

2.1 INTRODUCTION

to the contemporary cultural context:

"The human mind is a great city in which the individual is always lost. He spends his lifetime groping, trying to locate himself." (Heller 2003: 69)

This seems to be a contemporary affliction. Is it possible that mankind has lost its existential footing along its course through history? What is the reason for this, and what is a possible remedy?

It is significant that the author of this phrase associates the negative experience of being 'lost' with a city. Most often when issues related to the degradation of cultural and moral values are discussed, it is related to the urban context. Why is it that the contemporary urban environment is so toxic to the health and wealth of cultures that once flourished in the rural context?

Contemporary urban life has stripped people of many of the things that had previously rooted them to their world. Primitive life was once structured by the daily practice of rituals and the performance of essential tasks in order to survive. Life was once lived in close proximity to the family structure, shared with the community while enveloped and sustained by the biophysical environment. The deterioration of the family structure, the disappearance of communal interaction through declining religious practice and indifference toward the biophysical environment has fragmented the ritual of daily life.

The contemporary urban dwellers spends their life in the belly of shopping malls and office blocks, finds sustenance in supermarkets and drive-through windows with no connection to the sacred or the physical realm. This is in stark contrast to the following extract which is a description of a rural community in Bali: "The whole idea of Bali is a matrix, a massive and invisible grid of the spirits, guides, paths and customs. Every Balinese knows exactly where he or she belongs, orientated within this great, intangible map." (Gilbert 2006: 237)

The pre-urban intangible map has been replaced by other intangible maps in contemporary life, none of which connects one to the biophysical realm. Very simply put, the system looked something like this: the individual fitted into the family, that fitted into the community with similar beliefs and rituals, which fitted into the physical environment. The physical environment then served the community and the benefit was worked back to the individual. Although oversimplified, the idea serves to illustrate the cultural link that culture and society had with the environment. Later certain examples of communities will be discussed where the dependence upon the environment to regulate the daily lives of the people will become apparent.

The urban dweller, however, is completely unaware of his or her link to the earth and has therefore foregone connections to many other aspects of life.

The human mind is a great city in which the individual is always lost. He spends his lifetime groping, trying to locate himself. (Heller 2003: 69)



2.2 LITERARY INVESTIGATION

of core theoretical concepts

2.2.1 Loss of orientation and identity

Colin St John-Wilson (1992: 10) states that what man fears most is emptiness. This emptiness is defined as a lack of identity and focus and a feeling of unreality. The statement refers to the ideas of Adrian Stokes who addressed the 'psychological position' of man in the world. (St John-Wilson 1992:5) Stokes directly relates the psychological well-being of man to his physical position in the world, in other words, where he is orientated.

This is not an unfamiliar thought. Although less specifically grounded in the discipline of psychology, the theory of phenomenology is fundamentally an exploration of the positioning of man in the world as an existential plane. "Together identification and orientation make up the general structure of dwelling..." (Norberg-Schulz 1985: 15) The human experience of dwelling is again claimed to be directly related to his position in the world.

It is clear from these examples that the problem of disconnection exists. Juhani Pallasmaa (2000:6) refers to this as cultural erosion. Accordingly, the need for cultural discovery and a reconnection with identity on a purely psychological level is identified. Later, possible architectural remedies for this problem will be suggested, as the author is of the opinion that this connection can be facilitated by the architect. The following statement is an illustration of the impact the profession can make on the well-being of an individual.

...to the tangled web of needs and annoyances, desires and frustrations by which each day we follow our course; and to find an answer to those needs is to give to the individual a kind of self-respect which constitutes a form of freedom that the politicians know nothing of, because it has nothing to do with dogma, but all to do with each person (Aalto's little man) who is helped to be at home in a world that can be marvelous in unison, but terrifying in alienation.

(St John-Wilson 1992:97)

2.2.2 Reconnection to the natural environment

"When we...identify ourselves, we use the place as our reference." (Norberg-Schulz 1985: 9), The importance of the environment around us emerges from this statement. The idea of reconnection to our own identity is incomplete when set in a void. Reconnecting to the physical world is essential. Norberg-Schulz describes the world as the 'multifarious between', that is, all that is between the earth and the sky. (Norberg-Schulz 1985:18) Thus, the environment forms the basis for our exploration of self, a guiding realization in the design process. The question remains: how do we achieve a connection to the physical and biophysical environment through the act of building, which fundamentally produces a cultural environment?



