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## RUDOLF STEINER: Occult Crank or Architectural Mastermind?

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) saw architectural creation as a means of apprehending our place in the cosmos and his esoteric system of Anthroposophy aimed to demonstrate the correspondence between the spiritual and material worlds. Much of the literature available on Steiner tends to polarize him as either a creative genius or eccentric oddity, with architectural historians generally tending to adopt the latter view. Despite the fact that Steiner's architectural conceptions have remained marginal, the highly acclaimed works of many Anthroposophically inspired architects suggest that his gnostic perceptions may have something worthwhile to offer contemporary architecture.



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## Polarized Opinions

The architecture and philosophy of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) has often met with indifference or antipathy in architectural circles. This can partly be attributed to the prejudices associated with positivist interpretations of modern architectural history which failed to acknowledge metaphysical and spiritual conceptions of architecture. However, in large part, it has to do with the enigmatic nature of Steiner himself. Throughout his life, Steiner shifted from conventional academic scholar to international figurehead of Anthroposophy. He defined Anthroposophy as “a path of knowledge to guide the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe”<sup>1</sup> and believed that architecture must play a central role in achieving that objective. Steiner wrote 28 books, delivered more than 6000 lectures (more than 70 of which were on architecture) and designed 17 buildings.<sup>2</sup> His epistemology drew loyal acolytes and staunch opponents in equal measure and much of the literature written about him reflects these two extremes. He is often eulogized by biased devotees on the one hand or dismissed, ignored or even deliberately discredited on the other. In order to determine what relevance and significance Steiner may hold for architects, it is important to understand the philosophical debates which have consistently surrounded Anthroposophy and examine how architectural historians have interpreted and understood Steiner’s ideas, as these factors have influenced how Steiner has been presented to us. By addressing both the real and imposed limitations of Steiner’s outlook, this paper aims to identify a way of coming to terms with his architecture and its basic principles which have been a source of inspiration for notable contemporary architects.

## Philosophy or Fiction?

Part of the reason such contradictory opinions of Steiner exist is because the man himself is a paradox. His work is rooted in a strong philosophical foundation; he studied Goethe, Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel and Shelling, among others. However Steiner’s claims of “factual” knowledge of the spirit world, announced as divine revelations, have led some critics to dismiss him as a deluded eccentric or denounce him entirely as a fraud. At times, his work demonstrates a disciplined mind of remarkable intellect, capable of highly original thought, while at other times his somewhat absurd ramblings read more like a bizarre fiction with a completely unfathomable plot. The Nobel Prize winning playwright, Maurice Maeterlinck, recognized this dichotomy in his book *The Great Secret*, commenting that;

we ask ourselves, having followed him [Steiner] with interest through preliminaries which denote an extremely well balanced, logical, and comprehensive mind, whether he has suddenly gone mad, or if we are dealing with a hoaxer or with a genuine clairvoyant.<sup>3</sup>

While Maeterlinck acknowledges this contradiction, he investigates it no further and in the next paragraph concludes that:

when all is taken into account, we realise once more, as we lay his works aside, what we realised after reading most of the other mystics, that what he [Steiner] calls “the great drama of [occult] knowledge” ... should rather be called the great drama of essential and invincible ignorance.<sup>4</sup>

One of the major obstacles standing between Steiner and today’s reader is, in fact, Steiner’s

own literary output. In his book *Rudolf Steiner: The Man and His Vision*, Colin Wilson describes Steiner's writing as "formidably abstract and as unappetising as dry toast".<sup>5</sup> Wilson suggests that this is a result of Steiner's background as a Goethe scholar. Having spent several years as the editor of Goethe's works, Steiner adopts Goethe's austere and stilted prose in his own writing.<sup>6</sup> While this makes for difficult reading, the greatest stumbling block, however, is the occult content of the work. At the end of the nineteenth century Steiner's work shifted from orthodox philosophy towards more obscure occult ideas, thus resulting in a rejection of his later work by many of his academic peers. According to Wilson, the key to understanding Steiner lies in how one approaches his work. He argues that beginning with Steiner's esoteric works is likely to cause confusion and scepticism and, as such, suggests that we should;

come to understand Steiner's basic ideas through his early books which are grounded in philosophy and either ignore his later ideas or study them purely in a spirit of intellectual curiosity, without

detracting from the importance of his earlier works.<sup>7</sup>

Wilson's recommendation allows the uninitiated to enter Steiner's worldview without having to take on board the occult aspects of his teachings. Yet to entirely ignore his later work paints an incomplete picture of the diversity of Steiner's outlook, given that his practical initiatives in education, agriculture, medicine and architecture resulted from his later esoteric work.

