

2 THEORETICAL DISCOURSE

THE THEORETICAL DISCOURSE EXPLORES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MATERIAL WORLD AND THE QUALITY OF HUMAN LIFE.

2.1 BEING

According to Martin Heidegger the primary purpose of life is to dwell. The way in which “we are” and “I am”, the way in which we humans exist on earth, is through dwelling (Norberg-Schultz 1980:10).

To be able to dwell, a certain environment is required in which to dwell. Heidegger (Norberg-Schultz 1980:5) describes the role of architecture in an existential sense as allowing “for a specific site to become a place”. Christian Norberg-Schultz illustrates this through an understanding that for such a place to be successful, it needs a distinct character. He terms this character the “Genius Loci” of a place. He states that “the specific character of the place thus allows us to dwell within that given space, and it is within this specific area where architecture can mould the physical parameters that human beings can be” (Norberg-Schultz 1980:5).

Juhani Pallasmaa (2005:16) sums up this ongoing task of architecture when he states that “architecture, as with all art, is fundamentally confronted with questions of human existence in space and time. It expresses and relates man’s being in the world”. He then poses the following questions (Pallasmaa 1994:67):

Can architecture define a credible social and cultural goal for itself? Can architecture be rooted in a culture in order to cre-

ate an experience of locality, place and identity? And finally, can architecture re-create a tradition, a shared ground that provides a basis for the criteria of authenticity and quality?

2.2 PHENOMENOLOGY

The intention of the phenomenological research method is to “study the meanings of human experiences in situations, as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life” (von Eckartsberg 1998:4).

According to Rolf von Eckartsberg (1998:3), the emphasis is on the study of lived experience: on how we read, enact and understand our life-involvements. This existential phenomenological approach is developed from phenomenology as applied to the human consciousness and incorporates a method of lived experience, or existentialism. The purpose of this approach is to examine the essential nature of human experience and existence. Of importance is the key phenomenological notion of intentionality – the fact that all human impulses and actions do not exist unto themselves but are directed towards something and have an object (Seamon 2000:3).

The starting point within phenomenology is the arena of everyday life experience and action (von Eckartsberg 1998:4). Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the originator of philosophical phenomenology, articulated the metaphor of “life-world”. The life-world is the locus of inter-



FIGURE 3 (top left)

The Kunsthaus Bregenz, Peter Zumthor, 1997.

FIGURE 4 (right)

Brother Klaus Field Chapel by Peter Zumthor, 2007. Wachendorf, Eifel, Germany.

action between ourselves and our perceptual environments with the world of experienced horizons within which we meaningfully dwell together. The life-world is the world as we find it, prior to any explicit theoretical conceptions (Von Eckartsberg, 1998: 2).

A phenomenological approach then works to unmask the life-world's concealment (Seamon 1981:1).

The architect's themes of investigation with respect to the life-world includes the sense of place, or "at homeness", environmental experience and behaviour. According to David Seamon, two key phenomenological notions are that of outside and inside, which are significant as they set up an immediate relationship of fusion between person and world (Buttimer 1977:150).

The central aim of a phenomenological approach is to explore and to interpret the mutual relationship between the material world and the quality of human life through examining behaviour, experience, and meaning in a descriptive, interpretive manner as they occur in their everyday context (Seamon 2000:1).

Communication theories and phenomenology present ways to approach the crisis of meaning within architecture in response to the loss of socially motivated engagement with the world. Phenomenology emphasises nature, place and tectonics. Can there be meaning in form, or only in content? What is appropriate content for architecture? Can ornament, structure or material play significant roles in the construction of meaning?

Phenomenology underlies the post-modern attitude towards site, place, landscape, and making (particularly tectonics). Recent theory has moved towards philosophical speculation by problematising the body's interaction with its environment. Visual, tactile, olfactory, and aural sensations are the visceral part of the reception of architecture, a medium distinguished by its three-dimensional presence.

