

03 THEORETICAL DISCOURSE

The Theoretical Discourse focuses on the intangible dimensions related to architecture such as memory and experience. It is important to consider the intangible dimension in architecture as essential element, for as Marshall McLuhan points out, '[e]verybody experiences far more than he understands. Yet it is experience, rather than understanding that influences behaviour' [Perkins, 1995: 2].

3.1 Experience in architecture

In *The palace at 4A.M.* Alberto Giacometti's surrealistic sculpture becomes a 'stage for his ideas, on which the primordial drama of life, love and death are coded with a dream.' In the same way, architecture becomes a stage for the architect's ideas. The difference, and this is the important part, lies in the fact that the architect's ideas, transformed into a structure, will be experienced by actual human beings – its users.

However, later in his life Giacometti started to question the 'Threat to Humanity' further when he came to realise that 'we perceive each other merely as an "ap-

parition" surrounded by space, within a certain field of vision and perspective reduced.' It was this idea of perception that Giacometti experimented with in his sculptures. During this same period Maurice Merleau-Ponty published *Phenomenology of perception* in which he asserts that the way in which a situation is perceived is greatly influenced by its concrete reality. Giacometti changed the way in which sculpture was regarded. 'He was the pioneer of the anti-Cartesian counterpoising to Cubism that replaces rational systems with experienced perception, knowledge with specific experience' [Ruhrberg, 1998:487-490].

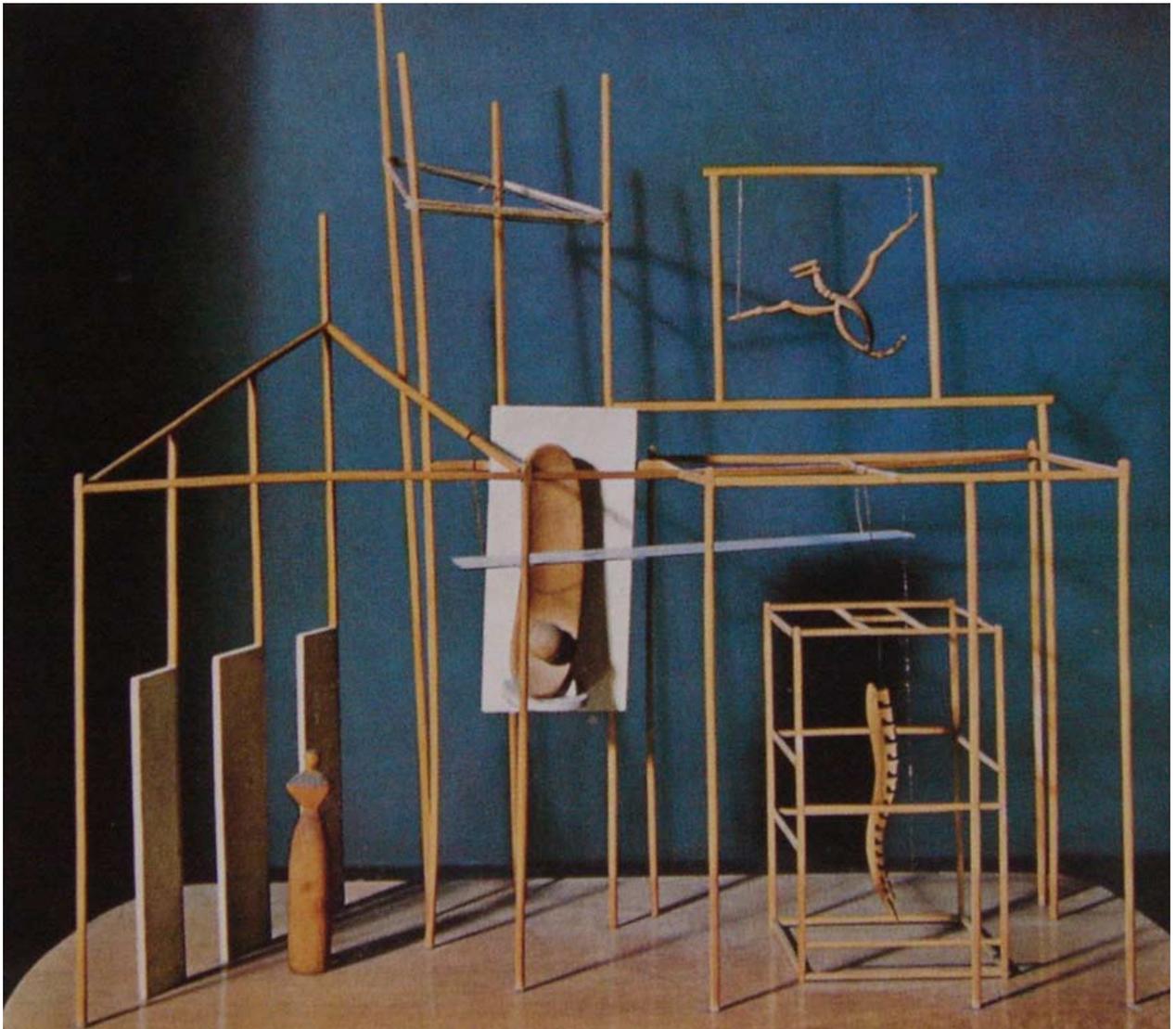


Figure 3.01 The Palace at 4A.M. , Alberto Giacometti [Ruhrberg, 1998:465]

The experience of architecture is an intimate one that depends on unifying the experiences of the body and the mind. Human inclinations and actions cannot exist by themselves.