Fig. 2

Various authors have been intrigued by the mysterious connection of mankind to his surroundings. A seemingly inherent awareness and experience of the world.

Pallasmaa (2000:1) claims that the sensory realm and experience of man has been reduced to that of visual perception. Within the discipline of architecture, the resulting built environment has the same focus: that of a visual image, rather than a sensory experience. (Pallasmaa 2000:11) The criticism rests upon the belief that architecture can be experienced as more than merely visual syntax. The practical solutions offered are all related to the meaning that can be instilled through human situations and encounters. (Pallasmaa 2000:6)

As mentioned before, St John Wilson relies on psychology for an explanation. He finds that all experience is situated between two extreme poles: envelopment as opposed to exposure. (St John-Wilson 1992:14). As both our 'psychological position' and spatial experience falls within this range, memory plays an integral role in our architectural experience. (St John-Wilson 1992:12). Additionally, all experiences relate to our body, our vehicle of experience. Architecture, in his opinion, is a transposition of the human body. (St John-Wilson 1992:5). Thus, as experience is subconsciously understood as the language of the body, the possibility exists to embed ambiguous meaning into architecture, if it is employed in terms of the polar positions of experience (St John-Wilson 1992:12)

From the above arguments, experience is cited as the main connection to the environment around us. In any attempt to establish a connection between an individual and the physical environment, the experience of it should be significant. Architecture is the vehicle of experience of a place.

2.2.3 Orientation in time

Orientation, however, is not restricted to physical presence or even the place of the individual within a social and cultural context. We are also orientated within time. This is what determines the world into which you have been 'thrown', as Heidegger describes it. All the factors that influence the identity of an individual that have been mentioned, such as the physical and metaphysical context, has a history and is the result of a singularly unique story. To fully understand your surroundings as they exist today, as well as one's own identity, one must be made aware of your orientation in time.

Both St John Wilson and Pallasmaa discuss how the concept of time becomes integral to that of meaningful experience.

Pallasmaa(2000:4) adds to his critique of a visually biased architecture: "Vision places us in the present tense, whereas haptic experience evokes the experience of a temporal continuum." The underlying idea of both authors seems to be that of materiality. Many contemporary materials are designed to remain shiny and new until it is replaced, divulging nothing of its origins, whereas traditional building materials such as brick, stone, copper and wood tell a story of its lifetime: from the creation to the deterioration. (Pallasmaa 2000:4) A haptic experience, to the mind of Pallasmaa, becomes the concrete



Mapungubwe National Park Interpretive centre
Peter Rich

This approach can be seen in the selection of materials and structural system of the centre. The Mediterranean tradition of vaulting was selected based on the desire to use natural materials and labour intensive methods in order to empower the community. (Fitchett et al 2009:28) The earth tiles are produced locally and have low embodied energy. (Fitchett et al 2009:29) The structural form expel the need for steel reinforcement and relies on human labour instead of machinery. (Fitchett et al 2009:30)

