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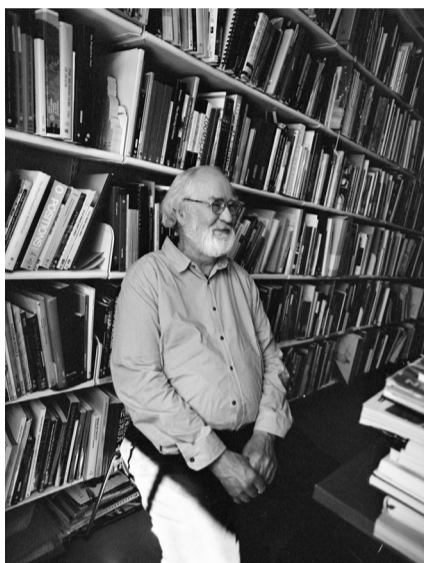
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Juhani Pallasmaa

Landscapes of architectural education -architecture, knowledge and existential wisdom (2/2)

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The first version of this essay was initially written for a lecture at the Washington University in St. Louis in 2011. A further version was given as a lecture at the UACG University in Sofia in 2015.

Due to its extension, the text has been presented in two parts, the first part being published in Palimpsesto #23.

Wisdom of books

In the end of my essay, I wish to turn back to books.

As a young man and aspiring architect, I organized my books in two categories: architecture books and other books. Later on, I realized that all good books are books about architecture in the essential sense that they depict the interaction of individuals with their settings, life histories, institutions and customs, as well as with other individuals, and this is exactly the life world in which architecture takes place. I realized that the essence of architecture is not in buildings as physical objects, but in their role as frames through which the world is seen and as horizons of experiencing and understanding the human condition. Buildings are mental and existential instruments, not simply aestheticized shelters. The essence of architecture is essentially beyond architecture. 'Let us assume a wall: what takes place behind it?', the poet Jean Tardieu asks¹, but we architects rarely bother to imagine what happens behind the walls we have erected. Yet, imagining life is more important than fancifying spaces, as my mentor Aulis Blomstedt taught me sixty years ago.

Somewhat later, I came to yet another realization: the books which I had categorized as non-architecture seemed to reveal more important aspects of the human significance of architecture than the books written specifically about the art of building and by architects. There is an obvious reason for this; architecture books usually deal with their subject matter as a closed, formalized and, usually, conventionalized discipline, whereas poetry, novels and plays, are engaged with the same experiential ground from which also architecture arises. This observation applies to all art forms: painting, sculpture, photography, theatre, dance, music and cinema. They all reveal the essence of artistic aspiration

and expression, and they valorize the existential condition behind artistic expression. All arts are expressions of the timeless human existential enigma and this gives Egyptian art, for instance, its voice by which it approaches us and has a forceful impact across the abyss of four and a half millennia.

Literary lessons is architecture

The best lessons in architecture I have read, are the following: Anton Chechov's correspondence, which etches the essence of human character as well as the tragic and comic aspects of life in the reader's consciousness. He also teaches the supreme virtues of condensation and simplicity in artistic expression; Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry and his novel *The Notebook for Malte Laurids Brigge*, as well as his letters, all reveal the nature of poetic sensibility and the osmotic interaction between the outer space of the world and the inner space of the mind. Rilke teaches us the irreplaceable value of solitude and silence as conditions of *sine qua non* for creative work; Joseph Brodsky's essays, in which he analyses in minute detail poems by Robert Frost, Anna Akhmatova and Ossip Mandelstam, for instance, expose the incredible archaeology of poetic images. He also teaches us how the tragic, vulgar and commonplace are ennobled as they become condensed into the spiritual imagery of poetry. Besides, he convinces the reader of the significance of uncertainty and insecurity for the creative mentality. 'Poetry is a tremendous school of insecurity and uncertainty ... Poetry - writing it as well as reading it - will teach you humility and rather quickly at that. Especially if you are both writing and reading it.'² The poet's observation applies to architecture; it certainly humbles you, particularly if you are both making it and theorizing about it. In my personal case, the realm of uncertainty expands every day, and I have developed a great suspicion for individuals who are sure of themselves and of what they are talking about. In my view an arrogant and self-assured architect has not understood the meaning and depth of his trade, or even himself.

I should add to my personal list of most significant architecture books at least Franz Kafka's, Feodor Dostoyevsky's, Thomas Mann's, Herman Hesse's and Italo Calvino's novels. Calvino's *The Invisible Cities* is, of course, pure architecture in literary form, written architecture, as it were. So are Jorge Luis Borges' short stories and Georges Perec's hilarious *Espèces d'espaces*. I would like to say that all good literature is about the condition of architecture.

Years ago, I read Jorge Luis Borges' book entitled *On Writing*³, in which he explains the origins and meanings of his literary imagery, for instance, of the horrifying short story 'The End of the Duel', where two gouchos, who had been hostile to each other throughout their lives, are both taken prisoners in a civil war and are forced to perform their final rivalry in a running race with their throats cut. Borges reverses our received understanding of the relation of reality and imagination: 'Reality is not always probable, or likely. But if you are writing a story, you have to make it as plausible as you can, because otherwise the reader's imagination will reject it'.⁴ In architecture, likewise, not fantasy of spaces and forms, but genuine understanding of human behaviour, experience and imagination is needed.