### Anthroposophy and Architecture

Understanding this shift in Steiner's work is critical in understanding why Steiner has been overlooked or dismissed in architectural circles. Architects who come across Steiner's work usually do so via his buildings rather than via his other diverse teachings. A number of Steiner's lectures on architecture pertain specifically to the first and second Goetheanum (Figs. 1, 2) and its ancillary buildings in Dornach, Switzerland. These lectures were delivered to audiences well acquainted with Anthroposophy,



Figure 1. The first Goetheanum, built between 1913 and 1922. Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First\\_Goetheanum.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First_Goetheanum.jpg).



Figure 2. The second Goetheanum now stands on the same site as the original Goetheanum. Photo: © Fiona Gray.

many of whom were actively involved in the building of the Goetheanum or other Anthroposophic pursuits. Readers who have no previous understanding of Steiner's basic teachings are distinctly handicapped in coming to terms with his architectural ideas due to the assumed familiarity with Anthroposophy's fundamental concepts and the use of Anthroposophic jargon throughout the lectures.<sup>8</sup> As Wilson identified, to approach Steiner in this non-linear way is almost certain to put off many readers. It is also arguable that translation from the spoken to the written word necessarily causes the lectures to lose some of their intelligibility, which was conveyed via intonation, gesture and the assistance of Steiner's blackboard drawings (which are now exhibited in art galleries throughout the world).<sup>9</sup> Steiner was also unable to check and edit the transcripts of his lectures and therefore it is unreasonable to expect that they should withstand the kind of scrutiny that his earlier books can be subjected to. This lack of editing does give the texts an immediacy which conveys Steiner's sense of purpose and mission, however a mere acquaintance with the Goetheanum or his architectural lectures

alone is inconsequential without a deeper understanding of their underlying philosophy.

This may go some way towards explaining why much of the architecture built today in the name of Anthroposophy seems to adhere almost apostolically to an expressionistic aesthetic style with little regard for context or architectural programme and no genuine attempt to engage with its higher aspirations. Superficial "Steinerisms" are often applied to buildings with limited understanding of the creative task which Steiner had set for architects. Steiner argued that architectural forms should be borne of an architect's own artistic freedom and individual creativity, reiterating this point time and again in his lectures and writings. In a lecture delivered at Berne in 1921, he stated that: "Spiritual Science does not want to build up abstract symbolical or insipid allegorical art which merely forces didactic teaching into outward form."<sup>10</sup> In relation to the community of houses that Steiner designed surrounding the Goetheanum, he noted that while the community must strive for a unified solution, one house must not be obliged to be like another, stating that;

the houses must be varied and they will have to be very individual in character. Just as there would be nothing organic in putting an arm or hand where the head ought to be in a human body, so a house that would be right for one site would be wrong for another.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Steiner's repeated attempts to convey his organic principles, it seems that some Anthroposophically "inspired" architects entirely miss the point, haphazardly applying wonky windows, irregular angles and faceted roof lines in a banal attempt to "Steinerize" the building. The other side of this scenario however can be found in the work of architects such as Imre Makovecz and Greg Burgess who draw meaning and depth from Steiner's indications. These architects enter into the true intent of Anthroposophy, to produce works of striking originality, giving it relevance and meaning for our own times. This is, of course, what Steiner had always hoped for; recognizing that his own efforts were but an imperfect first attempt at a *modus operandi* for modern architecture. He claimed that "[o]ur building can be no more than something we intend to take further, and those capable of taking our intention further will surely come".<sup>12</sup> Steiner saw his architectural work in terms of a broader concept of human evolution. As part of this evolutionary process he believed that his work would be carried further towards the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century. He envisaged an architecture capable of truly expressing a spiritual conception of modern life. To some extent, this wish has been fulfilled by those contemporary architects who base their work on a deep understanding of Anthroposophic principles, rather than on superficial adaptations of stylistic elements, as we shall soon discuss.

## Disciples and Opponents

Along with the inherent difficulties of Steiner's literature and the application of his ideas to practice, a more damning claim of plagiarism must also be addressed. Steiner has been accused of intellectual opportunism by his detractors, who argue that he has simply patched together various parts of German Idealism, occultism and unorthodox Christianity to create his own eclectic system of esoteric thought. As a result, Steiner's essential ideas are often overridden by an almost chaotic proliferation of concepts borrowed from a wide range of intellectual sources, thus rendering him a dilettante in the eyes of many.

One source, which Steiner borrowed heavily from, was Theosophy. The founder of the Theosophical Society, Helena Blavatsky, claimed to have access to a mysterious body of knowledge called the Akasha Chronicles. These are not chronicles in the ordinary sense of a historical text, but rather a mystical record of the history of the cosmos and of the experiences between death and rebirth. Steiner based much of his theory of cosmic and human evolution on his supersensible readings of this convenient chronicle, giving exhaustive accounts of lost civilizations such as Atlantis and Lemuria.<sup>13</sup> Blavatsky was regarded by many as a charlatan and although Steiner severed his connection with the Theosophical Society in 1909, he was unable to escape being tarred with the same brush. Wilson argues that if Steiner had stuck with the important insights of his philosophical work and reserved his occult teachings strictly for the faithful, he may never have incurred the resentment that has been directed towards him. This may be so, however the Theosophical Society had provided Steiner with a necessary platform from which to establish his own following.