The bodily and unconscious connection to architecture has again become an object of study. It has begun to displace formalism and lay the groundwork for an emerging aesthetic of the contemporary sublime. Heidegger's writings are motivated by the concern with modern man's inability to reflect on Being. Heidegger argues that this reflection defines the human condition. He maintains that language shapes thought, and thinking and poetry are required for dwelling. Norberg-Schultz considers the principle proponent of a phenomeno-

logical architecture to be concerned with the concretisation of existential space through the making of architecture. Phenomenology requires deliberate attention to how things are made. It recognises and celebrates the basic elements of architecture (wall, floor, ceiling as horizon or boundary). This has, however, led to a renewed interest in sensuous qualities of materials, light and colour and the symbolic tactile significance of the joint (Nesbitt 1996:14-30).

2.3 ANONYMOUS CULTURE

The idea of totality, which is central to the thinking of modernity, and the accompanying notions of an era and of progress, have lost their validity. It is no longer possible to understand reality through a single conceptual construction or representation. Towards the end of our millennium, an universal history has become impossible as history has disintegrated into a multitude of alternative heterogeneous histories, and simultaneously the perspective of redemption has vanished (Pallasmaa 1994:74).

Pallasmaa feels that current trends in theorising, and the verbal explanation of architectural meanings and intentions, reveal an uncertainty of the role and essence of architecture. Architecture is nervously seeking its self-definition and autonomy in the embrace of the culture of consumption, which tends to turn it into a commodity and a form of entertainment (Pallasmaa 1994:75).

Fredric Jameson has emphasised the contrived nature of contemporary cultural production and its fixation with appearances, surfaces, and instant impacts. He describes post-modern architecture by the notion of "contrived depthlessness" (Pallasmaa 1994:76).

The reversion to images of a lost past in architecture is grounded in the very strategy of capitalist economy. The whole of history becomes a market place; local and ethnic traditions and historical settings are fabricated under the guise of a search for roots. Thematisation is the newest strategy of controlled emotional persuasion. When detaching imagery from its spontaneous autonomy, the image is not allowed to arise from within but is rather forced into a preconceived interpretation (Pallasmaa 1994:77).

This is a rejection of the contemporary world, and a reflection of a disoriented, split identity and an alarming cultural escapism (Pallasmaa 2000:78).

Architecture is one of our most fundamental existential expressions, and it communicates on several levels simultaneously. We are usually affected only by the surface message and ignore the unintentional sub-conscious messages, but they are the most significant ingredients in a work of art. In *Touching: the human significance of the skin* (1971) Ashley Montagu writes (Pallasmaa 2001:51):

We in the western world are beginning to discover our neglected senses. Touch, not vision, is the sensory mode that integrates our experience of the world and ourselves. It unites even visual perceptions and integrates them into the extension of the self. Tactile experience evokes the experience of a temporal continuum. Vision by contrast places us in a continuous present.

The role of architecture is not to entertain or thrill us, but to structure our understanding of the world and of our very existence. To use an expression of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, architecture's role is to articulate how the world touches us. Architecture creates frames for action, thought, and emotion. It gives expression to human institutions and establishes a hierarchy for them. It articulates the interplay between background and foreground, normality and uniqueness, greyness and colour, the commonplace and the celebrated (Pallasmaa 2001:52).

2.4 AWAKENING THE SENSES

One prominent aspect of Pallasmaa's phenomenology is his notion of "multi-sensory architecture". He explains that experience of architecture is multi-sensory: qualities of matter, space and scale are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle. Architecture strengthens one's sense of being in the world, essentially giving rise to a strengthened experience of self (Pallasmaa 1996:28).

