

Toward the poetic in architecture

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The Poetics of Architecture addresses the “making of architecture” simultaneously as an act of physical construction and a mental act of construing. In the past it has been investigated as a scientific (rational) or artistic (intuitive) endeavor. This article functions as a collection of diverse opinions that aim to illustrate that the two viewpoints are not mutually exclusive, but form an discourse between thought and feeling. This approach aims at creating places with the potential for poetic density. The scientific reasoning is supplemented by the author’s reflections on the poetic possibilities within the bow as a simple scientific/artistic artifact. The bow offers a glimpse of how objects can embody our most emotive and scientific capabilities and sheds light on the potential held within architecture to act as a condensing agent in our “lived world”. Simultaneously the assertion dawnns that the poetic potential of any building can ultimately only be unlocked by the experiences and individual appreciation of inhabitants. These experiences seem fleeting, but have a lasting quality. The poetic eludes definition in favor of continual aspiration towards it.

Key words: poetic, poiesis, architecture

’n Soeke na die poëtiese in argitektuur

Die Poëtiese in Argitektuur spreek die “maak van argitektuur” aan as beide ’n fisiese daad van konstruksie én ’n daad van verstandelike konstruering. In die verlede is dit ondersoek as ’n wetenskaplike (rasionele) of ’n kunssinnige (intuitiewe) onderneming. Hierdie artikel funksioneer as ’n versameling van diverse opinies wat poog om te illustreer dat die twee benaderings nie eksklusief teenoor mekaar staan nie, maar gesien moet word as ’n diskoers tussen gedagtes en gevoelens. Hierdie benadering mik na plekke met die potensiaal vir poetiese digtheid. Die wetenskaplike beredenering word toegelig deur die outeur se oordenkings oor die poëtiese moontlikhede wat opgesluit lê binne die boog as ’n eenvoudige wetenskaplike/kunssinnige artefak. Die boog illustreer hoe objekte ons emosionele en wetenskaplike bekwaamhede kan beliggaam en werp lig op die potensiaal van argitektuur om as kondenserende agent binne ons “geleefde wêreld” op te tree. Tegelykertyd ontstaan die idee dat die poëtiese potensiaal van enige gebou slegs ontsluit kan word deur die ervarings en persoonlike waardering van bewoners. Hierdie ervarings is oënskynlik kortstondig, maar het ’n blywende kwaliteit. Die poëtiese ontwyk omskrywing ten gunste van voortdurende soeke.

Sleutelwoorde: poëties, poiesis, argitektuur

Art and science need not stand in isolation. In fact, Juhani Pallasmaa (nd: 339) feels that art and science glide past each other in opposite directions. This necessarily implies that there will be moments in which art and science overlap to create a “denser view” of our reality. These moments become significant as places of poetic intensity.

In our lives these dense places linger as poetic images. Pallasmaa (*ibid*: 340) states that these poetic images are more than rationally understood destinations, but are experienced and lived. In the same way a work of architecture is a “real mental image object ... that place[s] itself directly in our existential experience and consciousness” (*ibid*: 340). It is therefore the task of the architect to marry the dualities of art and science in an effort to create places with the potential for poetic density.

The term poetics originates from the Greek verb “*poiesis*” that means “to make”. Therefore the Poetics of Architecture has its roots in the making of architecture (Antoniades 1990: 1). The architect must aspire to poetics (makings/buildings) of the first order by being a poet of the first order: the poet who can think strongly, feel strongly and see truly (Ruskin 1884: 446).

The Poetics of Architecture embraces a body of knowledge that represents the tension between abstract, institutional knowledge and embedded human knowledge: a dialogue between thought and feeling. Xavier Costa (Van Schaik 2002: 8) refers to this ambiguity as a “wounded discourse” that oscillates between formal specialized methods and informal internalized understanding. A hybrid intelligence that John Ruskin (1905: 1-2) defined as a “science of feeling” and a “ministry to the mind”.

César Daly (Becherer 1984: 105-110) proposed that the Poetics of Architecture should be seen as a marriage of science and sentiment where both the poet and the architect have to agree on Madame X's moderate point of view: a poetic that alternates between objectivity and subjectivity.

Peter Wilson (2002: 15) identifies two strategies that can be used when striving towards the poetic: Cumulative and Reductionist. Cumulative methods rely on an additive process represented by what Louis Hammer (1981: 384) calls “a palimpsest on which are written countless poems of space”. Reductionist methods rely on the reduction of the element to its essence, thereby releasing the “poetic potential of material space and shadow” (Wilson 2002: 15). This method can be seen in the work of Tadao Ando and Dom Hans van der Laan.

