

Placing Architecture, Presencing Architecture

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Kinya Maruyama, a visiting Japanese architect at the University of Pennsylvania, once sent out his students with their sketchbooks to “draw the wind.” The event represents two symptoms about current architecture culture: (1) the limits of the representational project, and (2) a consideration for returning “to the things themselves.”

Architecture is more than a discipline; it is above all, a “lived-experience.” If architecture is an art, it is an existential art. Architecture and existence are inextricably intertwined, and if any criterion of thinking best addresses this condition, it is the anthropological one.

The discipline of architecture has undergone a major transformation in the last few decades, both in the nature of its production, and in its theoretical dispositions, in short, the way it thinks about itself. One thing that has occurred is a deeper realignment of architecture/architectural theory with other disciplines. This is a new nexus, where the discourse has proceeded beyond the well-known triad of the aesthetic/visual, social/political, and technological/functional. The anthropological dimension is a major part of the new nexus.

I am describing the approach as an anthropological one for lack of a better terminology. It refers to a diverse body of thinking - hermeneutical, existential, and phenomenological. It would be redundant to claim a human dimension for architecture here, and yet the new anthropological project renews or deepens the question of the human situation. It is existential in the sense that it re-addresses architecture as the elemental and foundational way of being. It is phenomenological in the way it re-views architecture as opening up the receptivity “to the full ontological potential of human experience.” What is involved here is the direct investigation and description of phenomena as experienced free as possible from unexamined presuppositions, in a heightened reception of all the senses. Mistrusted faculties of human experience - sensorial, kinesthetic, haptic, oneiric - are no longer considered merely irrational, but authentic data for the investigation of the human experience.

The anthropological approach exposes a possible disjunction between architectural practices that rely on a representational and retinal primacy (as the terms image, drawing, analytique, desk crit,

etc., convey in academic conversation), and the concrete “lived-experience” of architecture. This rupture, if one were to recognize it as such, has developed out of historical and epistemological conditions, in parallel to or emerging from such overly discussed dichotomies as concepts and perception, and the rational and the sensorial.

This divergence between the norms of a discipline and the actualities of a “lived-world” is exposed in two major conditions: (1) “placing architecture,” that shows the fissure between the ideology of architectonic autonomy and the inevitability of situatedness, and (2) “presencing architecture,” that reveals the gap between the presence and re-presentation of architecture.

What I am trying to argue and analyze here (as a still work-in-progress) is that architecture is inevitably situated. What does it mean for architecture to be situated? Is not architecture by its very nature situated? What else can we mean by being situated? The topic of situatedness involves a phenomenological understanding of place and placing, and the relationship between body and the environment.

The anthropological project recalls corporeal/embodied “actuality” both in thinking about architecture and in its practice. The work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the phenomenology of perception, particularly his notion of the lived-body, has immense implications for architecture and the environment. In the euphoric age of disembodied (virtual) realities and mediated connectivities, the approach returns to and amplifies the fundamental intimacy of the body to architectural conditions. What the enigmatic exercise of Maruyama provokes is the necessity of architectural thinking to confront the fundamental and the phenomenal (Husserl’s “back to the things”), and to reconsider the architectural presence prior to and beyond the representational (and perhaps the conceptual) stage.

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED “PLACE”?

A “place” is something enduring and yet flimsy. Plato, writing in the *Timaeus*, observes that *chora*, what has been translated as “place,” is hard to grasp, approachable only by what he called

“bastard reasoning.” Aldo Rossi once remarked that as you approach place (conceptually), it recedes.

“Place” is flimsy because it is hard to take its measure. The notion “place,” in its English usage, remains particularly suspect. There is the possibility that the notion survives or thrives beyond the English usage, or for that matter, beyond linguistic usage. Yet, how to write place, literally, as Place, *Place*, or “place”? The symbol “place” invites thoughts; the notation [“] is a zone of interweaving not unlike the Greek sense of the word zone. There is a degree of both distinction and continuity. Place, with the capital P, implies a reified object, as something conceptual and abstracted, and *Place* has the implication of being too disjunctive and aberrational.

It should be admitted that re-writing “place” in the twenty-first century does have a retrogressive intonation, especially with the implication of a green ideology, landscape-inspired romanticism, regional chauvinism, or as something stable and perennial. It is also particularly difficult when the opposite of “place” - placelessness - begins to be apotheosized. Many writers think that much of what we understand by place is now outmoded, and one has to recognize placelessness as a new space that is slowly proliferating before us. It is not the placelessness often heralded by modernism, the one that was sort of a utopic and heroic space. One now confronts placelessness as a totally new kind of experience, with hotel and airport spaces being the paradigms.

