

## Architecture as Experience

The fusion of the world and the self

**Juhani Pallasmaa**

Aalto University (professor emeritus)

jpallasmaa@gmail.com

### Abstract

The complex phenomenon of architecture consists of too many irreconcilable and conflicting categories of thought, intention, emotion, interaction and action to be condensed into the framework of a single theory of architecture. Besides, art and architecture are constituted in their mental encounter and experience instead of the material works themselves. Works of architecture and art are encountered and lived rather than understood intellectually.

Architecture is commonly understood, taught, practiced and evaluated primarily as a visual art form. However, we encounter buildings and environments through our entire sense of being. Perceptions interact with memory and imagination to constitute an experience with meaning and temporal duration. Art and architecture are essentially relational phenomena as they express our being in the world instead of themselves or their authors. The interest in architecture as experience also directs our attention to such diffuse and neglected experiences as atmospheres, ambiances, feelings, moods and attunements.

**Keywords:** experience, existential sense, relational phenomena.

### Introduction

Modern architectural theory, education and practice have regarded architecture as visually aestheticised spaces and material structures, and primarily studied their historical, functional, technical and formal characteristics. The analyses have focused on architecture as physical objects and spaces and their geometric and compositional qualities, as well as the representation of these properties in drawings. As architecture does not possess a comprehensive theory of its own, the point of view and method of research have usually been borrowed from other disciplines in accordance with changing interests and fashions; often the applicability of the chosen theoretical frameworks have been highly questionable in the specific reality of architecture.

### Architecture and scientific criteria

Already at this early point in my presentation, I venture to question the feasibility of a comprehensive theory of architecture, due to the inherent internal complexities, contradictions and irreconcilabilities of this phenomenon. Through their relative artistic autonomy, the arts are less complex and contradictory in their ontological grounding than architecture. The inherent internal complexity of architectural projects was the implied view of Alvar Aalto's inaugural lecture as member of the Academy of Finland in 1955. "Whatever our task, whether large or small [...] In every case, opposites must be reconciled [...] Almost every formal assignment involves dozens, often hundreds, sometimes thousands of conflicting elements that can be forced into functional harmony only by an act of will. This

harmony cannot be achieved by any other means than art. The final value of individual technical and mechanical elements can only be assessed afterwards. A harmonious result cannot be achieved with mathematics, statistics, or probability calculus" (Aalto 1997a, 174). Aalto's declaration, sixty years ago, of the supremacy of art over science, was a courageous statement considering the fact that some of the most authoritative thinkers and scientists in Finland were in the audience. Aalto's view of the integrating power of art has recently been supported by Vittorio Gallese, one of the discoverers of the mirror neurons: "From a certain point of view, art is more powerful than science. With much less expensive tools and with greater power of synthesis, artistic intuitions show us who we are, probably in a much more exhaustive way with respect to the objectifying approach of the natural sciences. Being human squares with the ability to ask ourselves who we are. Since the beginning of mankind, artistic creativity has expressed such ability in its purest and highest form" (Gallese & Di Dio 2012, 693).

The inherently unscientific nature of architecture arises from the fact that its practice fuses facts and dreams, knowledge and beliefs, rational deduction and emotion, technology and art, intelligence and intuition, as well as the temporal dimensions of past, present and future. Besides, it is simultaneously the means and the end; a means because of its utilitarian task, and an end as a manifestation of art, that mediates experiential, cultural, mental and emotional values. In short, architecture is conceptually too "impure" or "messy" as a phenomenon and human activity to be logically structured within a single theory. A theory of architecture sounds to me as impossible and ultimately as useless as a theory of life. As a consequence of its complexity, architecture is bound to arise from an iterative and embodied action, that fuses rationality and emotion, knowledge and intuition, rather than from theory. There can well be theory-based and fully rational aspects in the design process, but in its entirety, the process is iteratively synthetic. Architectural design is guided by a subjective "self-piloting" action, and an immersive embodied identification with the concrete task, that fuses rationality and emotion, knowledge and intuition, rather than the application of a theory-based rational, methodical and predictable procedure. The design process is not a rational path, as it consists of numerous repeated deviations, dead-ends, new beginnings, hesitations, temporary certainties, and a gradual emergence of an acceptable goal as the result of the process itself. Due to the essential existential content of architecture, its design cannot be a smooth rational problem-solving process. In architectural design, questions and answers arise simultaneously.