As a concept oscillating between thought and feeling, it is clear that the poetic life can never be attained. Baracco (2002: 72) explains that when searching for the poetic we intuitively know “that reaching it would imply a comprehending and a rationalization of [the poetic], thus denying it”. The poetic is a continuous dialogue between objectivity and subjectivity. It can not be understood. It can not be fully experienced. Within the poetic moment new roads and modes of thought are “unconcealed”. The poetic can only be strived for within the discourse between thought and feeling.

The Poetics of Architecture can therefore not be analyzed, but should be explored as a dialogue between the specific and the general. These explorations stretch across many fields of architectural thought and will reveal that poetics is embedded in each facet of architecture as well as in the way these parts come together to form a coherent whole.

In order to explore the poetic depths of making (or *poiesis*), the bow (as used by the San hunters of Southern Africa) presents a sufficiently dense poetic image to reveal the deep-rooted nature of the principles of the poetics of architecture. The analogy with the bow enables us to linger between art and science so that we may arrive at a deeper understanding of the poetic.

The bow is a precise instrument designed for killing. It works because of the objective rationale behind the design: potential mechanical energy released into a burst of kinetic energy. Yet the bow also embodies other aspirations. For when the bow is placed in the hands of the waiting hunter, it turns into a musical instrument. Rhythm emanates from the bow and one is reminded of the rhythm of life and death captured within the bow. The life of the hunter- the death of the buck- the death of the hunter failing to shoot the buck: an instrument comprising of both science and sentiment.

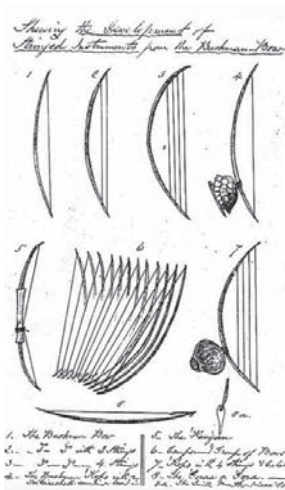


Figure 1
The Musical bow (Skotnes 1996: 308).

Figure 2
The Hunting bow (Tanaka, 1980: 52: Plate10).

Poetic readings of the site

Norberg-Schulz (1976: 422) argues that it is the task of the architect to present the potential within a given environment. These thoughts echo those of Heidegger, who stated that the way man belongs to a particular place in terms of the earth, sky, horizon and divinities should be revealed. By poetic “unconcealing”, the world (truth) is brought into presence (Norberg- Schulz 1983: 434).

The architect, however, must realise that the presence of architecture creates a new landscape. The Japanese architect, Tadao Ando (1991: 461), acknowledges this fact and stresses how important it is to discover the architecture which the site itself is seeking. In this way a new landscape will be created that will fully expose (in Heideggerian terms “unconceal”) the character of place. Through *poiesis* (making/building) the fourfold is brought into “a thing” and man’s understanding of his natural surroundings are concretized (Norberg- Schulz 1983: 436). This theoretical basis forms a datum from which the poetic content of the site can be explored.

The bow is uncovered from the branch. The bow is poetically unconcealed. The branch has changed- a new reality has been created.

Within a poetic moment the realization dawns: the bow is more similar to the poem than expected. The bow uses the minimum amount of material to achieve the maximum effect, while the poem uses the minimum number of words to suggest the greatest influence. Both aspire to the essence.

A poetic reading of the site will lead us to a deeper understanding of what Alain de Botton (2006: 251) refers to as “the promise of the field”. Architects should endeavor to reveal and celebrate this promise by looking past the visual images traditionally associated with architecture (like site plans and photographs). In the same way that the bow is uncovered from the branch, the building should reveal the potential of our surroundings. In this way we may celebrate the concrete nature of our world: a concreteness that becomes visible not only in the physical world, but also in our thoughts and experiences in an attempt to transcend the trappings of the poetic image.

Transcending the poetic image

In his article, “Hapticity and Time”, Juhani Pallasmaa (2000: 78) criticizes the unrivalled dominance that has been acquired by the sense of vision. By only perceiving within the field of vision, man limits himself to the image and deprives himself of the full range of architectural experience. This visual mindset is prevalent within the modern consciousness and forces architecture to bow down to the instant gratification found in the visual image.

Pallasmaa (1986: 89) further argues that the artistic dimension of the work of art exists in “the consciousness of the person experiencing it”, rather than the “actual physical thing”. The retinal images produced by contemporary society aim for immediate persuasion. Yet we are surprised when our places are typified by a “flatness of surfaces and materials, uniformity of illumination as well as the elimination of micro climactic differences”. The resulting standardization of environmental conditions within technological culture has left built environments predictable and has led to sensory impoverishment (Pallasmaa 2000: 78).

The bow can be understood by means of its physical and mental qualities, but perhaps the most lasting impressions of the bow lies within the consciousness experiencing it...

I can see the bow. It is an elegant construction. The wood has a particular scent and I can feel the texture in my hand- smoothed by years of use. The arrow rests lightly on my finger. I can smell the poison on the tip. My muscles tighten, the sun glistening in the drops of sweat on my forehead- the quiver roughly resting on my back. I hear the bowstring tighten ... and then ... release.

