ARCHITECTURE

building the foundations

Beauty School

BY TODD R. FLANDERS

"Every child goes to school in a building that looks like a duplicating-machine replacement-parts wholesale distribution warehouse. Not even the school commissioners, who commissioned it and approved the plans, can figure out how it happened. The main thing is to try to avoid having to explain it to the parents." —Tom Wolfe [1]

"We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." —Winston Churchill [2]

If you Google images of "beautiful schools," you will discover what most people think schools should look like. If you Google "ugly" ones, you will see many of Tom Wolfe's "wholesale distribution warehouses." While issues of aesthetics can't truly be addressed this way, the results of algorithms drawing upon millions of impressions are at least suggestive. People tend to think that beauty matters and that they know it when they see it.

I serve at a pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade Catholic school, Providence Academy in Minnesota, that was designed and built according to what people think a school should look like. In the mid-1990s, the school's founder passed around a style book containing about fifty pages of architectural photographs. He asked several people, separately, to identify the structure they most associated with the idea of a good school. Every person chose precisely the same one: the Wren Building at the College of William and Mary. Not incidentally, I think, it is the oldest college building still standing in the United States, one that itself drew on long-standing perceptions about educational architecture. Our school, opened in 2001, was modeled on it.

That our academy was designed according to what people think a good school should look like has had a curious afterlife. Frequently, its facade is used in regional and national media when an image of a school is called for. In recent years, it has been featured on a Fox News story, on the TV series "Resident Alien," in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, on the cover of a Chicago private school guide, on a national blog post, and in a social media promotion for a "Prep School Murder Mystery." Notably, none of these usages had anything to do with Providence Academy.