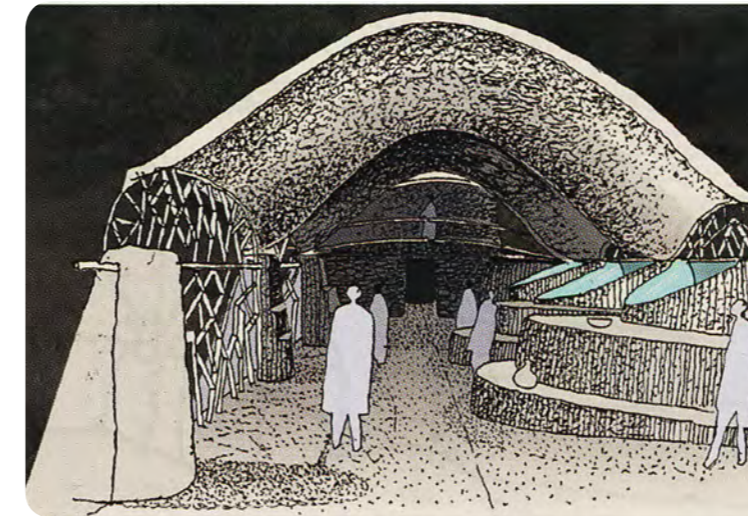
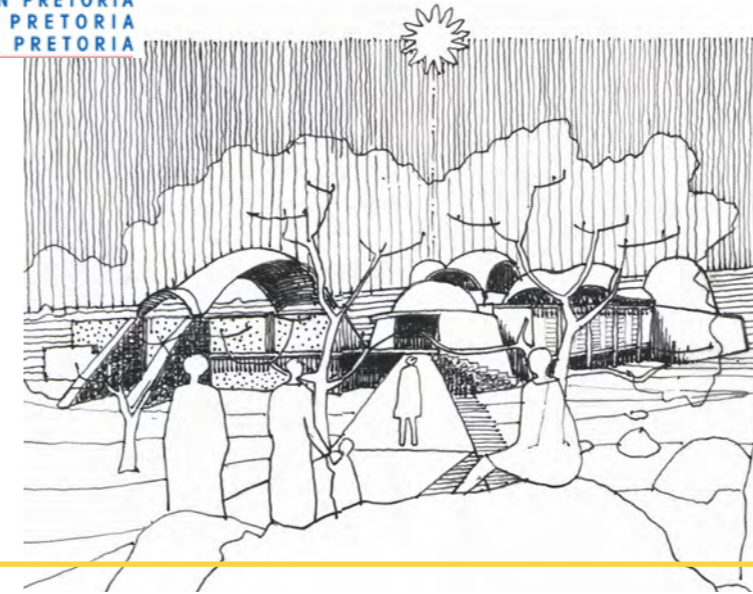


Fig. 3 The Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre

"The place, therefore, unites gives them common identity and permanence of the place is what

a group of human beings, it is something that hence the basis for a fellowship or society. The enables it to play this role." (Norberg-Schulz 1985: 9)

expression of time, thereby making it acceptable. (Pallasmaa 2000:6) This may be a valuable tool in orientating the architectural experience on an existential plane.

The use of traditional materials not only tells the tale of the manufacture of the object, but the many years it took to develop that tradition. St John-Wilson refers to the work of Alvar Aalto in this regard. Not only does the use of material and symbolism in his work tell the story of surrounding natural environment, it also embodies the "...collective beliefs, the local colour of every cultural reign." (St John-Wilson 1992:90) We often refer to culture in the present tense, but perhaps it is worthwhile to remind ourselves of how long it takes to develop a specific culture. Such an object has inherent content, as opposed to the reductive aesthetic of Modern architecture that excludes all subject matter. (St John-Wilson 1992:95)

Looking beyond purely traditional materials, we may consider the story that materials may tell about the world we live in today. The materials that we select are done so under the looming knowledge of the impact it will have on the environment. We consider the manufacture, transport, lifespan and demolition in addition to the look and feel. This is a direct and visible reflection of a cultural shift in our perception of the environment and the exploitation thereof.

2.2.4 Time in the natural environment

Being disconnected from tradition, history and culture and the natural environment means an existence isolated in time. St John Wilson(1992:10) claims that modern architecture succeeds in banishing space and time, thereby instilling a feeling of unreality. Consider the contemporary public space: the shopping mall. No sun, wind or rain penetrates the capsule to hinder the consumer from their primary task of self-indulgence. Individual identity plays no part in the transaction. Night may fall or tragedy may strike without the occupants having an inkling of the reality that exist beyond the unreality of those walls. In opposition we see the prominent role that the natural environment plays in the rural context. The calendar is determined by the seasons, the moon and the stars and because of its vital role in their survival, these elements are held in reverence by the inhabitants. As will be seen in precedents, this plays a guiding role in the production of architecture.

2.2.5 Conclusion

"...it is to match adequately, not only the criteria of function and environment, but also the other interlocking codes that spell out both the private and subliminal reactions, and the public realm of conventional narrative; and then, above all, so to weave the strands together that one can begin to conceive their counter-form in the architectural language..." (St John-Wilson 1992: 90)

These core concepts of theory attempt to define the additional, less obvious characteristics that transform architecture from built form to place. Those strands that make up the DNA of a truly significant place.