As the number of Steiner converts grew, so too did the contempt amongst his opponents. To outsiders, Steiner's celebrity only fuelled their disdain, and Anthroposophists themselves were largely to blame for this. The accusation of hermeticism is frequently levelled at Anthroposophists—and not without some justification. Anthroposophists share a distinctive set of assumptions which are, at times, disconnected from other modes of thought or points of view and many take on the fervour of devout followers, idolizing Steiner as some kind of guru. Steiner was, however, very clear about disciples, stating that;

[m]ental laziness is prevalent today with the result that people are only too ready to acknowledge some individual or other as a great soul merely on authority. It is important for Anthroposophy to be presented in such a way as to be based on the smallest possible extent on belief in authority. Much that I have said today can be substantiated only by means of spiritual investigation. Yet I beg you not to give credence to these things because I say them, but to test them by everything known to you by history, above all by what you can learn from your own experience. I am absolutely certain that the more closely you examine them, the more confirmation you will find. In this age of intellectualism I do not appeal to your belief in authority but to your capacity for intelligent examination.<sup>14</sup>

Despite Steiner's repeated injunctions of a similar vein, this problem persists even today and much of what is written about Steiner and his architecture from Anthroposophic quarters smacks of blind worship and besotted adoration. Such sermonizing does little to win the favour of sceptics or positivist critics, despite

the fact that individual freedom was central to Steiner's entire doctrine. This tendency is being redressed to some degree by the intelligent discourse being generated from scholars working at the Goetheanum such as Professor Walter Kugler, director of the Rudolf Steiner Archive, and Luigi Fiumara, leader of the Goetheanum's Architecture Department.

Hostility toward Steiner came from many directions—Theosophists, Catholics, Protestants, Occultists, Marxists, Nationalists and Nazis. There were at least two attempts on his life and the first Goetheanum, which he had spent ten years working on, was burnt to the ground, with arson being the suspected cause. Anthroposophy posed a threat to other belief systems and encountered vehement opposition. Steiner addressed the problem in a lecture delivered at Dornach in 1914, noting that:

It is all too easy to speak about spiritual science and its expression in the outer world in a way that totally misses its essence. Thus the virulent attacks that seem to be raining down on us at the moment first describe all manner of fantastic nonsense that has not the remotest connection with us, and then they proceed to attack that nonsense. The world is so little capable of accepting new spirituality that it has to invent wholly grotesque caricature against which it then proceeds to rail.<sup>15</sup>

Steiner was quite correct in suggesting that Anthroposophy had been deeply misunderstood, however he failed to recognize why this had occurred. By continually striving to present Anthroposophy from various angles, relating it to a whole myriad of human endeavours, his basic ideas were often lost in a melange of

other concerns. The simplicity of his basic insights often became distorted by a superficial understanding of the complex ideas expressed across the volume of his work.

### Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Despite the obstacles to understanding Steiner, his work is still finding application today in a wide range of practical endeavours, including architecture. It is, perhaps, this practicality that has allowed Steiner's ideas to retain their relevance, unlike other occult movements popular at the turn of the twentieth century which have faded into obscurity. Anthroposophy's practicality has allowed it to meet people's need for meaning without divorcing them from secular, industrialized society. Steiner education has grown to be one of the largest independent schooling systems in the world. There are also many "special needs" schools working with Steiner's curative pedagogical principles. The fundamentals of biodynamic farming were also developed by Steiner in a lecture series on agriculture, offering insights that were decades in advance of our current interest in ecology and organic foods. Today, the Anthroposophically inspired "Camp-hill" movement, an initiative dedicated to social renewal, has established over 100 communities in 20 countries worldwide.<sup>16</sup> In the visual arts, Steiner's ideas on colour and artistic creation have also had a direct influence on important artists such as Kandinsky<sup>17</sup> and, later, Joseph Beuys.<sup>18</sup> Steiner's philosophy has also been a source of inspiration for contemporary doctors, biologists and economists, resulting in alternative approaches to holistic healthcare<sup>19</sup> and ethical banking initiatives.<sup>20</sup> The NMB bank headquarters in Amsterdam (Fig. 3) designed by Ton Alberts and Max Van Huut is, perhaps, the most ambitious of all contemporary



Figure 3. NMB Bank, Amsterdam, Ton Alberts and Max Van Huut, 1982. Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WLANL\\_-\\_jankie\\_\\_ING\\_gebouw\\_Amsterdamse\\_Poort\\_\(3\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WLANL_-_jankie__ING_gebouw_Amsterdamse_Poort_(3).jpg). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.0 License.