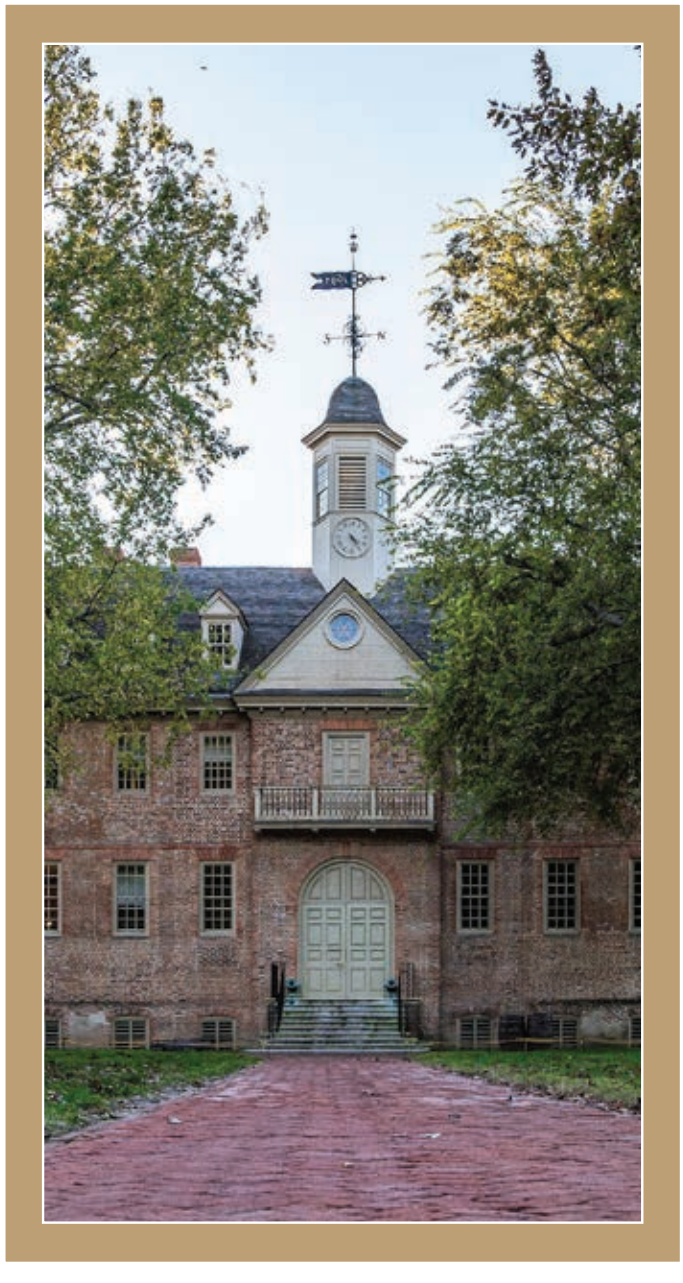


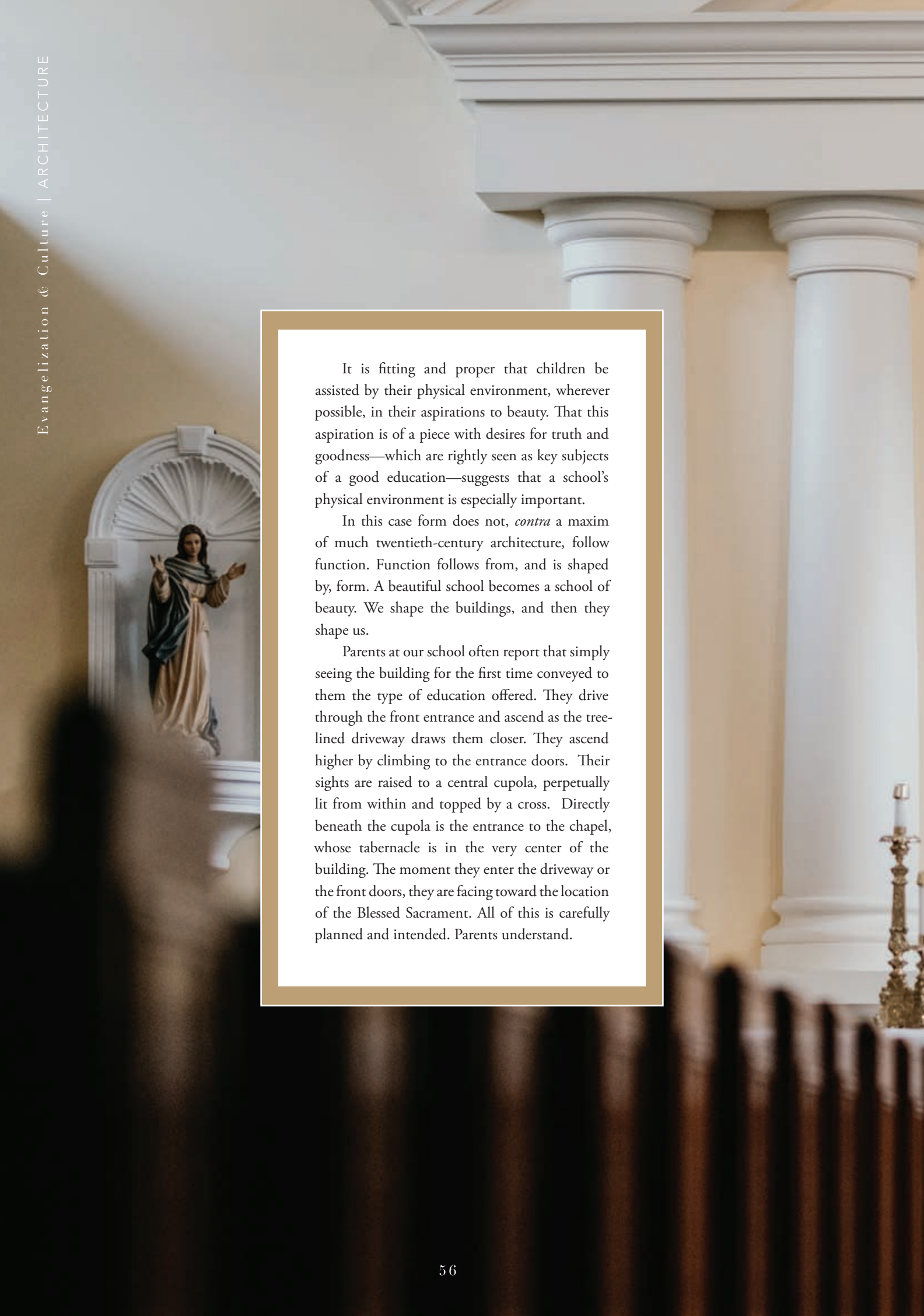
PHOTO: Miguel Yerena, Wikimedia Commons.

Does it matter what people think matters about the architecture and design of schools? It does if their intuitions are about something real. Even to raise the question connects us with a deeper one: Is beauty real? Is it an objective value, what philosophers have called a transcendental attribute of Being itself, one that is knowable across times and cultures? Or is it merely subjective, an opinion that varies with the eye and milieu of every beholder?

Which answer is correct? If beauty is objective, then a school's role is to present and instill artistic sensibilities that accord with a reality that uplifts. If beauty is, rather, merely subjective, then there is no uplifting to be done, no aesthetic knowledge to be conveyed. A school could offer nothing but neutral spaces in which students develop individualized tastes. This latter answer has brought the architectural tendency in modern school design.