Pallasmaa (*ibid*: 78) proposes a haptic architecture: architecture that focuses on multi-sensory experience as a means to experience the “qualities of matter, space and scale” through the “eye, ear, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle”. The whole being therefore perceives in a total way: architecture that invites all the senses at once. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*ibid*: 78) confirms this by seeing architecture as a way to show “how the world touches us”, and therefore “architecture concretizes and frames human existence in the flesh of the world”.

Haptic architecture, therefore, stands in direct contrast with the architecture of the eye: instantaneous and distinctive imagery against slowness and intimacy that embodies a gradual comprehension of architecture as images of the body and skin. Haptic architecture seeks to engage and unite, while the architecture of the eye results in detachment and control. The expressive possibilities of materials and surfaces can be used to enhance materiality and therefore architecture is allowed to “speak” through all the senses (Pallasmaa 2000: 78-79). This stimulates authentic experiences that are born “from real or ideated bodily confrontations rather than visually observed entities”. Haptic architecture distances itself from retinality and promotes a layered, multi-sensory experience (*ibid*: 80-81).

By stirring the experiences evoked by unconscious images and emotions through sensory perception, Pallasmaa aims to create architecture that is tied to the experiences of the people that inhabit it. By inhabiting we transcend the poetic image in favour of lingering poetic moments as expressions of authenticity. It is this “act of inhabiting” by the “lived body” that transforms a building into “poems of space”. It is this “lived body” that creates layer upon layer of meaning and reveals architecture as an expression of human presence in the world. We are left with a palimpsest filled with “poems of space”: drawings that make architecture into a place of memory (Hammer 1981: 384-385).

The poetic drawings we have lived

Architecture transcends our physical senses. It embodies our memories. Gaston Bachelard develops the writing capabilities of the “lived body” in a process that ultimately leads to a universe that is “covered with the drawings we have lived”. Bachelard (1969: 6-9) sees the house as the “cradle” and “warm bosom” that serves as an enclosed, protected space where mankind’s thoughts, dreams and memories are condensed. We add these memories to our “store of dreams” and become “near poets” by recalling the poetry of that which has been lived. The house becomes an “image that moves us at an unimaginable depth” through which we “touch the ultimate poetic depth” of our memories. The house forms a place of protection that facilitates daydreaming. As our memories of previous dwellings are relived we realize that the dwellings of the past remain in us for all time. In this sense Bachelard (Van Schaik 2002: 9) envisions architecture that affects people by touching “their own ‘lost’ knowledge and awareness”. In this way, our universe is covered with “drawings” that remind us of intense experiences.

The objects that occupy our lives offer more than their physical presence by serving as reminders of drawings that we have lived...

My father made this bow for me. I can still see his face when I sit with his bow in my arms. He told me how to shoot and how to make the poison. I shot my first Eland with this bow. I can still remember how nervous I was. Now that I am old I hold the bow to my nose and I remember how it feels to hunt. Even though I can no longer hunt, I am taken to the hunting grounds faster than any man can run. This is my bow and I have grown fond of it.

How we draw these drawings (experience the universe) is investigated by Colin St. John Wilson in his article, “The Natural Imagination”. Wilson (1989: 64) explores the way in which architecture can move a person deeply. He explains this phenomenon in terms of the natural imagination.

The Natural imagination, as an immediate (almost instinctive) response stands in contrast to the artificial imagination that can be seen as a learned or abstract response. According to Wilson (*ibid*: 65) the natural imagination is structured like a language that contains its own lore and imagery. In order to explain profound architectural experiences, Wilson applies the natural imagination to the spatial relationship between our bodies and its surroundings.

This spatial relationship is illustrated in the theoretical work of Adrian Stokes. Stokes refers to two polar nodes identified by Melanie Klein: the first referring to the position of enclosure of the baby in the womb and a second referring to the succeeding position of exposure or detachment. All later spatial experience can be measured against this experience and can be architecturally interpreted as the confrontation between internal and external space. It is at this junction that Stokes draws his conclusion: that the masterpiece embodies both these polar opposites simultaneously in a fusion between envelopment and detachment (Wilson 1989: 69).

Bachelard Investigates this spatial relationship as impressions of intimacy based on a transposition of human experience found in the bird's nest. Bachelard (1969: 101) refers to the nest as an expression of the bird's body. The nest adjusts, and is formed, by the movements of the bird and is therefore an envelope that continually adjusts to the forces that the body exerts on it. The nest is formed from the inside outwards by means of inner pressure exerted by the body on the envelope. Bachelard uses this image to show how mankind inhabits. For the world is a nest (*ibid*: 104) and even the shade of the tree can be inhabited (*ibid*: 132). The body is therefore within the vastness of the world. A position that can only be equaled by the depth of "inner space" (*ibid*: 205).

