"The Architecture of Civility" by Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson
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Recently, the front door to the Baltimore Museum of Art re-opened after a major renovation to the building. Some 12 years ago, the Peabody Institute in Mount Vernon did the same thing. Back then, people crowded into Mount Vernon Square in anticipation of the front doors re-opening after a restoration made the conservatory accessible to a broader public.

There is something magic in walking the grand staircases of these cultural institutions to access the art and the music inside. The architecture, and by extension the institutions themselves, signal that we are welcome. Arriving through such an entrance primes us for the importance of our shared experience once inside. Here, the architecture tells us, you will commune with the best of humanity.

For nearly twenty years I have written about architecture and cities for magazines. Some people see this reported beat as a narrow specialty. I see it as a window into the very thinking of mankind. What we build speaks volumes about who we are as a culture. When I write about a city or a building or an urban plan, I also write about human life and aspiration and the ways in which our manmade culture impacts and informs our daily selves. Architecture is nothing short of mankind's values writ large.

Why does a certain neighborhood, a certain room, inspire us, where others do not? Why are we different people in different places?

The physical design of cities influences how we relate to one another. Think of the beautiful bustle on the blocks around the Charles Theater in Station North, where outdoor cafes, pedestrians from the nearby train station, students, neighbors, and theater-goers mingle and interact in what the famed urbanist Jane Jacobs called the "ballet of the sidewalk." Think about your favorite place—whether it's a park or a restaurant, an interior or an exterior—and consider why it makes you feel good to be there. Design influences how we experience our daily lives.

To quote the writer Alain de Botton, "Belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places—and on the conviction that it is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be."

It is also, I would add, incumbent upon us as citizens to be vocal about the values we want written into our environment. Streets that are safe for cyclists and pedestrians; accessible public spaces and parks that welcome not just a respite from urban life but also a backdrop for the free exchange of ideas; schools designed so that every child may learn. Architecture is more than merely aesthetics. It is the infrastructure for our very lives. So, who might we ideally be? And how might architecture help to get us there?