In the *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, Fredric Jameson presents and discusses the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles as the epitome of this new space - what he calls a hyperspace - a space that we can now enter and experience. However, the new space, to put it in a nutshell, presents a disorienting experience, an alarming disjunction between the body and the built-environment. It is a space where the individual human body finds itself incapable “to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to map cognitively its position in a mappable external world.” A similar characterization may be made about the ever-unfolding nature of airport spaces. Studs Terkel, the celebrated radio personality, gives a humorous account of this condition though: While trying to get to Cleveland from Detroit, Terkel rushed to the counter to board his plane only to receive the answer: “But, sir, you are in Cleveland!” A much more poignant case is that of Mehran Nasser Kasini, an Iranian “stranded” at Charles de Gaulle airport for more than eleven years while trying to enter France unsuccessfully after fleeing Iran. The newspapers described him being seen inside the terminal “sitting at a table, perhaps smoking a pipe... taking stroll, stopping to pick up his mail at the post office or lunch at the in-house McDonald’s... he will be looking very much at home.” Kasini is ironically caught between the juridical concepts of two spaces (“countries”). Following Jameson, one can say that this *between* space (hyperspace) can now be experienced, and therefore needs to be taken seriously. Jameson thinks that we still do not possess the “perceptual equipment” to face this new and disorienting hyperspace; in fact, this new conditions require we “grow new organs to expand our sensoria and our bodies to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions.”

Despite the emerging of new kinds of spaces, a more elemental understanding of “place” has not been exhausted. Such an understanding, I would like to argue, is very much a foundational task for architecture.

I would like to suggest that “place”, culture, region, and nation are distinct concepts, even when they often seem interchangeable. The most important distinction is that “place” is the one that is least portable. On the other hand, culture, and even nation, are now perfectly transportable and immensely commodifiable (while region remains very much a metrical concept). Culture can now be mailed, shipped, fedexed, faxed, beamed, and very soon will have nothing to do with any originating location. With MTV, e-commerce and electronic transfer of capital, the geographic rootedness of culture and community is increasingly becoming irrelevant.

“Place”, on the other hand, is formed primarily by a locational underpinning - *this place* (there may be no *there* there, but there is surely a *here*). “Place” is now poised against culture, so that one can pose the phrase: “place versus culture.” Going back to airports, I would like to point out how the phenomenon of air travel underscores the primacy of placement as experienced in the form of jet lag. Jet lag is but the nagging exposition of a displacement, how place-specific physiological and diurnal rhythms are incarnated in us, and before adjustments to a new place can be made show as aberrational traces in the biological system.

In summation, I would like to say that man is a place-conscious being, even if it happens unselfconsciously, despite the evangelical persuasion of “global span” (Saskia Sassen), the often chimerical nature of “there” (Gertrude Stein), and the existential anguish of being thrust into this world without a clue of how we may dwell here (Jean-Paul Sartre). In short, man is inherently an emplaced being.

PLACE AND PLACING

Merleau-Ponty remarks that “our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space.” Or, “the world is wholly inside me and I am wholly outside myself” (this is the core idea of the lived-body). One is inclined to think the same for architecture and the environment. This is one further continuation of the analogy of body and building that recurrently shadows architecture. In this particular case, the correspondence of architecture is to the lived-body.

The lived-body is distinct from the living body, so is the relationship with the environment. The environment is an indefinite extension of the lived-body, and not distinguished as standing over and against the living body. According to Merleau-Ponty, the environment is a “manipulatory area” for the lived-body, something potentially to be taken and incorporated. The lived-body appropriates certain objects in the world to the extent that these objects cease to be objects and become “incorporated,” become part of the lived-body. On the other side, the environment directly and indirectly regulates the lived-body. The environment conditions the body in such a way that the body is the expression or reflection of

the environment. In living, the body not only lives itself but also lives the environment. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls a “reciprocal insertion and intertwining” of the lived-body and the environment. “The limits of one are lost in the other,” as one writer puts it.

What may be gathered from here is at least a theoretical possibility that architecture and the environment are indissociable concepts; they form a “chiasma.” Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi say it aphoristically: “Finishing ends construction, weathering constructs finishes.”