2.3 PHYSICAL TRANSLATION

as proposed by theory

2.3.1 Dwelling

"To dwell implies the establishment of a meaningful relationship between man and a given environment..." (Norberg-Schulz 1985:13)

Dwelling, thus, is an important idea in terms of establishing a connection the environment. Although this is a very philosophical idea, Christian Norberg-Schulz does offer some suggestions as to how one can achieve this meaningful relationship. Breaking down the meaning of the term, Norberg-Schulz identifies the key ingredients of dwelling to be a how, that relates to identification, and a where, that relates to orientation. (Norberg-Schulz 1985:15) These are both subjects that have been raised previously and are clearly worth investigating further.

Identification refers to the "...qualities of things..." (Norberg-Schulz 1985:15) Again, we see the implication that objects contain an inherent meaning with which one can identify, and that aids us in understanding our world as it exists. (Norberg-Schulz 1985:18)

Orientation, on the other hand has to do with "...spatial interrelationship..." (Norberg-Schulz 1985:15) He describes the elements of spatial relationship as centres, paths, goals and domains. (Norberg-Schulz 1985:24) Domains are the larger plane on which paths and goals exist, which makes up the 'environmental image' of the mind, and thus the structure within which the environment is connected with paths and centres. (Norberg-Schulz 1985:24) A centre denotes a place of more importance, a destination, where horizontal movement comes to an end. Also important is that he claims a centre to create a vertical axis mundi which unites earth and sky, and that this can add a sacred dimension to a centre. (Norberg-Schulz 1985:23)

"To dwell in the qualitative sense is a basic condition of humanity. When we identify with a place, we dedicate ourselves to a way of being in the world. Therefore dwelling demands something from us, as well as from our places. We have to have an open mind, and the places have to offer rich possibilities for identification." (Norberg-Schulz 1985:11)

2.3.2 Gathering

"The existential purpose of building (architecture) is... to make a site become a place, that is, to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment." (Norberg-Schulz 1985:422) This comment was made after discussing the phenomenon of a bridge gathering the environment around it and making it meaningful. (Norberg-Schulz 1985:422) This simple construction does not give the environment its meaning, but makes us aware of the environment and its inherent meaning. Thus, the act of building can gather the world around it.