The Catholic faith affirms the former answer. The *Catechism* teaches that beauty, along with truth and goodness, "reflect[s] the infinite perfection of God."[3] People are created capable of perceiving the reflection. Socrates would have understood this. Standing before the Parthenon and admiring it, he mused that "each column, each piece of marble, each statue, each of the temple's architectural elements makes its own contribution to the overall harmony of the whole; the beauty of the structure emerges from the way in which the parts are arranged."[4] Beauty is related to symmetries, to harmonies, to relations of parts to wholes, to the order of things.

PHOTO: Erik Witsoe, Unsplash.



It is fitting and proper that children be assisted by their physical environment, wherever possible, in their aspirations to beauty. That this aspiration is of a piece with desires for truth and goodness—which are rightly seen as key subjects of a good education—suggests that a school's physical environment is especially important.

In this case form does not, *contra* a maxim of much twentieth-century architecture, follow function. Function follows from, and is shaped by, form. A beautiful school becomes a school of beauty. We shape the buildings, and then they shape us.

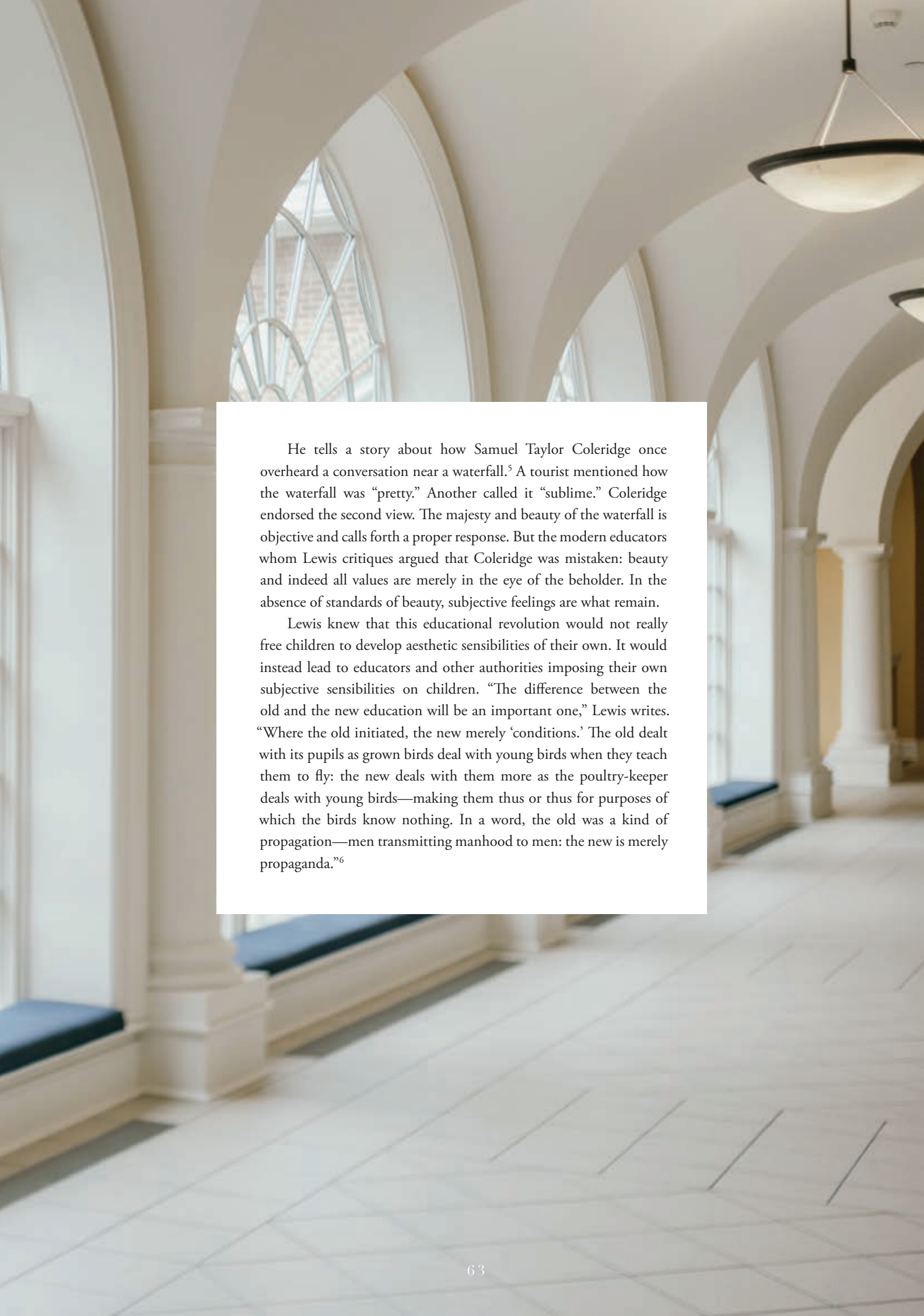
Parents at our school often report that simply seeing the building for the first time conveyed to them the type of education offered. They drive through the front entrance and ascend as the tree-lined driveway draws them closer. They ascend higher by climbing to the entrance doors. Their sights are raised to a central cupola, perpetually lit from within and topped by a cross. Directly beneath the cupola is the entrance to the chapel, whose tabernacle is in the very center of the building. The moment they enter the driveway or the front doors, they are facing toward the location of the Blessed Sacrament. All of this is carefully planned and intended. Parents understand.


