

**the aesthetic of the invisible**  
*a position regarding foundation design*

The question is as profound as the question of a tree falling in the forest: *If no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?* Likewise, *if something is unseen, does it visually exist?* And if it does not visually exist, then does aesthetics even have a place at the table?

With respect to architectural foundation design, the seen and unseen are important differentiators in how deeply connected a building is to its place as the foundation signals that there is more at work than a simple physical connection. Modern construction makes a physical connection to the earth, but since the physical is given, it is not our primary concern. In addition to the physical connection, a deeper connection is necessary to *elevate* a foundation above its given utility.

In history, a number of non-physical connections between architecture and site are observed. Stone masons working on gothic cathedrals offered more than blood and sweat. These builders believed that the perfection of their craft and persistence of their work was just cause for entrance into heaven. They were motivated to make a beautiful structure, so as to please God, and be offered a place at His table. The visible stone walls of which so much care was placed, required an enormous amount of mass, just as carefully crafted below grade. Indeed, the clergy would often wonder if masons were working hard enough. It was only until a foundation wall broke the horizon that they were visually satisfied. To them, the building did not exist until it "broke" ground.

It would seem that foundations, no matter how well intentioned suffer from "out of sight out of mind." If this is true, then foundations need to be elevated visually and by other devices in order to be appreciated. For example, the Vietnam War Memorial project is engaged with the earth. In fact, it is in-plane and *of* the earth such that multiple readings are possible. It does not interface with the earth via an intermediate layer. Further, it is placed in such a way that makes it difficult to determine if it was excavated from, or pushed into the earth. Here, it is not just its physical connection that makes the architecture and place so compelling.

On the significance of foundations, we can consider those of natural forms. These forms invoke the imagination to extrapolate what can be seen to something of a like kind below the plane of the earth. We know these forms are not simply resting on the earth plane. Conversely, when architecture simply receives a building foundation on which to go skyward, this intermediate plane is often of a different language and it severs the building from all connections but the physical.

Le Corbusier's church in Firminy demonstrates an interesting connection to the earth, where the alter rises from the foundation to the worship space. Here, the foundation of the church is of a similar language. It is a base, or foot to the building, clearly visible above grade, and as the section reveals, the invisible is readable even though it cannot be completely visualized. It is as if the building were set on the horizontal, and a wave of earth washed up and settled around this base. It is a complete thing, not an assembly of *dis*-connected parts.

After considering this question more, the foundations of modern construction are beautiful in their own right – they are a testimony to technology and utility. Yet, one way to evaluate quality is to let time enter the discourse. Some level of aesthetic quality can be determined when, after time has created ruin, that the above ground architecture can be imagined based on its below ground remains. It is possible that the anthropologists of tomorrow looking back on the foundations of today will interpret a very different architecture and perhaps a surprising assessment of our culture: one of hyper-utility suggesting our cultural connections to place are less about the given world around us and more about a self-created world. Herein lies a recurring and popular theme of environmental design ethics that might help the case for beautiful foundations.



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