Anthroposophic projects comprising ten office towers, ranging from three to six storeys, restaurants, library, auditorium, conference hall and other facilities all linked by an elevated indoor walkway. The success of such endeavours warrants an honest reappraisal of Steiner, particularly in the field of architecture, where he has been too readily dismissed as a result of the difficulties previously identified.

A balanced approach to Steiner's esoteric work is required if we are to develop a full appreciation of his contribution to architecture. In his biographical study *Rudolf Steiner: Life, Work, Inner Path and Social Initiatives*, Rudi Lissau is critical of Wilson's approach to Steiner, claiming that he is an example of a writer who wishes to penetrate Steiner's ideas but is

unable to.<sup>21</sup> Lissau suggests approaching Steiner with “suspension of judgement coupled with critical discernment”.<sup>22</sup> Maintaining an open mind is, perhaps, the most effective way to approach Steiner’s work since we are neither able to prove nor disprove many of his claims. There is no doubt that many of Steiner’s claims are insupportable by conventional standards of historiography. However, our serious attention is justified on the basis of the practical application of these claims, rather than purely on the basis of their academic rigor. Some may argue that such concessions should not be granted, however academics in many disciplines are discovering that Steiner’s epistemology represents a viable alternative to reductive systems of thought. Unlike many thinkers whose ideas remain somewhat divorced from reality, Steiner tested his theoretical concepts by applying them to practice. In terms of architecture, while he did not enunciate an architectural programme or manifesto as such, his wealth of philosophical insights informed and directed his own practical activity and continues to inspire architects today.

### Steiner’s Architecture in Context

In his lecture “True Artistic Creation—The Common Origins of Architectural Forms in the Goetheanum and the Greek Acanthus Leaf” Steiner refers to the work of a number of architects, including Semper, who were particularly active during his student days in Vienna. Though Steiner praised their talent and acknowledged Semper as “undoubtedly very gifted” he rejected Semper’s thesis of architectural forms having evolved from the techniques of primitive craftsmen.<sup>23</sup> According to Steiner this was a purely materialistic interpretation of Darwin’s doctrine of evolution which, he

believed, tainted most conceptions of art and architecture of the time. He argued instead that architecture must proceed from the inner depths of one’s soul world since only then could a building find its appropriate expression in outer form.<sup>24</sup> This spiritual conception of architecture tended to fall beyond the capabilities of purely positivist interpretations of modern architectural history and, as a result, failed to receive any serious consideration until the 1950s. Dennis Sharp was one of the first to address Steiner’s contribution to modern architecture. He connects it with the utopian ideals of the German Expressionists, but states that due to its idiosyncrasies and unique originality, it falls into no stylistic category and thus defies normal critical evaluation.<sup>25</sup> Wolfgang Pehnt also acknowledges the closeness of Expressionist and Anthroposophic aims in architecture but argues that:

[t]he authenticity of Steiner’s architecture is not affected by such associations. Despite its contemporaneity it is an isolated product of an unusual creative force, of the strength of will of an individual and at the same time of the convictions of a community that was (usually) at one with itself about its view of the world.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike much of the Expressionists’ work which remained fantasies on paper, Steiner’s visionary concepts came far closer to realization as he forged on to action, translating them into built form. Steiner’s second Goetheanum, which started construction in 1924, has often been compared to Mendelsohn’s Einstein Tower (1920–1924) in Potsdam—one built example of Expressionist architecture (Fig. 4). In both buildings, Steiner and Mendelsohn attempted to employ the concept of time so as to create a non-static, living architecture. Steiner





Figure 4. Einstein Tower; Erich Mendelsohn. Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Einsteinturm\\_7443.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Einsteinturm_7443.jpg), © Astrophysikalisches Institut Potsdam.

adopted Goethe's theory of metamorphosis and transferred it to architectural form, aiming to demonstrate the sequence of time in a succession of changing and mutating architectural motifs. Similarly, Mendelsohn borrowed Einstein's notion of a space-time continuum, to express the energy state of matter thus creating fluid, dynamic forms.

Other historians have sought to place Steiner within the context of Art Nouveau, relating his work to earlier generation architects such as Horta and Van de Velde. In seeking to stimulate an empathetic response from the viewer, these architects abstracted botanical and zoological forms from nature. Steiner pushed this idea further by attempting to express the inner life force that created the forms. He articulated this notion, claiming that "[i]n the shaping power of plastic art one can approach the creative living forces of nature if one lovingly and sympathetically comprehends how she lives in metamorphosis".<sup>27</sup> Steiner's attempt to embody the biological concept of metamorphosis in built form moved beyond the derivative naturalism for which Art