Sum Theo-
-ma logiæ
Totius Hispaniæ

So do students. The spaces they inhabit affect choices and actions. There are, for example, no food fights in a tasteful and carpeted lunch room. Classrooms, hallways, and even restrooms are designed to signify the dignity of the human person. Students respond by being more dignified—as mentioned repeatedly by visitors and those who encounter our students in the broader community. Of course, many factors contribute to student thoughts and behaviors, but the building literally comprehends them all. Its humane proportions, its harmoniousness, and its symmetries bespeak an orderly cosmos of which all are a part. They bespeak a world of meaning that provides a sense of continuity with students and customs that have gone before. That continuity instills a sense of home, of rootedness, and of belonging.

A century ago, even public school buildings were built with such a vision. That vision has not been lost so much as squandered. C.S. Lewis little 1944 masterpiece *The Abolition of Man* was prescient about tendencies of modern educational trends. He saw that progressive theorists were intentionally replacing the classic emphasis on objective values such as beauty with subjective sentiments. Lewis argued, with subtlety and precision, that nothing less than the future of human nature itself was at stake.

ART: Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, *Waterfall at Terni*, 1826, Wikimedia Commons.



He tells a story about how Samuel Taylor Coleridge once overheard a conversation near a waterfall.[5] A tourist mentioned how the waterfall was "pretty." Another called it "sublime." Coleridge endorsed the second view. The majesty and beauty of the waterfall is objective and calls forth a proper response. But the modern educators whom Lewis critiques argued that Coleridge was mistaken: beauty and indeed all values are merely in the eye of the beholder. In the absence of standards of beauty, subjective feelings are what remain.

Lewis knew that this educational revolution would not really free children to develop aesthetic sensibilities of their own. It would instead lead to educators and other authorities imposing their own subjective sensibilities on children. "The difference between the old and the new education will be an important one," Lewis writes. "Where the old initiated, the new merely 'conditions.' The old dealt with its pupils as grown birds deal with young birds when they teach them to fly: the new deals with them more as the poultry-keeper deals with young birds—making them thus or thus for purposes of which the birds know nothing. In a word, the old was a kind of propagation—men transmitting manhood to men: the new is merely propaganda."[6]

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The good news is that children want and need Lewis' "old education." They are created by God to share in a common human nature. It is a nature that seeks the things that reflect the infinite perfections of God. As the Roman poet Horace famously said, "You can drive out nature with a pitchfork, but she keeps on coming back."[7] Children naturally are, as Christ calls us all to be, "childlike." They delight in wonder, in song, in prayer, in dance, in beautiful things and paintings and statues and buildings. They intuit, and want to know, what is real. And, participating in a small way in God's own creativity, they marvel in trying their hands at making lovely things themselves.

"Something of the child's pure delight in creation survives in every pure work of art," notes philosopher Roger Scruton.[8] Children can be inspired by their surroundings to raise their sights, as all great artists do, to see with eyes of transcendence. So uplifted, they may come to see their world, even amid appearances of ugliness and meaninglessness, as it really is: charged with the grandeur of God. It is shot through with meaning and purpose. So inspired, each child may discover a vocation to help make his or her own world a truer, better, and more beautiful place.

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Notes

[1] Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Picador, 1981), 1.

[2] Winston Churchill, Speech to the House of Commons, October 28, 1943.

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 41.

[4] Xenophon, *Memorabilia,* quoted in Paul Herrick, *Philosophy, Reasoned Belief, and Faith* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), chap. 4, Kindle.

[5] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 2–4.

[6] Lewis, 23.

[7] Horace, *Epistles*, Book 1:10.

[8] Roger Scruton, "Why Beauty Matters," directed by Louise Lockwood (London: BBC 2, 2009).