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A parte de la evidente importancia de la dirección de actores, la autoría de un director de cine se encuentra principalmente en la puesta en escena. Cada secuencia se divide en una serie concreta de planos, que son las unidades de rodaje. Para cada plano se define la posición y movimiento de los actores, y la posición y movimiento de la cámara, en una suerte de coreografía entres unos y otra. Es lo que llamamos planificación (o *découpage* según el extendido el término francés). Esto es lo que definirá la propuesta narrativa de la película.

Por supuesto muchos otros factores importantes influyen en el resultado: la dirección de arte, la iluminación, la interpretación, el sonido... pero la base narrativa está ahí: lo que define cómo se cuenta la historia. Una cámara al hombro nerviosa siguiendo de cerca a un personaje o planos generales fijos; cortes rápidos de apenas uno o dos segundos o planos secuencia de larga duración... Las posibilidades son amplísimas. Un mismo guion en manos de dos directores diferentes dará como resultado dos películas muy distintas (basta recordar cualquier adaptación americana de una película europea).

En *Vasil* optamos por una cámara estable, una fotografía serena, que mantiene una distancia con los personajes y que permite que las cosas vayan sucediendo a su propio ritmo dentro del encuadre. Resulta coherente con el tipo de historia que contamos y ayuda a que el espectador se instale en un cierto estado de ánimo.

Otro aspecto importante que de alguna manera incluye a la arquitectura en el cine, es la elección de las localizaciones de rodaje (ya sean naturales, construidas o digitales): los espacios, siempre al servicio de la película, se utilizan para expresar ideas, atmósferas y emociones.

Una localización es buena cuando es adecuada para la historia que se quiere contar; cuando ayuda a crear la atmósfera y el tono buscados; cuando ayuda a describir a los personajes que la habitan.

La localización principal en *Vasil* es la casa de un arquitecto jubilado. El presupuesto no permitía su construcción, debíamos encontrar una localización natural. Primero buscamos una vivienda que se ajustara espacialmente a las exigencias del guion: en nuestro caso necesitábamos que fuera una vivienda de un solo dormitorio (el dueño de la casa acoge al protagonista que dormirá en el sofá), y que la cocina estuviera abierta al salón (para poder relacionar ambos espacios visualmente). Las viviendas reales con estas características eran muy pequeñas, lo que dificultaba mucho el rodaje y reducía los posibles tiros de cámara. Finalmente encontramos una grande, de cuatro dormitorios, y rodamos de manera que pareciera que solo tenía uno. Para ello falseamos la puerta que conectaba la entrada con el pasillo de habitaciones, simulando ser la puerta del único dormitorio y obviando toda la parte central de la vivienda (que se utilizó para vestuario, maquillaje, monitores, etc.).

Después ambientamos el espacio (mobiliario, objetos, cortinas, texturas...), no solo de manera que resultara creíble como vivienda de un arquitecto mayor, sino que además aportara información sobre el personaje. Su vivienda, junto al vestuario elegido, nos ayuda a entenderlo de un vistazo.

La elección de los exteriores plantea otro tipo de cuestión: qué tipo de ciudad queremos retratar. *Vasil* se ha rodado en Valencia, aunque en ningún momento se dice o muestra qué ciudad es: no es relevante para la historia. Nos movemos en barrios elegantes cuando acompañamos a los personajes de mayor estatus social (Ensanche, Alameda), barrios más céntricos o populares cuando el protagonista busca trabajo (el Carmen, Ruzafa) o caminamos por el antiguo cauce del río Turia convertido en jardín cuando pasea ocioso dejando pasar el tiempo. Al final, impulsado por el guion y por los propios personajes, se completa un retrato de ciudad que, como todo lo demás, apoya la atmósfera y el tono buscados en la película.

En cada parte del proceso, desde la elección de las localizaciones hasta la decisión de dónde colocar la cámara o la composición de los encuadres, está la mirada de la directora, y junto a ella, inseparable, la mirada de la arquitecta.

Vasil se estrena en salas de toda España el 4 de noviembre.

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Borges also wisely warns us of the obsession with contemporaneity: 'No real writer tried to be contemporary.'⁵ The explicit desire to be novel and contemporary is equally disastrous in our craft. Only the aspiration to be sincere and authentic can produce meaningful novelty.