Immateriality, which includes feelings, hopes and desires, can be regarded as a powerful driving force in life. Immateriality makes people do things and want things. Experience can be seen as immaterial action. Immateriality, what people do and how they react, cannot be controlled. Immateriality can however be influenced by the physical. Architecture can be considered to represent the physical, i.e. the material. The actual immateriality of participation is what elevates the material. Architecture can therefore not exist without the participation of the human being, and consequently, the experience of architecture is what drives the immaterial quality of the material. Architecture becomes the design of the physical environment within which the human being experiences life on a daily basis.

Phenomenology is considered to be the interpretive study of human experience. Architecture therefore plays a dramatic role as the arena in which everyday life and its related 'performances' take place. As Sir Winston Churchill once said, 'we shape our buildings: thereafter they shape us.' [Perkins, 1995:62].

We exist on Earth as souls in our bodies. Our body is that which facilitates the interaction between our minds and the real world. This occurs through our senses – sight, touch, smell, hearing and taste – and some argue that there are more than these five senses, such as thermal sensitivity.

Peter Zumthor is an architect who firmly believes in the psychological effect that buildings have on their dwellers. He acknowledges the fact that we experience our environment on a conscious level in his architecture, and clearly states that the experience of architecture goes beyond our daily interaction with functional spaces. He says that to experience architecture in a concrete way means to touch, see, hear and smell it, to discover and consciously work with these qualities. [Zumthor, 2006: 10].



Figure 3.02 Thermal Baths Vals, by Peter Zumthor [www.presidentsmedals.com accessed 29.09.2009]

It is therefore important to acknowledge this psychological dimension in architecture and to design with more than one sense of the human being in mind, for as Marshall McLuhan points out, '[e]verybody experiences far more than he understands. Yet it is experience, rather than understanding that influences behaviour' [Perkins, 1995: 2].

When nature, materials and light are integrated as design elements, the metaphysical element in architecture comes to life as the sensory experience is stimulated. When the mind and body feel different than usual on entering a building, we are experiencing its space.

Architecture is part physical and part metaphysical. The art of design lies in understanding and translating the metaphysical. The work of Peter Zumthor can be regarded as an example of achieving the metaphysical in architecture. Zumthor designs spaces that enhance the natural and the real world, and consequently, the users dwell in relation with the environment. An effect is shaped in the person; he makes him wonder about the most basic components of life. He refers to architecture thus:

Architecture has its own realm. It has a special physical relationship with life. I do not think of it primarily as either a message or a symbol, but as an envelope and background for life, which goes on, in and around it, a sensitive container for the rhythm of footsteps on the floor, for the concentration of work, for the silence of sleep' [Zumthor, 2006:12].



'One eye sees, the other feels.' Paul Klee [Perkins, 1995:4]

Architecture can no longer be regarded as mere buildings; it becomes the container of poetry, thoughts and dreams. The magic of architecture, the memory of an experience, the shaping of a thought all take part in the meeting of the conscious with the unconscious.

Zumthor uses sensory stimuli to trigger feelings and ideas within a person. He intends to penetrate the human mind by using sight when views of the mountains are framed. The way one feels within one's own skin is experienced by means of different temperatures, and memories of the individual's past are triggered through the sense of smell. These sensory stimuli create an awareness within the person to fully experience the space he finds himself in. The individual is stimulated to wonder, to be fully aware of life and of where he dwells.

3.2 Memory

Humans experience their surrounding environments by means of stimulation and integration of the five senses. These produce images within the mind and therefore create memories that can later be recalled and relived. These memories influence future experiences and the way in which other environments will be experienced.

In the essay *Carlo Scarpa: built memories*, Anne-Catrin Schultz refers to two kinds of memory that exist, i.e. direct and indirect memory. Indirect memory refers to the narrative component, to the evoking of historic places or elements, as opposed to the direct memory that refers to a building's original shape or style. Insightful meaning is added to architecture when the direct and indirect memory incorporate the narrative into the structure. Architectural details and symbols enable the structure to relate to its historic and local context.

It is often difficult to preserve a memory and consequently keep it alive. Memory is inherently a living element and its preservation would entail freezing a moment in time, directly opposing its inherent nature.

According to Francis Yates, '[o]ne has the impression that memories are most carefully built up with memory architecture, with architectural places reflected within. The art of memory is an invisible art; it reflects real places but is about, not the places themselves, but the reflection of these within the imagination' [Birksted, 2000:48].

The role of architecture should therefore be re-evaluated in relation to memory and its preservation. As memory can be regarded as part of the intangible dimension of space and time, the experience of architecture and its metaphysical elements can be considered to be a means of enabling the memory to stay alive as it becomes part of the metaphysical world of the user. Weaving individual experiences of atmosphere, space, scale, materiality, light and so forth into the architecture enables a memory to continue within the individual's imagination, keeping the memory alive through the human mind as a vessel of remembered experience.

Architecture can be seen as central to the idea of remembering. Memories are created, transformed, or for that matter, imagined in relation to place. Architecture is the formal configuration of place within space, acting as a reference point for memory. As Ruskin states:

It is as the centralisation and protectress of this sacred influence, that architecture is to be regarded by us with the most serious thought. We may live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her [Ruskin, 1849:181].