The inner space is seen by Bosco (*ibid*: 205) as the hidden desert that each person bears within himself. The "infinite" quality of this desert must be seen in conjunction with the immensity of world space. According to Baudelaire (*ibid*: 192) this exterior spectacle in fact helps "intimate grandeur" to unfold. Therefore immensity becomes an intimate dimension that reveals man's poetic fate: to be a "mirror of immensity" through which "immensity becomes conscious of itself" (*ibid*: 196). The dialogue between the immensity of world space and the depth of inner space therefore leads to a condition of intimate immensity.

By "drawing our experiences" we are able to make sense of the immensity that surrounds us. These drawings act as a mirror to exterior vastness and sustain a balance that leaves us "in between". Remembering is therefore a lot like the architectural act of "gathering". In the same way that architecture can gather the surroundings, we may be able to gather our drawings as a counterweight that makes immensity intimate and enables us to dwell.

Louis Hammer (1981: 385) expands on this duality. According to him the enormity of the cosmos and the smallness of man are made to intersect within every important work of architecture. An intense dialogue is created that stands central to the creation of "poems of space" as memories of the "lived body". The body inhabits this dialogue between inside and outside: occupying the different shades in between. As an experience mediating between inside and outside, space therefore becomes "an aspect of any orientation" (Norberg-Schulz 1971: 9) while the body, by wanting to be "both visible and hidden", becomes a "half-open being" (Bachelard 1969: 222).

The threshold is therefore crucial to the position advocated by Stokes: the simultaneous presence of the body within the opposing poles of exposure and envelopment. It is through this fusing of opposites within the concept of intimate immensity, that Pallasmaa's body language evolves to poetics and man is satisfied within the half-open. This ambiguous position, between inside and outside creates an opportunity for poetic expression within the body language.

4. The poetics of order

The poetic expression within the body language presents us with a general sense of order: an order stemming from our relationship with other things. The proximities and sense of enclosure surrounding us therefore create the realization of our place in the world.

In classical architecture, the human body, symbolic of the perfection of nature and nature's way of organizing complex functions, provided a means to create proportional harmony and governed the issues concerning human scale. The body offered a "system of interrelated, comparative measurements that seek to ensure a meaningful experience of architecture" (Nesbitt 1996: 20).

This method of architectural creation should lead to architecture that appears as an extension of our limbs and embodies the classical concept of beauty as a product or physical order. Order found within boundaries that are "within visually comprehensible reach ... [and] ... whose construction is the logical outcome of the assembly of different parts" (Kostof 1995: 264). Yet the return to classical methods in postmodern times has not lived up to these expectations. In many ways, it has led to figurative architecture that relies on the associative value of expression. In reaction to this, Demetri Porphyrios (1989: 94) denounces this stylistic and scenographic preoccupation embedded in "postmodern high-tech, postmodern classical and postmodern deconstruction" and advocates a return to authentic classicism and the wisdom of the traditional city.

Porphyrios relies on classical principles, rather than figurative stylistic methods, and hereby acknowledges classical poetic sensibility as a means to order places and spaces. We should be wary of over-committing to the idea of art (as an expression of incoherent freedom) or science (as a source of over-simplification and blandness) in order to appreciate the abundant coherence found within the intricate expression of poetic sensibility.

Alain de Botton (2006: 191) asserts that buildings that "flirt with confusion" can make us aware of the "scale of our debt to our ordering capacities". In his opinion beauty is the result of our endeavours in which "spirit is aligned with logic" (*ibid*: 186).

The grouping of buildings or functions as a celebration of both spirit and logic could lead to a more poetic coherence: a coherence in which order is not unbending and change not only celebrates uncertainty, but is also a proponent of stability. The act of grouping buildings then presents us with the poetic potential to define certain spaces (places) and imply that, by adding new buildings, new places will be defined and new relationships will develop between buildings.

This dialogic relationship, the relationship between one building and the other, aims at a much wider sense of harmony than the planning of individual buildings (Porphyrios 1989: 95). To create order within a grouping, geometry is transcended by the need for a unity of feeling or intent. This principle is illustrated in the following examples:

a) Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli

Hadrian's Villa is an agglomeration of the world that was known to the Roman emperor, Hadrian. The grouping includes symbolic interpretations of his extensive travels to the far reaches of his realm and is therefore a visual representation of his memories. It is not governed by a single visual ordering principle and different spaces are grouped together in a complex composition. The different elements within the composition only form a whole, because it is the memories of one man. These memories are concretized within a Roman style and are therefore not stylistic representations of the place represented. The *canopus*, a representation of a certain place in Egypt, evokes Egyptian memories through symbolism- the water, boats, lights and underground terminus of the course- rather than style. In Hadrian's Villa we see how one man uses his own

architectural language to express memories of other cultures (Moore, Mitchell & Turnbull 1988: 82-83).