### **The poetic and phenomenological approach**

On the other hand, the phenomenon of architecture has also been approached through subjective and personal encounters in a poetic, aphoristic and essayistic manner, as in the writings of many of the leading architects from Frank Lloyd Wright to Alvar Aalto, and Louis Kahn to Steven Holl and Peter Zumthor. In these writings, architecture is approached in a poetic, philosophical and metaphorical manner, without any qualifications as scientific research. These writings usually arise from personal experiences, observations and beliefs. I must confess that these personal and often confessional accounts have valorized the holistic and poetic essence of architecture to me more than the theoretical or empirical studies that claim to satisfy the criteria of science. The experiential and existential core of architecture has to be encountered, lived and felt rather than understood and analyzed intellectually. There are surely numerous aspects in construction, in its performance, structural essence as well as formal and dimensional properties that can be studied "scientifically", but the experiential and mental meaning of the entity can only be existentially encountered and experienced.

During the past few decades, an experiential approach, based on phenomenological encounters and first person experiences of buildings and settings, has gained ground. This thinking is initially based on the philosophies of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard and many contemporary philosophical writers. The experiential and phenomenological approach, which also acknowledges the significant role of embodiment, was introduced in the architectural context by such writers as Steen Eiler Rasmussen, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Charles Moore, David Seamon, Robert Mugerauer, and Karsten Harries. I also believe that the book *Questions of Perception* of 1994 by Steven Holl, Alberto Pérez-Gómez and myself, has helped to spread this manner of thinking especially in schools of architecture internationally.

## The meaning of experience

The poetic dimension of architecture is a mental quality, and the artistic and mental essence of architecture emerges in the individual experience of the work. In the beginning of his seminal book *Art As Experience* of 1934 John Dewey, the visionary American pragmatist philosopher argues: "In common conception, the work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience. Since the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience, the result is not favorable to understanding. [...] When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals" (Dewey 1934, 4). Here Dewey connects the condition of making a piece of art and its later encounter by someone else, as in both cases the mental and experiential reality dominates and the work exists "nakedly" as a human experience. The philosopher suggests that the difficulties in understanding artistic phenomena arise from the tradition of studying them as material objects outside of human experience and consciousness. Dewey writes further: "By common consent, the Parthenon is a great work of art. Yet, it has esthetic standing only as the work becomes an experience for a human being [...] Art is always the product in experience of an interaction of human beings with their environment. Architecture is a notable instance of the reciprocity of the results in this interaction [...] The reshaping of subsequent experience by architectural works is more direct and more extensive than in the case of any other art [...] They not only influence the future, but they record and convey the past" (Dewey 1934, 4, 231). Here Dewey even assigns an actively conditioning role to architecture in relation to the nature of experience itself as well as to our understanding the passing of time and history. I have formulated this view with the argument that architecture creates frames and horizons for perception, experience, meaning and understanding, and consequently, instead of being the end product, it has essentially a mediating role.

## Time in architectural experience

The significance of the time dimension and temporal experience has not usually been sufficiently acknowledged in studies of architecture. Karsten Harries' statement on the mental meaning of time in architecture is significant: "Architecture is not only about domesticating space, it is also a deep defense against the terror of time. The language of beauty is essentially the language of timeless reality" (Harries 1982). Since Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) the art of building has been theorized in terms of the space-time continuum as defined in modern physics but in the human lived reality the two dimensions have different essences and the dimension of time has also its independent mental role in our experience of architecture. We have a deep existential need to feel rooted in time as much as in space; we need to dwell in time and duration as well as in space and place.