Another aspect of Pallasmaa's architectural phenomenology is his emphasis on architectural experience as a verb rather than as a noun. In interpreting architecture as a verb, one focuses on action and movement in perception. This perspective emphasises multi-sensory engagement, since the moving body is typically more open and present to the moment than the static body. He explains how a building is encountered: it is approached, confronted, related to one's body, moved through and utilised as a condition for other things. Architecture directs scales, and frames actions, perceptions, and thoughts (Pallasmaa 2000:60).

There is an inherent suggestion of action in images of architecture, the

moment of active encounter or a promise of use and purpose. A bodily reaction is an inseparable aspect of the experience of architecture as a consequence of this implied action. A real architectural experience is not simply a series of retinal images (Holl, Pallasmaa and Pérez-Gómez: 2009).

In this regard, Pallasmaa criticises three current tendencies in architecture: the commodification of buildings; the self-defeating search for newness; and the hegemony of the marketable image. Instead he contends that architectural theory, criticism, and education must return its attention to the now neglected cultural grounds of architecture, attempting to present a more complete experience of the building grounded in the fullness of bodily encounter rather than merely the experiential limitations of visual interpretation. One example he uses is the visual constriction of computer-aided design. By reinforcing visual manipulation and graphic production, computer imaging further detaches architecture from its multi-sensory essence. As design tools, computers can encourage mere visual manipulation and make us neglect our powers of empathy and imagination. We become voyeurs obsessed with visuality, blind not only to architecture's social reality but also to its functional, economic, and technological realities (Pallasmaa 1996:193).

Authentic architectural experiences can only be achieved by approaching or confronting a building, rather than the architectural façade. One must enter and not simply view the frame of the door, and one must look through rather than at the window itself. The authenticity of architectural experience is grounded in the tectonic language of buildings and the comprehensibility of the act of construction to the senses. We behold, touch, listen and measure the world with our entire bodily existence and the experiential world is organised and articulated around the centre of the body. Our domicile is the refuge of our body, memory and identity. We are in constant dialogue and interaction with the environment, to the degree that it is impossible to detach the image of the Self from its spatial and situational existence. This concept is captured by the poet Noel Arnaud, who states, "I am the space, where I am" (Pallasmaa 2005:64).

Moreover, instead of attending to a one-dimensional, image-based approach to architecture, as Pallasmaa suggests, one should attend to "peripheral vision", which goes beyond the object to perceive it contextually. He suggests that "focused vision makes us mere observers" and that "peripheral perception transforms retinal images into spatial

and bodily experience” which in turn encourages participation (Pallasmaa 2000:84).

Drawing inspiration from Gianni Vattimo’s ideas of “weak ontology” and “fragile thought”, Pallasmaa prescribes “fragile architecture” as a counter to today’s visually-dominant architecture. This is architecture of the “fragile image” which is contextual, multi-sensory, responsive, and concerned with experiential interaction and sensual accommodation. This architecture grows gradually, scene by scene, rather than quickly manifesting in one simple, domineering concept (Pallasmaa 2000:78).

2.5 EXPERIENCE

The discussion revolves around architects and artists who are associated with an approach to inclusionary, responsive environments. These environments are appealing to man’s being in the world.

Peter Zumthor was born in Basel in 1943, and was the son of master joiner. He studied at the Kunstgewerbeschule and at the Pratt Institute in New York. Since graduating he has preferred to live and work in Switzerland near Chur in Canton Graubunden.

Zumthor explores the essence of architecture in buildings that celebrate place and engage all the human senses. Each of his buildings are the result of a deeply considered response to site and programme. Each is clearly the product of sensitivity to place, materiality, space and light, and to human responses to these fundamental elements of architecture (Ryan 1997:42).

Zumthor’s Vals spa recounts the thinking he describes in his essay “Appealing to all the Senses”. The architect choreographs materials according to their evocative qualities. Flamed and polished stone, chrome, brass, leather and velvet were deployed with care to enhance the inhabitant’s sense of embodiment when clothed and naked. The theatrical character of steaming and bubbling water was enhanced by natural and artificial light, with murky darkness composed as intensely as light.