Nouveau had often been criticized. According to Steiner the activity present in organic nature corresponded with the activity present in the spirit world and he argued that if one's perception was penetrating enough, the supersensible could be perceived within the sensible. By translating this idea into architectural terms he aimed to demonstrate a spiritual link between architecture and nature. He gave sculptural expression to this concept in 1913 in the seven pairs of interior columns of the first Goetheanum, in which the capitals and bases of each column appear to grow out of the forms of the previous adjacent column. Each column captures a new stage of the transformation process but metamorphosis itself occurs in the invisible space between the visible forms (Fig. 5).<sup>28</sup> A similar metamorphosis can be detected in Gaudi's rough-hewn stone column colonnade at Park Güell (1900–1914) (Fig. 6). However, whereas Steiner's columns require the observer to imaginatively perceive the process of metamorphosis occurring between each column in a rhythmic process, Gaudi's columns present the idea of growth and transformation in a more imitative

manner, so that the columns themselves take on the naturalistic appearance of growing plants.

The sculptural, monolithic quality of Steiner's architecture has been linked to Gaudi's mature



Figure 5. Interior model of the First Goetheanum, Rudolf Steiner. Photo: © Rudolf Steiner Press, London. Source: *The Goetheanum: Rudolf Steiner's Architectural Impulse*, 1979, p. 23.

work<sup>29</sup> and although no such influences will be allowed by his followers, the similarities can hardly be denied. The nodular, bone-like detailing surrounding the lower windows of Gaudi's Casa Battlo (1904–1906) (Figs. 7, 8), for example, strongly resemble the staircase detailing of the first Goetheanum (Fig. 9) where the dynamics of load and movement are empathetically expressed in anthropomorphic terms. The exuberant, three-dimensional façades of the second Goetheanum and Steiner's Duldeck house (1915–1916) (Fig. 10) are also reminiscent of the sinuous, undulating façade of Gaudi's Casa Mila (1906–1911) (Fig. 11), reflecting their shared propensity toward plastically conceived, organic forms, even though Gaudi achieved his forms in stone, while Steiner employed reinforced concrete.

While Steiner does not fit within any one stylistic label, his architectural endeavours were undoubtedly influenced by the moral, spiritual and biological impulses of the time. To suggest that his work developed entirely out of his own immediate spiritual experiences, whereby artistic forms were conveyed directly to him with no cultural influence, is yet another example of Anthroposophic



Figure 6. Columns along colonnade at Park Güell, Antonio Gaudi. Photo: © Fiona Gray.

propaganda. Steiner's bold exploration of new techniques in reinforced concrete and his introduction of the principle of metamorphosis into architectural form do, indeed, represent highly original and creative contributions to modern architecture, but ones that must

be understood within the broader context of modernism's revolutionary spirit.

In order to bring some degree of balance to the critique of Steiner's architecture, in 1979 architect Rex Raab, painter Arne Klingborg and art historian Ake Fant, wrote *Eloquent Concrete: How Rudolf Steiner employed Reinforced Concrete*.<sup>30</sup> The authors aimed to make Steiner's architectural work more accessible to the English speaking world, with the hope that it might find acceptance in both the architectural profession and the general public. Until that time, most of the scholarly work on Steiner's architectural legacy was generated from northern Europe and was not available in English. Although they are Anthroposophists, the authors do, for the most part, succeed in presenting a relatively unbiased account of Steiner's architecture, giving straightforward descriptions of the work supported by superb photography. Few people would be better equipped to conduct such a study given that the authors were also the consultants engaged to complete parts of the interior and the western end of the second Goetheanum. Their firsthand knowledge of Steiner's buildings combined with an understanding of Anthr-



Figure 7. Casa Battlo façade windows, Antonio Gaudi. Photo: © Fiona Gray.



Figure 8. Casa Battlo window surround detail, Antonio Gaudi. Photo: © Fiona Gray.

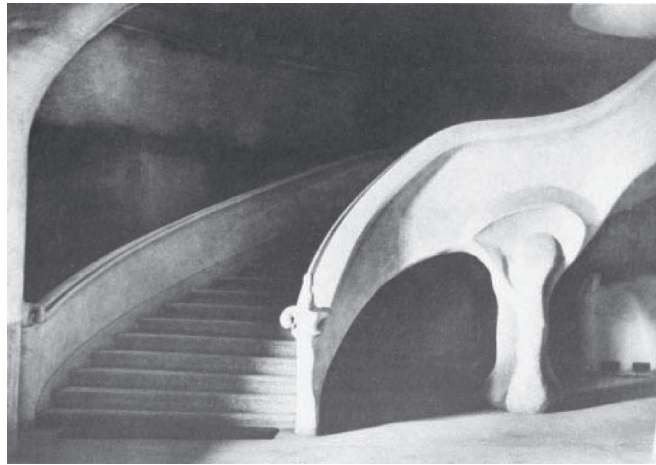


Figure 9. Staircase detail in the first Goethenaum, Rudolf Steiner. Photo: © Rudolf Steiner Press, London. Source: *Eloquent Concrete: How Rudolf Steiner Employed Reinforced Concrete*, 1979, p. 36.