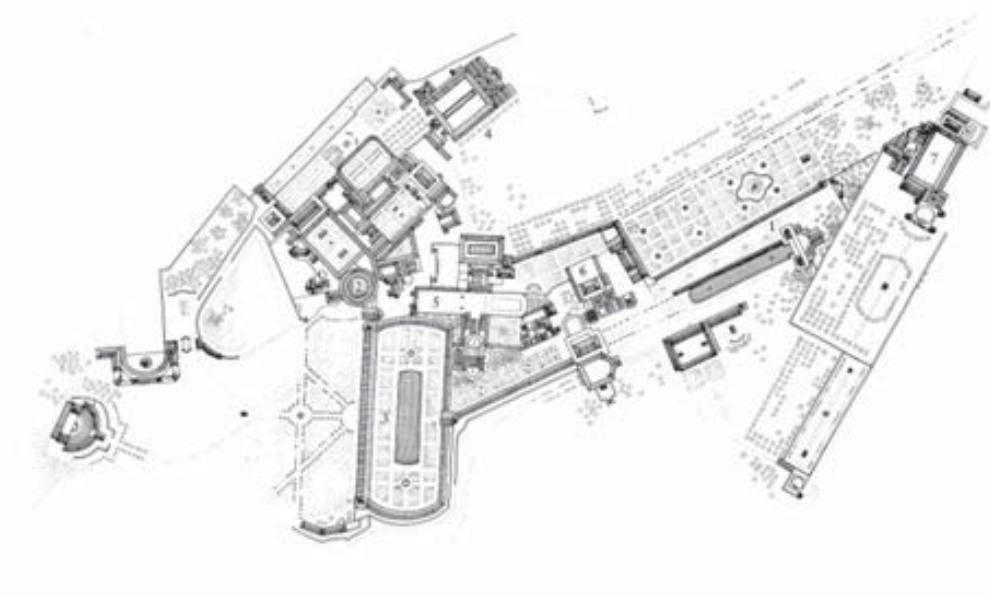


Figure 3
Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli (Moore et al 1988: 82)

Hadrian's Villa is therefore a collection of distinctly different places united by a unity of feeling and the consistency of experience. Another way to group different elements is by using a prominent route as in the Panathenaic Way.

b) The Panathenaic Way

The Panathenaic Way stretched from the Dipylon Gate through the Agora to the Acropolis. Citizens of ancient Athens passed through the Dipylon gate when entering Athens and walked on a wide street (Dromos) towards the Agora. The ritual path cut diagonally through the Agora and then commenced its sharp rise to the Acropolis (Kostof 1995: 151-152). In this way the Agora, as a public place of political, commercial and social importance, was connected with the Acropolis that was entirely dedicated to the gods.

A path can therefore act as a thread that unites different elements. More than a form of ordering, this binding element unites different experiences and promotes the formation of dense places. These places are not understood in terms of geometry, but as a sequence of events that express the same intent: places that can transcend geometry by means of a unity of feeling.

As a convergence of many routes and trails of thought, Süleymaniye Külliye celebrates the agglomeration of experiences into a multivalent coherence.

c) Süleymaniye Külliye

Süleymaniye Külliye is a mosque complex within a densely populated urban (residential) part of Istanbul. From narrow urban spaces the visitor is cast into the open garden space of the mosque complex. By sinking the two north eastern *maddresses* into the side of the hill, the Ottoman architect and civil engineer, Sinan (c.1490-1588), provides a view towards the Golden Horn and enhances the prominence of the mosque from the level of the Golden Horn and Galata. The Süleymaniye Külliye therefore provides multiple threshold experiences that are united within a grouping that responds actively to the influences of the city and its topography. This creates a coherence of intent interspersed with moments of urban drama. Urban drama is not only achieved by means of large imposing buildings but by choreographing the events

leading up to these dramatic revelations. A building like Süleymaniye Mosque has the ability to enliven a much larger part of the urban surroundings when architects understand and use its implied emotional effect in addition to its rational geometric order.

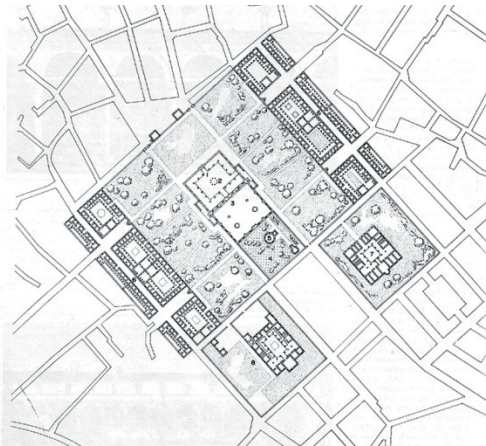


Figure 4
Conquerors Külliye (Fatih Mosque, 1463-70)
(Kostof, 1995: 458).