At the Thermal Bath Vals, Zumthor (2006:27) aimed to celebrate the liturgy of bathing by evoking emotions:

To me, buildings can have a beautiful silence that I associate with attributes such as composure, self-evidence, durability, presence, and integrity, and with warmth and sensuousness as well; a building that is being itself, being a building, not representing anything, just being. The sense that I try to instill into materials is beyond all rules of composition, and their tangibility, smell, and acoustic qualities are merely elements of the language we are obliged to use. Sense emerges when I succeed in bringing out the specific meanings of certain materials in my buildings, meanings that can only be perceived in just this way in this one building. When I concentrate on a specific site or place for which I am going to design a building, when I try to plumb its depths, its form, its history, and its sensuous qualities, images of other places start to invade this process of precise observation: images of places I know and that once impressed me, images of ordinary or special places that I carry with me as inner visions of specific moods and qualities; images of architectural situations, which emanate from the world of art, or films, theatre or literature.

Jannis Kounellis is one of the founding figures of the Arte Povera movement, which arose in Italy during the early 1960s.

Poetic, political and historical concerns translate into works that are loaded with metaphor. It is in the contrast between message and materials that a satisfying tension is established, adding depth to the formal beauty of the wood, iron, lead, fabric and paper used in structure, providing glimpses of content beyond structural beauty. Ordinary materials and objects in his work are “imbued with dramatic power, evoking history, memory and the reality of our present day experience” (‘Jannis Kounellis’ :2006).

FIGURE 5 (opposite page, top left)

Kolumba Art museum of the archbishop of Cologne, Peter Zumthor, 2007, Cologne, Germany.

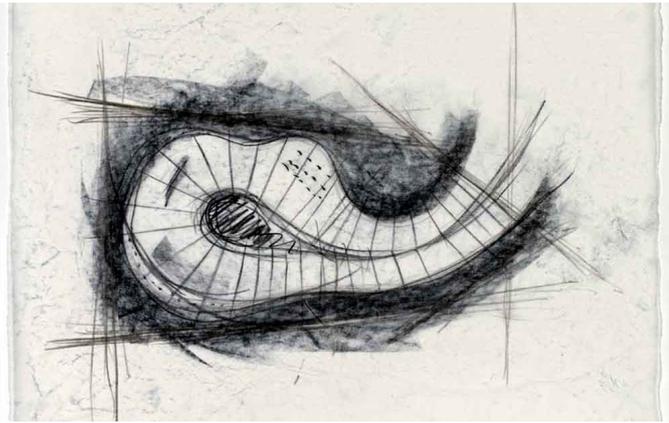


FIGURE 6 (top right)

Interior view Kolumba Art Museum of the Archbishop of Cologne, Peter Zumthor, 2007, Cologne, Germany.

FIGURE 7 (middle left)

Sketch of Brother Klaus Field Chapel, Peter Zumthor, 2007.

FIGURE 8 (middle right)

Bath Vals 1996, Peter Zumthor, Graubünden, Switzerland.

FIGURE 9 (bottom)

UNTITLED 1998, Sculptural exhibition by Jannis Kounellis, ACE Gallery, NYC.

Aldo van Eyck's oeuvre comprises a vast array of tectonic ideas worked out within the programmes of socially relevant structures, contributing greatly to modern architecture's moral core (Chasin 2004:428).

Van Eyck (Chasin 2004:429) intended his work to be based on three great traditions: the classical, implying "immutability and rest"; the modern, implying "change and movement"; and the archaic, implying "the vernacular of the heart". These three traditions can be reconciled in order to develop an architecture with a formal and structural potential sufficiently rich to meet the complex reality of contemporary life. The paradigm of the three traditions united stands for the realm of architecture. This realm is connected with the reality of human relationships. Architecture has to deal with the "constant and constantly changing" human reality: not only with what is different from the past, but also with what has remained the same (Strauven 2007:2).