Figure 10. Duldeck House, Rudolf Steiner. Photo: © Fiona Gray.

oposophy's underlying tenets has provided an intelligent base upon which to build a broader understanding of Steiner's relevance for contemporary architecture.

Ironically, however, despite the authors' aim to bring Steiner's architecture to the masses, it is the second Goetheanum building itself that stands between Steiner and his potential modern audience.<sup>31</sup> For many it represents a temple of worship, thus reinforcing the

perception of Anthroposophy as sectarian. Not only is the building difficult for many to appreciate in terms of what it represents, but also in terms of its aesthetic form. The sheer massiveness and imposing bulk of this gigantic raw concrete structure is somewhat intimidating. Its convex and concave surface distortions, meant to embody the push and pull forces of the universe, give the building an uneasy sense of restlessness. Its detailing is eccentric, and at times rather erotic, and the

geometric principles which it employs are particularly abstruse. The fortress-like quality of this monumental structure can be seen, in part, as a reaction to the destruction by fire of the first Goetheanum, which had been built almost entirely of wood. In 1924 Steiner presented his ideas for the rebuilding of the Goetheanum in a model which indicated entirely new sculptural forms to be

executed in concrete (Fig. 12). Unfortunately, however, Steiner died in March 1925 and as a result only designed the exterior form of the new building, leaving only a few suggestions on the completion of the interior. The building was opened in 1928 as little more than a shell. Since then, the interior fitout has been completed spasmodically, under the direction of a number of different architects,



Figure 11. Casa Mila, Antonio Gaudi. Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barcelona\\_casa\\_mila\\_gaud%C3%AC.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barcelona_casa_mila_gaud%C3%AC.jpg).



Figure 12. Model for the second Goetheanum, Rudolf Steiner. Photo: © Fiona Gray.

as funding has permitted. Today, all but the north-east stairwell behind the stage has been completed.

The second Goetheanum rates among many Anthroposophists and architectural critics as a lesser example of Steiner's architecture, lacking the resolution and level of detailing that had been invested over many years in the first building. In terms of technical achievement, however, the second Goetheanum was certainly a great success, being the largest reinforced concrete structure of its time. Steiner recognized that using concrete required a different formal expression to that of the first Goetheanum. He noted that:

[w]ith wood, the shape of the space is carved into the material; a form arises from a concave, hollowing-out treatment of the main surface. With concrete on the other hand, the form is convex, a bulging-out of the main surface defining the boundary of space required.<sup>32</sup>

This understanding of the nature of concrete, coupled with Steiner's desire to express his notion of artistic freedom, resulted in far more daring forms than had previously been attempted in the first Goetheanum (Fig. 13). Steiner's emphasis on the sculptural quality of concrete has lent the building a strong sense of fluidity and movement as expressed in the double curvature of the great wave like forms that appear to lunge towards the viewer as you approach the building. Its clumsiness in certain details can possibly be attributed to the fact that Steiner had no formal architectural training, and therefore lacked an architect's aesthetic sensibility that may have allowed his thinking in regards to such detailing be more successfully resolved. Steiner's boiler house (1915) is one such example



Figure 13. Concrete detail of Second Goetheanum, Rudolf Steiner. Photo: © Fiona Gray.

where the philosophical ideal wholeheartedly failed in translation to an architectural product (Fig. 14). Steiner's aim to express the purpose and content of the building is simplistically and literally applied. His crudely resolved symbolism, such as the chimney which was intended to look like rising smoke, flouts his own admonitions of naturalistic imitation.

The artistic ability of contemporary architects such as Burgess and Makovecz to create aesthetically engaging buildings based on Steiner's indications perhaps points to why their work is finding appreciation outside of Anthroposophic circles, where Steiner had often found condemnation. Steiner's philosophy has provided these architects with a syntax from which they have developed their own architectural idiom. For instance, Makovecz and Burgess both draw upon the archetypal imagery of the *vesica piscis* that was fundamental to Steiner's architectural



Figure 14. Boiler House, Rudolf Steiner. Photo: © Fiona Gray.

conception of the first Goetheanum. However, it finds different formal expression in their work. The sacred geometry of the *vesica piscis* is formed by the intersection of two circles of the same radius so that the centre of each circle lies in the circumference of the other. This iconography is rich in both ancient and Christian symbolism however in Anthroposophical terms the area of overlap between the circles expresses the point of balance between the earthly and spiritual worlds—a space of reconciliation between the polar forces of spirit and matter. Steiner adapted the visual imagery of the *vesica piscis* to conform to his own programme so that in both plan and section, the first Goetheanum consisted of two interpenetrating circles of unequal size (Figs. 15, 16). The larger dome on the western

side of the building housed the public auditorium space and represented modernity's dominant physical realm of being, while the smaller dome on the east encircled the performance stage and represented the supersensible, spiritual realm of being.