I have spoken at some length of the value of literature to our understanding of architecture. Allow me to add one more observation. As we read a poem, we internalize it, and we become the poem. When I have read a book and return it back to its place on the book shelf, the book, in fact, remains in me; if it is a great book, it has become part of my soul and my body forever. The Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal gives a vivid description of the act of reading; 'When I read, I don't really read; I pop a beautiful sentence in my mouth and suck it like a fruit drop or I sip it like a liqueur until the thought dissolves in me like alcohol, infusing my brain and heart and coursing on through the veins to the root of each blood vessel'.⁶ In the same way, paintings, films and buildings become part of us. Artistic works originate in the body of the maker and they return back to the human body as they are being experienced. I can sense how I carry in my body all the memorable pieces of architecture, which I have experienced. They are not stored in my retinal or cerebral memory, they are recorded as bodily and existential sensations.

Architecture as collaboration

Architecture, as all artistic work, is essentially the product of collaboration. It is not only collaboration in the obvious and practical sense of the word, such as the interaction with numerous professionals, workmen and craftsmen, but it is collaboration with other artists and architects, not only one's contemporaries and the living, but with predecessors who have been dead for decades or centuries. One's most important teacher of architecture may well have died half a millennium ago. Any authentic work is set into the timeless tradition of artistic works and the work is meaningful only if it presents itself humbly to this tradition and becomes part of that continuum. Countless architectural works made today, are too ignorant, arrogant and disrespectful to be accepted as constituents of the esteemed institution of tradition.

The role of the dead in the collectivity of creative work was pointed out by T.S. Eliot in his seminal essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' of 1919⁷, which ought to be one of the items in the long list of compulsory reading for all students of architecture. But instead of repeating this rather often quoted essay, I'll remind the reader of what Jean Genet has to say about the role of the dead in the creative team work in his essay on Alberto Giacometti: 'In its desire to acquire real significance, each work of art must descend the stairway of millennia with patience and extreme caution, and meet - if possible - the immemorial night of the dead, so that the dead recognize themselves in the work.'⁸

I often instruct my students to be careful and ambitious in choosing their personal mentors. You can have Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, or Kahn as your mentor, if you are wise and courageous enough to appoint them as your personal mentors in the search for the secrets of architecture. Many of the finest artists of our time have mentioned Piero della Francesca as their most important teacher. My good friend, the legendary Finnish designer Tapio Wirkkala often said to me that Piero was his teacher. Yet, Piero died in 1492 and Tapio was born in 1915.

Wisdom of architecture

The artistic tradition is not a depository, however, from which to borrow, quote or steal without permission. It is an esteemed community of its own, a community of conversation, exchange and mutual assessment and respect. We do not only utilize the accumulated wisdom of architecture - Milan Kundera speaks of the 'wisdom of the novel', and argues that all good writers consult this wisdom⁹ - we also alter the reading of prior works. This reverse process of historical influence is most often forgotten, but it calls for special sensitivity and responsibility. Aldo van

Eyck, one of the seminal architects of the second half of the 20th century, who taught us the human meaning of geometry, and showed the importance of anthropological studies for architecture, was once asked to give a lecture on the influence of Giotto on Cézanne.¹⁰ Instead of the suggested topic, however, he chose to give a talk on the influence of Cézanne on Giotto. He realized that the thinking and painting of Paul Cézanne made us all see Giotto's work in a totally new context. I am mentioning this reverse interaction in order to emphasize the multi-directional and -dimensional nature of creative work. Creative works draw from and advance to all possible directions simultaneously, and new works keep constantly altering and revising our reading of history; history is not written as a progressive linear project, but backwards as a repeated cyclical process.

Beauty is an inseparable part of the notion of art, but it has a complex nature. Joseph Brodsky even dares to criticize Ezra Pound for his tendency to aim directly at beauty: '*The Cantos*, too, left me cold, the main error was the old one: questing after beauty. ... it was odd that he hadn't realized that beauty can't be targeted, that it is always a by-product of other, often very ordinary pursuit.'¹¹

In our craft, also, seductive beauty and aesthetic appeal have, regrettably, become a conscious and explicit aim. At the same time architecture has lost sight of its social aspirations, the notions of equality and emancipation, which inspired early modernity. Instead of aspiring for a better and more humane future, contemporary architecture seems to be blinded by momentary attention and celebrity.

¹ As quoted in Perek, *Tilaja ja avaruuskia/ Espèces d'espaces*, Lokikirjat, Helsinki, 1992, p. 50.

² Joseph Brodsky, 'In Memory of Stephen Spender', in *On Grief and Reason*, pp. 473 and 475.

³ Borges, *On Writing*, edited by Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Daniel Halpern, Frank MacShane. The Ecco Press, Hopewell, New Jersey, 1994.

⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

⁵ Ibid., p. 53.

⁶ Bohumil Hrabal, *Too Loud a Solitude*. Harcourt, Inc., San Diego-New York-London, 1990, p. 1.

⁷ T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and Individual Talent', in T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*. Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1964.

⁸ Jean Genet, *L'atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*. Marc Barbezat, Lárbelét, 1963.

⁹ Milan Kundera, *Romaanin taide [The Art of the Novel]*. WSOY, Helsinki, 1986, p. 165.

¹⁰ Aldo van Eyck reported about the incident to the author in a private conversation in the early 1980s.

¹¹ Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark*. Penguin Books, London, 1992, p. 70.

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