Van Eyck (Strauven 2007:2) stated in 1962 that:

A past is gathered into the present and the gathering body of experience finds a home in the mind; the present acquires temporal depth; loses its acrid instantaneity; its razor blade quality. One might call this the interiorisation of time or time rendered transparent. It seems to me that PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE must be active in the mind's interior as a continuum. If they are not, the artefacts we make will be without temporal depth or associative perspective.

Van Eyck's thinking fundamentally proceeded in terms of reconciling opposites such as past and present, classic and modern, archaic and avant-garde, constancy and change, simplicity and complexity, the organic and the geometric. He saw that maintaining the dialectics of these opposing factions was a necessary condition for the development of a genuinely contemporary architecture (Strauven 2007:1-2).

The more Van Eyck came to identify with the new consciousness, the more he recognised that its different manifestations were grounded on one fundamental idea, the idea of relativity. Relativity implies that the world cannot be regarded as having an inherent hierarchical structure stemming from a privileged, absolute frame of reference or subjected to an intrinsic centre. All viewpoints are equivalent: every place is entitled to be regarded as a centre. Far from being a chaos of unrelated fragments, this polycentric reality has a complex coherence in which objects, though autonomous, are linked

through purely reciprocal relations. This implies a coherence in which these relations are as important as the objects themselves. He summarised this view using a statement by Mondrian (Stauven 2007:4):

The culture of particular form is approaching its end. The culture of determined relations has begun.

Van Eyck succeeded in reconciling a great many polarities in the Amsterdam Municipal Orphanage (1955-1960). The Orphanage is both house and city, compact and polycentric, single and diverse, clear and complex, static and dynamic, contemporary and traditional. The classical geometrical order that lies at the base of the plan, the modern dynamic centrifugal space and the archaic biomorphic cupolas which cover the entire building all embody a maximum amount of both closeness and openness. These units are also a striking example of Van Eyck's view that architecture should, just like man, breathe in and out. This balanced, non-hierarchical organism remains linked to the outside world by articulated external spaces (Strauven 2007:5).

Each of the eight compartments is positioned to face a large domed space which serves as a symbolic house. The central organising principle of the design is the idea of the building as a city. The circulation is conceived as an internal street which acts as a continuation of the actual street outside. The courtyards serve as plazas, or gathering spaces for the community of the house.

The entrance courtyard can be seen as a type of gate for the entire complex. Considering van Eyck's "philosophy of the doorstep", one discovers that the entrance court serves as a logical and gradual transition zone between the city and the building itself (Clarke 1985:75).

In the Amsterdam Playground Project (1947-1978), van Eyck used elementary forms that included both architectonic and biomorphic connotations. Low massive concrete sandpits and stepping stones contrasted slender somersault frames, arches and domes made of metal tubing. All of these elements act as enabling structures that lend themselves to various kinds of child's play, while their archetypal forms imply multiple meanings (Strauven 2007:5).

The sandpits, round or square, were simple geometric forms but also constituted receptive bodies, welcoming and sheltering the playing child while remaining linked by an axial path. Through his compositional techniques, all of which were aimed at evolving different forms