This concept has been borrowed by Makovecz in a number of his buildings, however to greatest effect in the Stephaneum auditorium at the Catholic University in Piliscaba, Hungary (Fig. 17). Here Makovecz's unequal cupolas not only intersect but lean dramatically towards each other as if to literally embrace one another, thus representing a more complete merge between the physical and spiritual world. The style Makovecz adopts, however, does not share the Art Nouveau tendencies of the first Goetheanum, but instead borrows from the language of Renaissance Classicism. Steiner's first Goetheanum also made Classical references with its hemispherical domes however, whereas Steiner was actively trying to break away from the styles of the past to find a new way of expressing modern life, Makovecz deliberately superimposes modernity with tradition by using fluted pilasters on his tilting façades.

In the case of Burgess, the *vesica piscis* motif repeatedly finds expression in one form or another in almost all of his work. In his Catholic Theological College in East Melbourne, for example, it is given centre stage in the massive bulkhead that hangs above the central spiralling staircase (Fig. 18). The northern circle of the bulkhead consists of a series of spaced battens, which are penetrated by direct light, while the southern circle is an impenetrable solid surface. This play of openness and solidity, darkness and light again reference the polarities of cosmic and terrestrial, sacred and the profane, which are central to Steiner's philosophy. Through

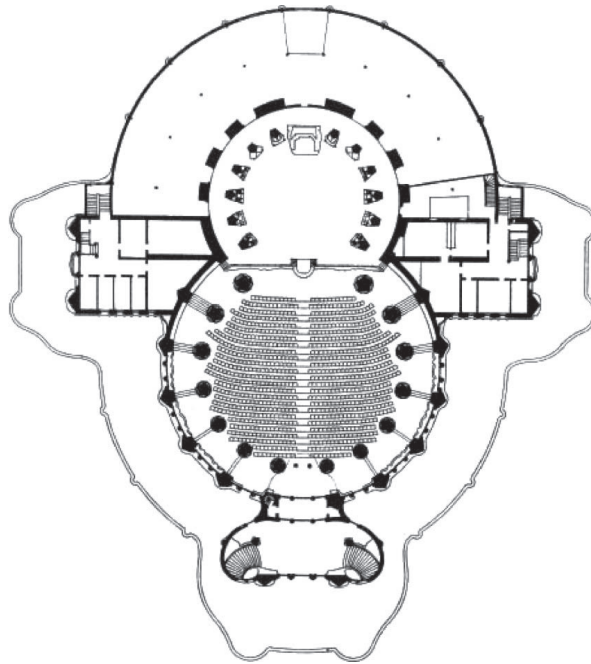


Figure 15. Plan of the first Goetheanum. Photo: © Rudolf Steiner Press, London. Source: *Eloquent Concrete: How Rudolf Steiner Employed Reinforced Concrete*, 1979, Transparent overlay illustration 43.

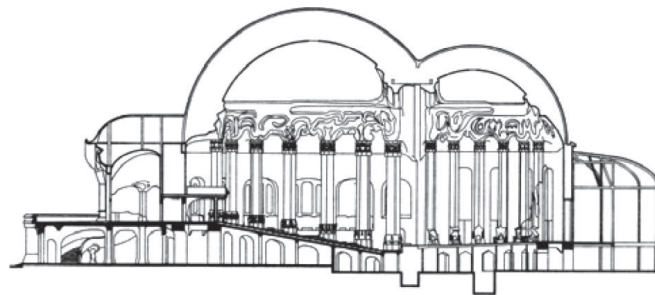


Figure 16. Section of the first Goetheanum. Photo: © Rudolf Steiner Press, London. Source: *Eloquent Concrete: How Rudolf Steiner Employed Reinforced Concrete*, 1979, Transparent overlay illustration 44.

the medium of architecture Makovecz and Burgess interpret Steiner's ideas in a visual rather than intellectual language thereby making his complex ideas more readily accessible to a contemporary audience. It is also interesting to note that both Makovecz and Burgess have attracted commissions from the Catholic institution. Though Catholics rejected much of Steiner's unorthodox interpretation of the Bible, Makovecz and Burgess have managed

to imbue their work with a spirituality that supports rather than alienates people in their own spiritual beliefs.

### The Verdict

The limitations of Steiner's architecture and the dogma others have attached to it should not detract from the intellectual premise of his





Figure 17. The Stephaneum Auditorium at the Catholic University in Piliscaba, Hungary, Imre Makovecz. Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Piliscaba\\_Stephaneum\\_d%C3%A9li\\_oldal.JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Piliscaba_Stephaneum_d%C3%A9li_oldal.JPG). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.0 License. Released under the GNU Free Documentation License.



