing track of time while at peak performance. That's why exceptional architectural design is described as being "timeless".

Where timeless buildings are concerned, few are more iconic than Palladio's Villa Rotonda, in Vicenza, Italy. Completed in 1592, this villa still stands today. While many attribute Palladio's success to the rules of his classical style, it is obvious that he was "in the zone" as well. In a strictly symmetrical composition with porticos facing each Cardinal point, Palladio brought together in one building a number of references of his studies of ancient Roman structures while pursuing the Renaissance ideal of man as the measure of all things and the hub of the universe. The geometry of the whole house begins with the size of a human being standing at its geometric center. The result is a design in which geometry not only decides the form of the building but also symbolizes the distinctively human contribution to making the world better, more beautiful and better ordered. The villa becomes a temple to the human being presiding at the center of the world which it surveys in each of the four directions, with the supra-world above, symbolized by the dome.

Henry Bacon's design of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, completed in 1922, is loosely based on the Parthenon, and of a similar architectural language, however, very different from the Parthenon. The memorial closes off the vista that begins with the United States Capitol two miles to the east, and it sits at the end of a reflecting pool, from a distance appearing almost to float on the water like the Taj Mahal. Here, the Memorial is not a structure supported by columns, like a Greek temple, but more of a marble box surrounded by a colonnade. Brilliantly to his own purpose, Bacon was also clearly "in the zone" when he created this immense, formal box to memorialize Abraham Lincoln and stand as a symbol of American certitude and conviction. Bacon's design has a timeless gravitas that has animated its role as an embodiment of the national unity Lincoln proclaimed in his Second Inaugural Address.

This timelessness quality is having a sense of something eternal or divine; and a sense that the architecture was simply right and would always be so. Beauty was derived from the language of timelessness; thus, architecture with this quality is considered to be aesthetically pleasing. There is a central quality, which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a living creature, a town, a building. This quality is objective and precise; and timeless. The search which is made for this quality, is the central search of any person, it is the search for the moments and situations when a person feels most alive, as if time has stopped or at least slowed down.

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