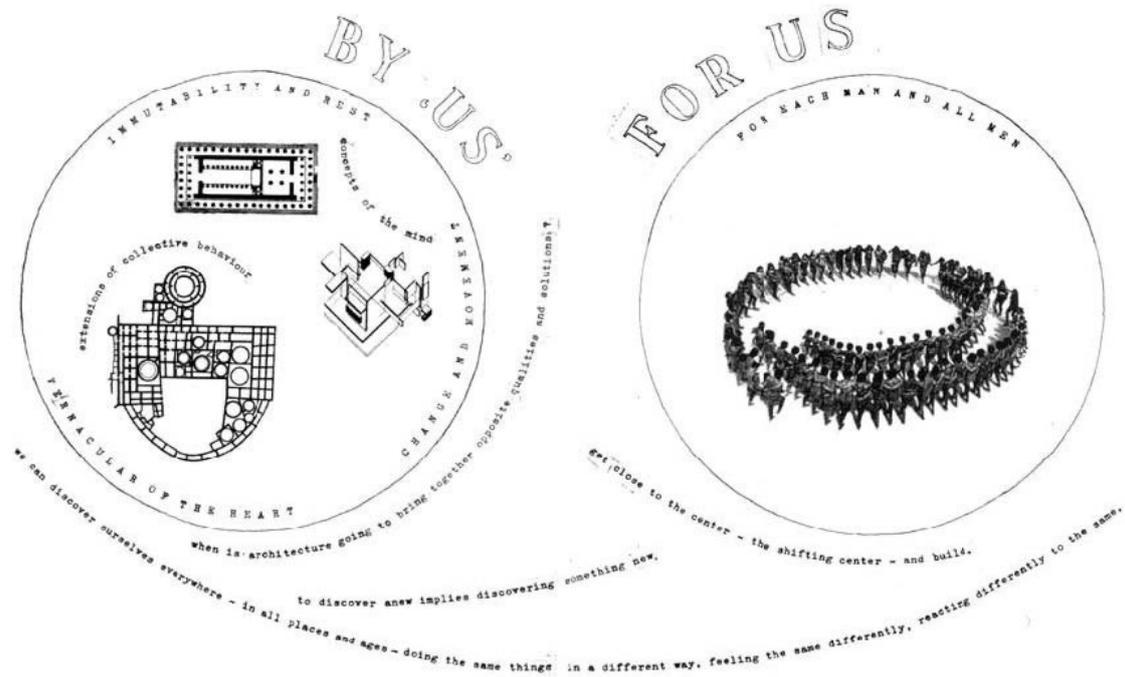


FIGURE 10 (top)
Otterlo Circles, 1959-62. Aldo van Eyck Archive.

FIGURE 11 (bottom left)
Amsterdam Municipal Orphanage (1955-60).

FIGURE 12 (bottom right)
Playground Zaanhof, Amsterdam, Aldo van Eyck, 1948.

of non-hierarchical order, van Eyck sought to realise recognisable places where cohesion lay in reciprocal relations rather than in subjection to a central point (Strauven 2007:5).

Van Eyck conceived of the “in-between” as a place where different things can meet and unite, or more specifically, as “the common ground where conflicting polarities can again become twin phenomena” (Strauven 2007:5). This stems from the insight that real polarities (such as subject and object, inner and outer reality, small and large, open and closed, part and whole) are not conflicting, mutually exclusive entities. Rather, they are distinctive components, two complementary halves of one and the same entity. Conversely a true entity is always twofold. Their in-between should not be considered a makeshift or a negligible margin but something as important as the reconciled opposites themselves. This is the space where contrary tendencies come into balance. This space is filled with ambivalence, and the space therefore corresponds to the ambivalent nature of man. The in-between is “space in the image of man”, a place that, like man, “breathes in and out” (Strauven 2007:5).

Van Eyck succeeded, in the words of Georges Candilis, in creating an architecture of exceptional quality using the most modest of means, an architecture “that consisted not only of hard, tangible materials but also of immaterial materials” (Strauven 2007:5).

2.6 CONCLUSION

The task of architecture is not to free buildings from anything but to weave them into an existing cultural continuum that has collective significance. A building moves us when it succeeds in reverberating with something concealed in our humanity, and when it echoes images and sentiments stored in our subconscious. Architecture is not an exposition of novelties. Architecture is not an art form of pure self-expression. Architectural meaning resides in human experience. It is evoked by the acts of occupying and inhabiting space, in one’s experiences of space, matter, gravity, and light. A significant work of architecture is never the product of a single individual. It is always a collaboration of history and tradition with the discipline of architecture (Pallasmaa 2001:52).