Figure 18. Staircase and Bulkhead, Catholic Theological College in East Melbourne, Gregory Burgess. Photo: © Fiona Gray.

work. His architectural conceptions cannot be divorced, however, from his wider Anthroposophic teachings, which inevitably lead to difficulties reconciling his philosophical insights

with his puzzling mystical aberrations. In order to avoid superficial impressions, which can lead to the erroneous view that he advocated a narrow stylistic language, it is important to appreciate Steiner's architecture within the broader context of his work. Rather than presenting a formulaic approach to design, Steiner encouraged individual creative freedom. His concept that the spiritual realm can be perceived as an objective reality through the perception of material phenomena, particularly architecture, moves beyond the vagaries of style and transcends materialist modes of thought. Though his ideas have met with considerable scorn and criticism, they remain powerfully present in the work of a number of contemporary organic architects for whom Anthroposophy presents a means of moving beyond conventional ways of thinking about architecture. Despite his many eccentricities, Steiner's view of architecture as an intuitive art capable of bridging the physical and ethereal world has inspired others to create works of remarkable integrity and originality, thus suggesting that his concepts are worthy of further investigation.

## Notes

1. Rudolf Steiner, *Anthroposophic Leading Thoughts: Anthroposophy as a Path of Knowledge – The Michael Mystery*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1973, p. 13.
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3. Morris Maeterlinck, *The Great Secret*, London: Methuen, 1922, p. 212.
4. Maeterlinck, *Great Secret*, p. 213.
5. Colin Wilson, *Rudolf Steiner, The Man and His Vision: An Introduction to the Life and Ideas of the Founder of Anthroposophy*, London: Aeon Books, 2005, p. 9.
6. Wilson, *Rudolf Steiner*, p. 14.
7. Wilson, *Rudolf Steiner*, p. 165.
8. Christian Thal-Jantzen (ed.), "Introduction", in *Rudolf Steiner, Architecture as a Synthesis of the Arts: Lectures by Rudolf Steiner*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1999, p. viii.
9. Walter Kugler (ed.), *Rudolf Steiner: Blackboard Drawings 1919–1924*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2003.
10. Rudolf Steiner, *The Architectural Conception of the Goetheanum*, London: Rudolf Steiner Publishing Company, 1938, p. 7.
11. Rudolf Steiner, *Architecture as a Synthesis of the Arts: Lectures by Rudolf Steiner*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1999, p. 45.
12. Steiner, *Architecture as a Synthesis*, p. 147.
13. Rudolf Steiner, *Atlantis and Lemuria*, Whitefish: Kesinger Publishing, 2003.
14. Rudolf Steiner, *From Buddha to Christ*, New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1978, p. 91.
15. Steiner, *Architecture as a Synthesis*, p. 144.
16. The first Camphill community was founded in the 1940s by the Austrian pediatrician Karl König, near Aberdeen, Scotland.
17. Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study of the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1970, pp. 64–66.
18. Allison Holland (ed.), *Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner: Imagination, Inspiration, Intuition*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2007.
19. See, for example, Weleda homeopathic remedies and pharmaceutical products and Dr. Hauschka skin care range that have been developed following indications given by Steiner.
20. See, for example, GLS Bank of Germany which is an Anthroposophic bank that focuses on providing ethical banking solutions for a range of social, cultural and ecological initiatives.
21. Rudi Lissau, *Rudolf Steiner: Life, Work, Inner Path and Social Initiatives*, Stroud: Hawthorn Press, 1987, p. 153.
22. Lissau, *Rudolf Steiner*, p. 150.
23. Steiner, *Architecture as a Synthesis*, p. 55.
24. Steiner, *Architecture as a Synthesis*, p. 76.
25. Dennis Sharp, *A Visual History of Twentieth Century Architecture*, London: Heinemann/Secker and Warburg, 1972, p. 91.
26. Wolfgang Pehnt and Rudolf Steiner, *Goetheanum, Dornach*, Berlin: Ernst and Sohn, 1991, p. 35.
27. Steiner, *Architectural Conception of the Goetheanum*, p. 3.
28. Hans Hasler, *The Goetheanum: A Guided Tour Through the Building, its Surroundings and its History*, Dornach: Verlag am Goetheanum, p. 34.
29. Dennis Sharp, *Modern Architecture and Expressionism*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1966, p. 164; Pehnt and Steiner, *Goetheanum, Dornach*, p. 19; and Isle Meissner Reese, "Steiner's Goetheanum at Dornach", *Progressive Architecture*, XLVI (September 1965): 146–153.
30. Rex Raab, Arne Klingborg and Ake Fant, *Eloquent Concrete: How Rudolf Steiner Employed Reinforced Concrete*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1979.
31. Wilson, *Rudolf Steiner*, p. 170.
32. Steiner, *Architecture as a Synthesis*, p. 174.