The significance of experience has not been understood in relation to such material and utilitarian objects as buildings and larger environments. Couple of years ago, Robert Mc Carter and I chose the above mentioned quote from Dewey concerning the Parthenon as an art work as the motto of our book which we had entitled *Architecture as Experience* to honor the philosopher's seminal book. We ended up arguing two years about the title with the publisher, who finally used his contractual right and named the book *Understanding Architecture* (McCarter & Pallasmaa 2012), which is, of course, a totally different subject matter and not in the interest of our book at all. Besides, this title sounds rather pretentious. This is a concrete example of the stubborn rejection, even today, of the experiential and mental dimension of architecture, and the continued emphases on rationality and intellectualization, "understanding" over experience.

## Encountering architecture

The experiential approach focuses on the encounter of the true architectural reality and the experiencing person and mind, and in accordance with Dewey's view, this actualizes the architectural dimension. The phenomenological method attempts to approach phenomena without preconceptions, and to identify with sensitivity the emergence of emotion and meaning in the unique personal encounter. Beyond its constitution in experience, architecture mediates between the outer world and the inner realm of the self, creating distinct frames of perception and understanding. This interchange is necessarily an exchange: as I enter a space, the space enters me and changes me, my experience, and my self-understanding. Mediation is essential in all art, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty states firmly: "We come to see not the work of art, but the world according to the work" (Merleau-Ponty cited in McGilchrist 2010, 409). The philosopher's view rejects the regrettably common understanding of art and architecture as self-expressions. This is an essential point: the meaning of art and architecture is outside of the work itself, as it always reaches beyond itself. A fundamental starting point in the experiential approach to art and architecture is the fusion or continuum of the physical and the mental, the outer and the inner realms, without categoric boundaries. Rainer Maria Rilke used the beautiful notion *Weltinnenraum*, the inner, mentally experienced space of the world (Rilke 1997, 8). Or, as Merleau-Ponty suggests somewhat enigmatically: "The world is wholly inside, and I am wholly outside of myself" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 407). The photographer points at the continuum of material and mental, outer and inner realities.

## Intuiting architecture

Profound architects have always intuitively understood that buildings structure, re-orient and attune our mental realities. The fact that artists have intuited mental and neural phenomena, often decades before psychology or neuroscience has identified them, is the subject matter of Jonah Lehrer's thought-provoking book *Proust was a Neuroscientist* (Lehrer 2008). In his pioneering book *Survival through Design* (1954), published more than six decades ago, Richard Neutra acknowledges the biological and neurological realities, which are emerging in today's architectural discourse, and makes a surprising suggestion: "Our time is characterized by a systematic rise of the biological sciences and is turning away from oversimplified and mechanistic views of the 18th and 19th centuries, without belittling in any way the temporary good such views may have once delivered. An important result of this new way of regarding this business of living may be to bare and raise appropriate working principles and criteria for design" (Neutra 1954, 18). Later he even professed: "Today design may exert a far-reaching influence on the nervous make-up of generations" (Neutra 1954, 7). Also Alvar Aalto intuited the biological ground of architecture in his statement: "I would like to add my personal, emotional view, that architecture and its details are in some way all part of biology" (Aalto 1997b, 108). The direct impact of settings on the

human nervous system and brain has been proven by research in today's neuroscience. "While the brain controls our behaviour and genes control the blueprint for the design and structure of the brain, the environment can modulate the function of the genes, and, ultimately, the structure of the brain. Changes in the environments change the brain, and therefore they change our behaviour. In planning the environments in which we live, architectural design changes our brain and our behavior" (Gage cited in Eberhard 2015, 135). This statement by Fred Gage, neuroscientist and one of the initiators of the ANFA Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture, leads to the most crucial realization: when designing physical reality, we are in fact, also designing neural, experiential and mental realities. This realization heightens the human responsibility in the architect's work. I myself used to see buildings as aestheticised objects, but for couple of decades now, architectural images have been primarily mental images or images of the human condition and mind for me. I have also gradually understood the significance of the designer's empathic capacity, the gift to simulate and empathize with the experience of "the little man", to use Aalto's compassionate notion (Aalto 1997a, 176).