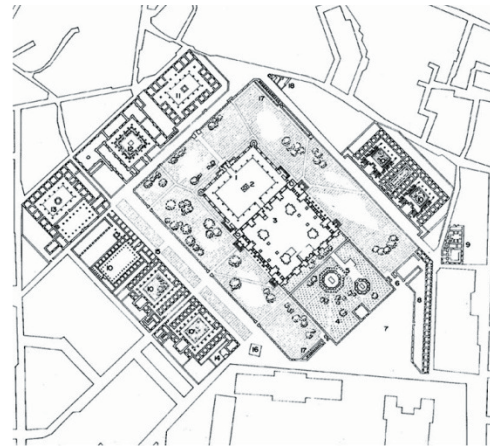


Figure 5
Süleymaniye Külliye (1550-57)
(Kostof, 1995: 464).

When viewed against the earlier and more geometric Conquerors Külliye (Fatih Mosque, 1463-70) the dynamic interplay of the Süleymaniye Külliye (1550-57) with the surrounding urban fabric becomes evident. While the Conquerors Külliye remains “detached” due to its focus on geometric purity, Sinan exploited the topography surrounding Süleymaniye Külliye in a vibrant way, while maintaining a respect for symmetry and axially in the mosque, courtyard and cemetery (Kostof 1995: 463). By focusing on the existing urban factors and the topography of the site, a grouping can therefore be created that forms a coherent whole with the city.



Figure 6
Moments of urban drama: view over sunken
***madrese* (author’s photo – June 2005).**



Figure 7
Moments of urban drama: view towards a *minaret*
(author’s photo – June 2005).

In Süleymaniye Külliye the dialogue between old and new has been addressed as a means to transcend the allure of geometry in such a way that order can be achieved through a unity of feeling or intent: a form of poetic sensibility has been revealed.

Disregarding order would weaken our ability to recognize and express our relationship with other things. Similarly, the blind adherence to the rules of geometry would diminish our ability to recognize and express our relationship with each other.

There is an order, a governing principle, which speaks of mathematic truth within the bow. The transmission of force from one form to the other: a cause and effect that speaks of poetic sensibility.

According to the world-renowned American architect, Louis Kahn (Latour 1991: 82), order is a realization created by the combination of thought and feeling. In this sense order becomes poetic. Kahn (*ibid*: 59) further states: “the higher the order the more diversity in design“. In this sense order implies precision; a concept that, according to Peter Zumthor (1998: 28), gives architecture the depth and multiplicity acquired by poets.

The poet of the vague the poet of precision

Peter Zumthor (1998: 27), the Swiss architect and 2009 Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate, refers to the work of the Italian writer, Italo Calvino, as a means to discover the hard core of beauty (an idea stemming from the work of the American poet, William Carlos Williams). Calvino (*ibid*: 28) explores the work of the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi who experiences the beauty of literature in its “vagueness, openness and indeterminacy”. This opens the work to a multitude of meanings and interpretations. We are moved by works or objects of art that are multifaceted and embraced by endless layers of meaning that change according to our angle of observation.

How can the architect achieve this level of ambiguity without succumbing to the dangers of *kitsch* and superficiality? Calvino finds his answer by close inspection of the precise nature of Leopardi’s vagueness.

“This then is what Leopardi demands of us so that we can enjoy the beauty of the indeterminate and vague! He calls for highly accurate and pedantic attention in the composition of each picture, in the meticulous definition of details, in the choice of objects, lighting and atmosphere with the aim of attaining the desired vagueness” (*ibid*: 28).

No part of a composition should ever be seen as insignificant. Each part needs close inspection and requires lucid thinking. Within precision a multitude of meanings is created: a palimpsest that is continuously rewritten. The poetic is once again found in the dialogue between science (precision) and sentiment (ambiguity). An example of this lucid means of thought can be found in the work of the Dutch architect and Benedictine monk, Dom Hans van der Laan.

Van der Laan (Padovan 1994: 76) advises that architecture should not try to impose specific forms on society or aim to achieve specific social arrangements or meaning systems. The building should provide a clear, yet relatively neutral, framework. This provides society with the chance to assert its own order to which its own specific functions and systems of meaning can be attached.

In Vaals Church, Van der Laan, a proponent of rigorous precision, achieves “a clear, yet neutral, framework”. Each picture forms a composition and is meticulously defined. Here the poetic potential of material, space and shadow is achieved within a place of rigorous precision: a precision that, in the light of Leopardi’s words, breeds ambiguity.

The bow is a precise instrument. Whether it must shoot straight or be tuned on a certain pitch. Within the bow’s precision lies its flexibility and ease of use. The hunter must know how the bow will react. The more precise the instrument the wider the application since the hunter will be able to predict the result more accurately. An instrument that is precisely tuned will enable greater musical freedom.