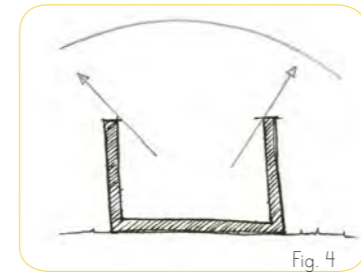


Fig. 4

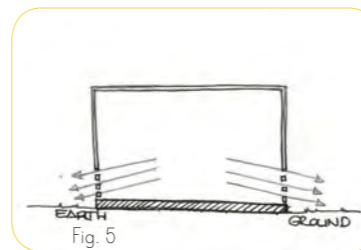


Fig. 5

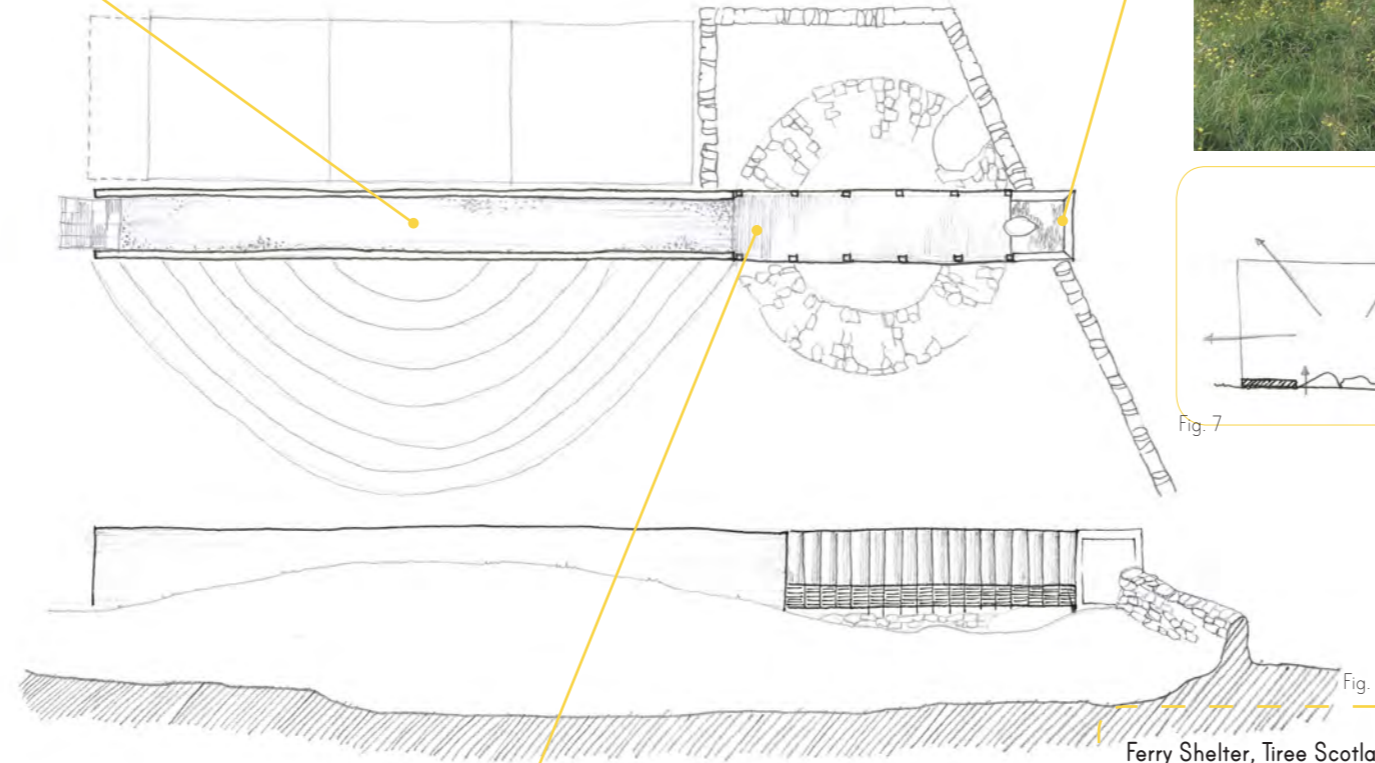


Fig. 6

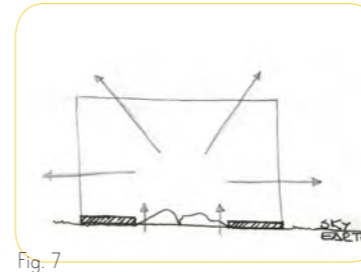


Fig. 7

Ferry Shelter, Tiree Scotland, Sutherland Hussey Architects, 2003

The precedent is a good example of the impact that enclosure and exposure can have on the experience of a place. Here, by means of obscuring view and focusing the eye on certain elements of the landscape in turn, the traveller is made acutely aware of his surroundings. What would merely have been a landscape quickly passed by, becomes an experience of the sky, the surface of the earth, the experience of natural elements and lastly all of these things are gathered in a single view.

"If we call this multifarious between the world, then the world is the house, which is inhabited by the mortals. The single house however, the villages, the cities, are works of architecture, which in and around themselves gather the multifarious between." (Norberg-Schulz 1985:18) This 'multifarious between' refers to everything that exists between the earth and the sky, and is subsequently called the world. So, architecture is given the task of becoming the connecting element between the earth and sky, which defines our world. This may become a guiding principle in pointing out the singular importance of the earth and sky in the design considerations. The scale involved should also be noted. He refers to cities, towns and single houses, making the concept one that can be of importance throughout all stages of a design.

2.3.3 Enclosure and exposure

"We may conclude that dwelling means to gather the world as a concrete building or 'thing' and that the archetypal act of building is to Umfriedung or enclosure." (Norberg-Schulz 1985:425) Following from the concept of gathering, Norberg-Schulz approaches that of enclosure. Previously, we have also discussed the polar range of enclosure and exposure suggested by Colin St John Wilson. (St John-Wilson 1992:14) Here, we encounter a link between the two theories that may result in an interesting practical application. While Norberg-Schulz focuses on the environment, St John Wilson shifts his focus to the human body in what he calls the "body language". (1992:5)

"It is the language drawn from a wide range of sensual and spatial experience, of rough and smooth, warm and cold; of being above and under, inside, outside, or in-between, exposed or enveloped. But then it is intrinsically these sensations that are the primary vehicle for architectural experience." (St John-Wilson 1992: 12) Where gathering creates awareness of the environment, the body language interprets the enclosure in terms of the human experience.