This interface between the material and the mental worlds is so fundamental that philosophers and neuroscientists, such as Alva Noë, increasingly see this continuum to constitute even the human consciousness. Dewey argued thoughtprovokingly: "the mind is a verb" (Dewey cited in Robinson 2015, 363). I wish to argue that architecture is also a verb, as its true essence is always an invitation to action. It is this verb-like tendency towards active search and exploration that unites architecture and the human mind. Architecture is always also a promise, an offer of human order, predictability and security.

## Vision and the existential sense

Until recently, architecture has primarily been seen as a visual art form experienced and judged by vision. This view is expressed most notably by Le Corbusier in his credo: "Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light" (Le Corbusier 1959, 31). During the past decades, the hegemony of vision has been pointed out by a number of contemporary thinkers, such as David Michael Levin and Martin Jay. I have also written extensively on the dominance of vision in the western industrial and consumerist culture (Pallasmaa 2005), and argued that the directional sense of vision makes us observers and outsiders, whereas the omni-directional, embracing senses of hearing, touch, smell, and even taste, turn us into insiders and participants. We can also suspect that, the unfocused, peripheral vision is more important than focused vision for the experience of being in space. Already Walter Benjamin argued that architecture along with cinema is primarily a tactile art form (Benjamin 1986). Merleau-Ponty, finally, brought all the senses together in his understanding of sensory perception: "My perception is [therefore] not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the things, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 19).

After having investigated the phenomenon of architecture for fifty years as an architect, writer and teacher, I have no hesitation in arguing today that the most important sense in architectural experience is not vision, but our existential sense. Architecture is primarily an experience of our embodied sense of being and self, of the experience of being in the world, rather than merely of vision or any other of the five Aristotelian senses. In Merleau-Ponty's statement above, his expression "I perceive with my whole being" also seems to suggest an embodied existential experience.

Couple of years ago I talked with a French artist who had totally lost his eye sight two decades earlier in a brutally violent attack in New York. Yet, he had just



directed a ballet in Warsaw, and was on his way alone to Greenland. As I asked him, “how can you do such things without vision?”, he answered, “I see with my whole body”.<sup>1</sup> It is becoming evident that we encounter and judge environments and architecture through our most synthetic sense, our sense of being and self. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “the flesh of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b) makes this view understandable: “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breaths life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 203). We exist in this flesh of the world and grasp our existence through being part of that very flesh. Merleau-Ponty suggests poetically that Paul Cézanne’s paintings “make us feel how the world touches us” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 19). I would add that architecture goes even a step further, as it enables us to dwell in the flesh of the world itself. Architecture gives us our domicile in this existential flesh, both physically and mentally.

Architecture also activates and strengthens our sense of self, as its experience is always individual and unique. Architecture seems to be always addressing each one of us individually. Besides, if I am unable to project meaning into my encounter with a place, space or building, there is hardly any architecture, just the physical construction of settings. As Jean-Paul Sartre argues, that when I am reading Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, I project my own sense of frustrated waiting on the character of Raskolnikov (Sartre, J-P. 1978). The imaginative experience of the spaces and events experienced when reading a novel is a most impressive capacity of the human mind. This capacity of literature to evoke and mediate experiences of spaces, places and situations, has been recently studied by Elaine Scarry: “In order to achieve the ‘vivacity’ of the material world, the verbal arts must somehow also imitate its ‘persistence’ and, most crucially, its quality of ‘givenness’. It seems almost certainly the case that it is the ‘instructional’ character of the verbal arts that fulfils this mimetic requirement for givenness” (Scarry 2001, 30). When I feel a deep and moving melancholy in Michelangelo’s Laurentian Library, it is my own sense of melancholy that I am confronting, released and amplified by the embodied gestural language of the great architect. I can even say that I feel through the muscles of Michelangelo, as his buildings, shapes and profiles secretly gesture as if they were parts of a human body, my own body. The great gift of art is that we can momentarily experience and feel the world and ourselves as articulated through the sensitivity of a great artist.