Van der Laan’s work is poetic because it creates an opportunity for ambiguity: ambiguity that allows Hammer’s poems of space to be attached to the living body. The body experiences and memory makes form habitable. Within the building certain zones are created that can be seen as points that gather ambiguity. These points are examples of the dense places created when different elements are united through a unity of feeling and intent: points that the english

literary critic and poet, William Empson (Wilson 1989: 67), calls the “moments of greatest poetic intensity”.



Figure 8
Vaals church interior (Padovan, 1994: 155-157).

Moments of poetic intensity

The bow becomes a bow string- a connection is made: a joint. Energy passes. Tension holds. poiesis. Without the joint the bow will return to its natural position: straight. Mankind’s presence is gone. The bow has become a point, its presence radiating into eternity ... no boundaries.

But the line bends: it is pulled into a bow and secured. A space is enclosed within the world- a place has been created for the arrow or fiddle stick: a dwelling. Under the sky and on the earth a musical or killing ritual follows. After killing and through music man is forced to stand before the divinities. In this way the fourfold is concretized within the bow. A world is brought into being through a moment of poetic intensity.

A joint in architectural terms can either be physical or spatial. Physical joints are more obvious and signify the connections between different physical elements. A column can be a joint between the floor and the roof. It is the admiration of this transition from one physical element to the next that led to capitals and other forms of physical ornamentation. Even seemingly functional solutions can become sources of expression and meaning (Figure 9). Spatial joints are even more experiential and exist between different spaces. Between inside and outside we find a transition or a spatial threshold. The admiration of the spatial threshold is demonstrated in the portico, porch or even the South African “stoep”.

Kenneth Frampton (1990: 522) looks to Gottfried Semper when trying to determine the value of the joint. Semper acknowledges the joint as “the fundamental nexus around which the building comes into being”. Therefore the joint becomes “a point of ontological condensation”: a moment of poetic intensity.

Karl Bötticher and Gottfried Semper (*ibid*: 520) further state that tectonics not only relates to structural and material matters, but also to the poetics of construction by referring to the Greek *poiesis* as the act of making and revealing (*ibid*: 519). The difference between spaces, members or materials can therefore be revealed poetically by means of the joint. This spatial and structural act of revealing coincides with a poetic act of “unconcealing” described by Martin Heidegger (*ibid*: 494). The joint can therefore become the means of poetic expression.

As an instrument of precision, the bow relies on the specific properties of the materials used. The bow can not be unbending, it must be flexible. The bow must allow tension to be gathered within it in order to be useful. The string is elastic and in tension as opposed to the arrow that is rigid and in compression upon impact. The material mirrors the requirements implicit within the forces applied. The bow is of a flexible wood and the bow string of the sinuous elastic material, the shaft of the arrow of the lightweight stiff wood and the arrowhead is made of metal or rock to provide resistance to pressure upon impact. The materials are true to the nature of the specific use.

The poetic potential of the joint is enhanced by the extent of the difference between the two objects or materials that are joined. The joints of “greatest poetic intensity” will therefore be found between that which Semper defined as the tectonics of the frame (usually understood as lightweight steel or wood frame construction) and the stereotomy of compressive mass (brick, block and concrete construction) (*ibid*: 521).

The importance of these joints is emphasized by the difference between the two cosmological opposites to which they aspire: the earth and the sky. The transition between these elements form the very essence of architecture and are, according to Semper (*ibid*: 522), the dominant components whereby a certain culture distinguishes itself from another. When our bodies move from one space to the next, or our eyes follow the transition from one element to the next, we realize that we are surrounded by moments of transition: “places where everything has changed”.

Threshold

*Everything is still the same
I stretch my leg out, I loose my balance
Stop
Resistance
Regain balance
I walk
Everything is still the same
I stretch my leg out, I loose my balance
Stop
Resistance
Regain balance
I walk
Over the barrier
Through the looking glass
everything has changed
I stretch my leg out, I loose my balance
Stop
Resistance
Regain balance
I may not know how
but I feel
everything has changed
(poem by author)*

If we consider ourselves to be “half-open beings” (Bachelard 1969: 222), then we should be able to thrive in places where everything has changed. This emotional experience is the counterweight to the perceived stability of our concrete reality. In these moments of poetic intensity we discover our own poetic capabilities by being able to be at peace in a place of change.



Figure 9
Detail in the Phillippolis Museum (author's photo – May 2009).

Norberg- Schulz (1980: 9-10) defines dwelling as inhabiting the world. The world is that which is “on the earth” and “under the sky”. Therefore the joint, as a connection between “earth” and “sky”, operates on the same cosmological plane as mankind. The joint becomes an expression of man: a search to unite earth, sky and horizon as a means to gather that which is known. By building/making (*poesis*) man brings the inhabited landscape close to him, and simultaneously “the closeness of neighborly dwellings... [is brought]... under the expanse of the sky” (Norberg-Schulz 1980: 9-10). Man exists. He has created a “place transformed”.