The irreversible indictment of the modern age, that societal and cultural norms can no longer be conceived in purely regional or local terms, produces euphoric claims for a global civilization. At the same time, the specificity of particular places continues to resist the homogenizing tendency of globalism. The specificity is derived not so much from cultural criteria (culture being a portable and commodifiable object is no longer the immutable premise), but from more elemental conditions or “realities,” conditions that both openly and surreptitiously affect the life and form of architecture, and constitute the nature of its situatedness.

The situatedness of architecture entails, above other things, the following three conditions (1) A telluric “reality” which indicates that the earth is the ultimate ground-basis for architecture, where architecture can be seen as another topographical manipulation of the earth’s surface. (2) A climatic “reality” that is the most direct evidence of architecture’s chiasmic relation with the elements. And, (3) a geo-logic “reality” that stresses that architecture is a phenomenon of gravity, not so much in a technical sense but in a visceral way. These conditions form a sort of invisible dynamics that work within the making and experience of architecture.

CLIMATE AND GRAVITY

Climate and gravity impinge on us imperceptibly, two things we take for granted as being given, and yet are essential for *where* and *how we are*. What distinguishes lived and actualized architecture from say ideational ones, or from the digitized domain, is that the former is literally and perceptually embedded in climate and gravity in a seamless manner.

Still, the question of climate and gravity remain largely untreated in architectural discourse. It is considered either as a dry prosaic technicality coming under the rubric of climatology, or a sentimental balderdash about nature. Or worse, it could be considered, again not enthusiastically, as a sort of climatic determinism. The issue, I believe, goes beyond these considerations.

The Japanese thinker Tetsuro Watsuji sees space, environment, and climate as synonymous terms. In his book *Climate: A Philosophical Study*, Watsuji places premium on climate, how climate is the basis of how we see ourselves and how we see the world. He wishes to rephrase the phenomenological notion of how “we discover ourselves in space” by how “we discover ourselves in climate,” that is, how we find ourselves, always, in a concrete climatic and geo-

graphic envelope. Notwithstanding allusion to climatic determinism for cultures, Watsuji’s arguments have implications for a rephrasing of architecture and environment. First, Watsuji may claim that terms like space and environment are abstract notions, that they make sense only when they have been particularized by specific climates. Second, Watsuji offers the Japanese term “fudo” where culture and climate (or, culture and nature, or by extension, architecture and environment) are seen in a conjoined sense such that it becomes hard to distinguish the two. Watsuji’s idea corresponds to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “intertwining.”

Architecture, in this sense, may be seen not merely as a shelter from climate, as if climate and architecture are confronting each other, but as the inevitable intertwining of the architectural body and climate; it is where climate is revealed. Architecture is the trace of wind, water, sun, and rain. The parasol and the brise-soleil in some of Le Corbusier’s buildings, the marble strips of Louis Kahn’s Assembly Building in Dhaka, or more recently, the stained membrane of Peter Zumthor’s Chapel in Graubunden, the folding screen of Enriq Miralles’ Hostalets Civic Center in Balanya, or the suspended stones in Herzog and de Meuron’s Winery in the Napa Valley, all have a weathering narrative.

Gravity is the other bane of architecture. It is after all the metaphor of limitation and death, or as someone said, sleep is the complete surrender of the body to gravity. In the film “The Matrix,” the first thing that is attempted is to overcome the reality of gravity. There are comparable anti-gravitational desires all throughout architectural history, particularly in modern architecture.

But gravity persists, and continues to interject an ambivalence in the architectural dream. There is the story of Louis Kahn and Vincent Scully on a visit to Moscow. Scully pointed to the famous church spires there, and exclaimed: “See, Lou, how they touch the sky.” Kahn replied, possibly looking at the base: “See how they rise from the ground.” Kahn’s architecture, more than others in contemporary times, has been an unabashed reflection on gravity, attempting to confirm that architecture on earth is firmly gravity-bound.

Tectonics is actually the *poiesis* of gravity. It is no mere expression of making; it reveals man’s dialogue with earth and gravity. Even if tectonic articulation is camouflaged, gravity remains as an abiding ontological condition. Gravity is also an invisible dynamic in corporeal orientation, in understanding the preconceptual modalities of left/right and up/down, horizontality and verticality, heaviness and lightness, ascent and descent, wetness and dryness, and seating and standing. They all have architectural implications, and are in one form or another vectors of gravity.