## Perception, experience and imagination

Perceptions are not experiences, as they are mere registrations of stimuli without contextualization, judgement and meaning. Sense perceptions interact with memory and imagination to constitute a full-integrated experience with distinct connections and values. In architectural design work, the most demanding and valuable skill is to intuit or simulate the experience of the physically non-existent entity. Again, intuiting the experience of a single form or object is relatively easy, whereas imagining the entire atmosphere or feeling of a wide and complex spatial entity calls for an extraordinary imaginative skill. The imaginative and intuited experience also calls for the capacity of empathy. The notion of empathy was introduced in the aesthetic theories of the late 19th century, but it has been bypassed during the entire modern era. However, along with the current interest in experience, also the interest in empathy is now emerging

It has taken so long to realize how we actually experience the world, and architecture as a part of it, because we have been misguided by the view of our five separate senses, as defined by Aristotle. We can point an organic, physiological sense organ for each one of our five classical senses, whereas we

<sup>1</sup> Conversation with Hugues de Montalembert in January 2014 in Sydney, Australia.

cannot point an organ for our existential sense, or sense of being, as they arise from a synthetic understanding of being in the world. Even the blind and the deaf are able to experience their full-embodied existence. However, Steinerian philosophy categorizes twelve senses (Soesman 1998), and one of them is the ego sense, the sense of self. Steinerian thinking also identifies a life sense, and a self-movement sense, and, in my view, these three non-Aristotelian senses together constitute the existential sense through which architecture is primarily experienced. Besides, the received understanding of the functioning of the senses seems too simplistic and in the light of recent knowledge, often entirely wrong, but discussing this subject would take me too far from the focus of my topic. It suffices here to just mention that philosopher Alva Noë presents the dramatic question “*Is the Visual World a Grand Illusion?*” in the very title of a book he has edited (Noë 2002). This is a shocking question for us architects to think about.

## Relational phenomena

This gradual expansion of our understanding of the senses, their functioning and interactions, and the consequent changes in our understanding of experience, reminds me of the problem of localizing human consciousness. In his book *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brains, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (Noë 2009), Alva Noë argues that scientists have not succeeded in localizing human consciousness, because they have been searching its location in a wrong place – inside the brain. In Noë’s view – and I believe he is right – consciousness cannot be localized at all, because it is not a thing, but a relational phenomenon emerging between the human mind and the world.

I suggest that artistic experience is similarly a relational phenomenon between the poetic object and the experiencing mind. Atmospheric experience is also a “difficult” phenomenon, because it is a relational experience, not a definable, namable and measurable object or “thing”. It is a “quasi-thing” as Tonino Griffero suggests (Griffero 2017). It also arises from relations and interactions of numerous irreconcilable factors, such as scale, materiality, tactility, illumination, temperature, humidity, sound, color, smell etc., which together constitute the “atmosphere”, or actually, our experience of it. We must confess now that all artistic and poetic experiences are similarly relational experiences, and their essences, meanings and emotive characteristics arise from a dynamic interaction of numerous factors and qualities with the human neural system and consciousness, in order to constitute an experience. Poetic and artistic experience also activates our deepest collective and biological memories. Our experiences resonate with our personal and biological histories.

An interest in the phenomena of atmospheres, ambiances, feelings, moods, and attunements, as well as in the understanding of the real multi-sensory and simultaneous nature of perception is emerging. This new interest in experience is shifting research from form and formal structures to emotive and dynamic experiences and mental processes. It is evident that when the focus shifts from the physical reality and form to the mental reality and emotion, also the methodology of the study is bound to change. In the study of the experiential essence of art and architecture, relevant philosophical perspectives, as well as an understanding and intuiting of perceptual and mental phenomena, memory and imagination, are called for.

In order to understand human experience, we must shift from the quasi-scientific processes of measuring to the courage and desire to live and encounter architecture directly through our very act of living.

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