In the precedent (discussed to the left), both these theories can be seen. A complete experience is created by means of enclosure and exposure. Attention is focused on the elements in the landscape, gathering the environment. The play of enclosure and exposure also makes the user aware of the comfort and discomfort experienced as a result of climatic conditions, as well as leading him through different spatial sensations of being between, under, inside and outside.

2.3.4 Weak or fragile architecture

"Whereas the latter [image architecture] desires to impress through an outstanding singular image and consistent articulation of form, the architecture of the weak image is contextual and responsive." (Pallasmaa 2000:7) Previously, we have read the objection of Pallasmaa against a visually biased architecture. Here, an alternative is offered: the concept of 'weak' or 'fragile' architecture is introduced. (Pallasmaa 2000:7) Fragile architecture attempts to become a supportive background to human perception, rather than dominating the foreground with a purely visual image. (Pallasmaa 2000:12)

The Japanese garden is cited as an inspiration for this: it explains weak architecture as containing more than one meaning, as being subtle and a fusion of the man-made and natural environments. (Pallasmaa 2000:10) This is reminiscent of the DNA strands mentioned by John Wilson, and the idea that: "...the moments of greatest poetic intensity gather around the points of ambiguity..." (1992:11)

Incorporating this architecture into the physical environment implies it being subject to the effect of time and natural processes. As opposed to image architecture which is manufactured as a final product, weak architecture is open-ended and subject to change. (Pallasmaa 2000:11) The flexibility and sensitivity may be an indication of an architecture that is compatible with the constraints and opportunities presented by the subject of sustainability.



Dune House, Atlantic Beach, William Morgan Architects, 1975

One way in which weak architecture may be created is to employ shapes that have a reciprocal relationship with the landscape. The dune house is an example of such a construction. The house is located adjacent to the beach in Florida and is only visible as a planted mound with ocular shaped window openings. (Orton 1988: 231) The stereotomic structure is achieved with a sprayed concrete shell and the 500mm soil cover improves thermal performance in the hot climate. (Orton 1988: 231)



Fig. 8 Photographs of Dune House

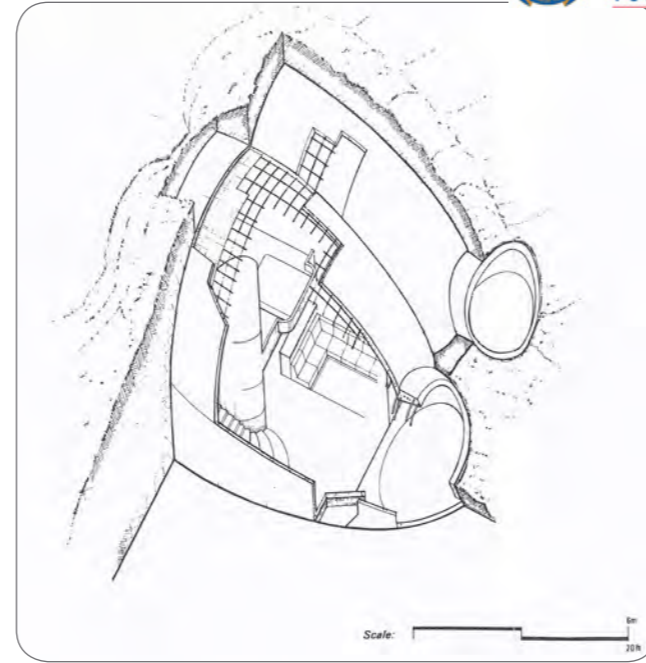


Fig. 9 Diagram of Dune House



Fig. 10 Muuratsalo Experimental house

Muuratsalo Experimental House, Western shore of Muuratsalo Island. Alvar Aalto

The summer house is set in a lush landscape on a large site where the architect could be close to the influence of the environment. The building served as laboratory for Aalto to experiment with materials and building techniques, thus different parts of the building have different characters. However, the use of materials and space exhibits a profound awareness of the surrounding landscape and is constantly either repeating or inviting the landscape into the design. Along with experimenting with materials and texture such as that of brick and stonework, different plants and mosses were incorporated to test the durability and effect. (Alvar Aalto Foundation)



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13