The poetics of a place transformed

The bow is a place transformed. It is manmade and deliberate. The tree is transformed into the bow to expose the truth within the branch. The bow string makes the bow useful. The branch bends ... it is pulled into a bow. A space has been defined within tension- a place created. The arrow is enclosed within a place, but is fired into the world. The fiddle stick is enclosed within a place, but sends music into the world. A space enclosed – a dwelling created. The bow is a place transformed a poetic disclosure of man's presence in the world.

Norberg- Schulz (1983: 435) investigates how the landscape (as the place where human life takes place) can become “known” by means of buildings that reveal the latent truth embodied in our surroundings. Buildings can hereby reveal how mankind belongs to a particular place in terms of the earth, sky and divinities. The relationship between a natural and manmade place is defined by seeing boundaries as places of “presencing”. Norberg- Schulz (1980: 13) defines the boundaries of a building as the floor, wall and ceiling. These boundaries relate to the boundaries of nature: ground, horizon and sky.

This relationship is a mirror of how man “receives” and “gathers” the world (*ibid*: 16). By “receiving” and “gathering” man ultimately transforms place. Through *poesis* man concretizes his understanding of the place he inhabits. Concretization is a term used by Norberg- Schulz (*ibid*: 10) as a means to “make the general visible as a concrete, local situation”. Therefore the concretization of space and the human soul and spirit provides an existential foothold that acknowledges the life and presence of mankind. This existential foothold is born from the

relationship between natural and manmade places. Norberg- Schulz identifies three methods of transformation employed by a man to concretize his world:

“Firstly, man wants to ... visualize his understanding of nature, ‘expressing’ the existential foothold he has gained. To achieve this he builds what he has seen ... Secondly, man has to complement the given situation by adding what is ‘lacking’. Finally, he has to symbolize his understanding of nature (including himself). Symbolization implies that an experienced meaning is ‘translated’ into another medium.” (*ibid*: 17)

These three methods of transformation illustrates the relationship between man and the world and implies that man “gathers experienced meanings” to construct a microcosm that concretizes his world (*ibid*: 17). By means of visualization, complementation and symbolization, a meaningful place is created as a concrete manifestation of man’s dwelling (*ibid*: 6).

The place transformed is the habitat of the half-open being: a place that gathers and becomes dense with the lived poems of our experience. Neither art nor science, when viewed in opposition or isolation, can explain this simultaneous being at peace while being changed. The transformed place is an expression of the intimate immensity that unfolds when our lived space corresponds to the depth of the moments of poetic intensity that populate our memories.

Conclusion

The Poetics of Architecture occupies a state of constant oscillating between thought and feeling. It is a continuous process that forms and extends from one poetic moment to the next. This process reveals that we may stand in the iron glow of our thoughts and emotions and still be able to produce rational ideas or works that “carry weight”.

We should create places that join this alternating discourse. Places that serve as condensing agents within our collective mindscape. These places should serve as nurturing cradles for the awakening of people caught in a poetic position: for we are all part of the discourse alternating between our immediate intuitive understanding and formalized methods of understanding. We constantly discover ourselves migrating between our thoughts and feelings.

There remains, maybe, one question: “Can any building be poetic?” ... no. It should, however, strive to open up new possibilities toward the poetic. The poetic can not be reached or rationalized, but should rather be seen as an ongoing process that can, in certain moments, be recognized or experienced.

Maybe, when moving through a space a person will turn his head and look sideways. He may see and experience something that he has never “felt” before. He is enriched ... nourished. It can not be explained, and it may never be felt again. A poetic moment has passed: it should be remembered, but can not be recreated. In this way buildings form backdrops for the way that art and science interact within our lives. Buildings can either facilitate or inhibit this process.

There is an alternative to the fiery consuming passion that we assume should be part of our artistic endeavors and the impassive posture that seem to accompany our scientific pursuits. The poetic lives within the fleeting moment where our rational and subjective selves fuse and embrace: standing within the fiery iron glow of our feelings, while a steady, logical mind refuses to abandon the rational truth.

The First Order

The fire consumes.

Burning all substance to ash.

The fire then finds

deprivation

and is sentenced

to its own

demise

*The lifeless candle.
 In a silent pregnant place.
 Will bless no one.
 Deprivation
 No warmth, only
 cold
 demise
 The lamp radiates.
 In a steady fiery glow.
 A beacon against
 deprivation
 Sustaining my heart,
 revealing my mind
 reside
 So the whole man stands in iron glow
 refusing to evaporate.
 So the man remains in red hot ember
 melting without losing weight.*

(Poem by author: inspired by the ideas of John Ruskin regarding Poetic Sensibility)
 (Selections from the writings of John Ruskin: 445-446)

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