The task of making, say, a platform - a flat, horizontal surface - may seem rather pedestrian but is actually fraught with a primal urgency (the need for a horizontal datum is quite diminished in zero-gravity). Some current works, as with the return of the ramp as a slanted inhabited plane (as in many Koolhaas’s projects), present and problematize the phenomenon of gravity. One such example is Balkrishna Doshi’s Gufa in Ahmedabad, a semi-underground art

gallery in a reptilian configuration. At the Gufa, there is an uncompromising absence of the flat plane; all surfaces, including the horizontal or the vertical, slant, curve, and undulate. That includes the floor. Attempts to stand still or stay stationary reminds one how much we take standing or seating for granted, and how precious is the horizontal datum. While I was sitting on that mean floor during an exhibition opening, constantly trying to adjust to an elusive position of comfort, the thought that came to my mind was gravity.

SENSES AND PRESENCES

The situatedness or emplacement of architecture is a tectonic and material act. In other words, it is a phenomenal engagement – an inevitable intertwining – with climate, gravity, and the earth. Steven Holl, echoing an Albertian theme, notes: “An architecture is born when actual phenomena and the idea that drives it intersect.” Idea belongs to the domain of thoughts, a matter of the mind, so to speak, while phenomenon involves sensations, perceptions, and feelings. The former implies “design” as modern architecture culture has come to know and practice it, and phenomenon points to the opening up of a work to a full corporeal and environmental engagement. It is siting, tectonics and materiality that give a building a presence. At that point, the building is both part of the social realm and part of the earth’s strata: in both cases, demooed from the mind of the creator. It then becomes an engaging phenomenon, and has presence.

An architectural presence is a matter of the senses. There are different degrees of how architecture can be *presenced*, that is, different degrees of visualization, representation, and experience. There is a distinctiveness of each mode, but more importantly, there lies a strain, particularly between the dominantly ocular/retinal/visual mode, and the whole range of spatial, pneumatic, visceral, tactile, aural, and peripatetic/kinesthetic condition. This is a critical disjunction upon which the modern discipline is based, and the transaction of architectural knowledge is substantially anchored. It would be fruitful to investigate how the visual mode informs and forms, describes and inscribes, expands and limits the perimeter of the discipline.

Sound, smell, shadow, tactility, and temperature, along with sight, attune us to place, and to emplaced or sited architecture. One hears a city in the call of the *muezzin*, in the tolling of the church bell (in some places), and perhaps today, in the scream of the police siren. And, again, in distinction to the olfactorily neutral places such as Boston and Minneapolis, one can still smell Istanbul, Venice, Delhi, and perhaps New York. Some of the works of Alvar Aalto remain as classic examples of the tactile. The work of Peter Zumthor (truly the “wizard of senses”) is perhaps the most compelling today; his Swiss Pavilion for Expo 2000 in Hanover is an encapsulation of all these topics. The non-visual dimensions of architecture have been addressed lately in some of the writings of Kenneth Frampton, Juhani Pallasmaa, and David Leatherbarrow.

A last remark on another topic from the dark: While light and lightness have enjoyed an exalted status in much of western modern architecture, as in the crystal metaphor, Mediterranean light, or the “the magnificent play of masses brought together in light,” there is still much to say about shades, shadows, and darkness. The construction of shadows, not just as comforting conditions but as compelling even mythopoeic elements, may perhaps be seen in the context of the Arab courtyard, the sanctum of Hindu temples, the stepwells of Gujarat, and the Japanese aesthetics of darkness. One can make a rhetorical claim that “place” is also how shadows are made.

The aesthetical articulation of shadows and darkness may be seen in Japanese teahouses, or as explored in Junichiro Tanizaki’s writings. A masterful construction of darkness is Tadao Ando’s Japanese Gallery at the Art Institute of Chicago. On entering the gallery, one is immediately confronted with a dusky atmosphere, not an expectation in a museum setting. One sees only a vague apparition of a set of columns (trees in a forest?), beyond which there is a somewhat more lighted area appearing to contain some objects. One navigates through and beyond the dark forest (a grid of nine square wooden posts), and arrives at the semi-lighted area. The area contains glass cases displaying Japanese artifacts; the light seems insufficient to view the pieces. There is a long and heavy wooden bench on one side, where one can sit and let the eyes slowly adjust to the dimness. It is almost epiphanous: The artifacts slowly begin to appear amidst the haze of a visible darkness. The whole experience is one of delayed visibility. For certain things to appear, one has to wait; for certain things to prosper, one has to delay. It is no wonder that the term “dwelling” is cognate with “delaying.”

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