

## TOWARD AN ARCHITECTURE OF HUMILITY

Juhani Pallasmaa

(1998)

Architectural culture, in its social context and core values, has undergone significant shifts over the past half century. When I began my studies in the late 1950s in Helsinki, the heroic mission of Modern architecture still molded architects' collective ambitions. Architecture enjoyed high social status and positive symbolic connotations; architects were seen as the builders of our national identity. Then, beginning in the early 1960s, the postwar ideals of late-Corbusian plasticity and gravitas gave way to structural and modular clarity, prefabrication, transparency, and visual simplicity; Miesian structural classicism and traditional Japanese buildings were inspirations for an architecture of reduction and deliberate anonymity that sought to mirror industrialization.

During the decade following the Paris Spring of 1968, architecture shifted again, becoming politicized; the art of building was scorned as an elitist practice in the service of power and aesthetic yearnings were condemned. The 1980s saw a harsh questioning of the Modern ideology and a renewed interest in formalism. This decade witnessed efforts to reconstruct the identity of the architect, and the self-esteem and social role of the discipline; nothing less than a new paradigm was sought.

Today, architects in Finland have largely succeeded in reestablishing a sense of professional identity and mission. And yet the tumultuous changes of recent decades continue to be felt, for the architectural profession has lost much of its prestige, as well as its acknowledged position among the shapers of national culture. Indeed, the social significance of the art of architecture is now perilously tenuous. Competition over fees, new quasi-rational practices, the imperatives of cost and speed, and, perhaps most insidiously, the obsession with the image, are eroding the once-fertile soil of architecture.

This brief narrative of the changing values and fortunes of architects in a corner of the world where Modern architecture has played an undisputed social role forms the background to my critical views of recent developments. The tendencies I describe, however, are hardly confined to Scandinavia; they appear to be universal, although they vary from place to place. Aware of the dangers of generalization, I believe we must still try to identify cultural undercurrents that inevitably influence architecture. I should acknowledge that many contemporary architects and critics, professional journals, and educational institutions are working to resist the negative influences of our time. Poetic works of architecture continue to be created in this age of obsessive materialism. And in some sense negative cultural phenomena actually strengthen architecture's humanist mission: resistance to the decay of spiritual and cultural values is now the shared task of architects and artists.

The widespread rejection of the Modern Movement's orthodox doctrine and its emphasis on social morality has inspired impressive aesthetic diversity, but the rejection has also produced a climate of arrogance, cultural incoherence, and narcissism. As the understanding of architecture as a social art has diminished, the idea of architecture as a form of studio art has intensified: contemporary 'neo-avant-garde' works are presented today as products of individual genius. Yet paradoxically, the artistic authenticity and autonomy of architecture are today being undercut by three cultural tendencies: the commodification of buildings, the self-defeating search for newness, and the hegemony of the marketable image. These cultural tendencies are supported by both commercialized architectural journalism and the voracious global entertainment and tourism industries.

Is architecture relinquishing its potential to embody ambitious, idealistic cultural and collective values? Is it working to support ideological emptiness and commercial exploitation rather than a shared cultural and historical understanding? Is the emphasis on transient construction transforming architecture into disposable scenery?

Despite the current critical and media focus on celebrity designer-artists, architecture continues to be that art with the most irrefutable and unavoidable grounding in societal life. In addition to evaluating the mere aesthetic relevance of individual projects, architectural theory, criticism, and education should survey a now-neglected cultural ground: the

preconditions of the art of architecture. Both education and practice would benefit from a rigorous cultural analysis of the prevailing state of architecture. What, for instance, is the collective mental background that informs the alarming conservatism—the nostalgic quasi-classicism—of American collegiate and corporate architecture? Is it cultural insecurity or a more serious suppression of the idea of (and hope for) progress? And what kind of mental defenses work to create our sickeningly regressive domestic architecture?

## VISUAL IMAGES

Architectural publications, criticism, and even education are now focused relentlessly on the enticing visual image. The longing for singular, memorable imagery subordinates other aspects of buildings, isolating architecture in a disembodied vision. As buildings are increasingly conceived and confronted through the eye rather than the entire body—as the camera becomes the ultimate witness to and mediator of architecture—the actual experience of a building, of its spaces and materials, is neglected. By reinforcing visual manipulation and graphic production, computer imaging further detaches architecture from its multi-sensory essence; as design tools, computers can encourage mere visual manipulation and make us neglect our powers of empathy and imagination. We become voyeurs obsessed with visuality, blind not only to architecture's social reality, but also to its functional, economic, and technological realities, those which inevitably determine the design of buildings and cities. Our detachment from experiential and sensory reality maroons us in theoretical, intellectual, and conceptual realms.

## HAPTIC EXPERIENCES

Recent dramatic changes in the temporal quality of experience have themselves affected architecture, which now must compete, for immediacy of impact, with today's frenetic forms of expression and communication—with fashion, advertising, and web culture. But while the visual image has an immediate impact, other dimensions of architectural experience require empathy and interpretation, an understanding of cultural and social contexts, and a capacity for envisioning the temporal endurance of buildings beyond momentary fashions. The appreciation of the sensory qualities of architecture requires slowness and patience (this is true for both the design process and the experience and judgment of the finished building). The impact of time, the effects of use and wear, and the processes of aging are rarely considered in contemporary design or criticism. Alvar Aalto believed that the value of a building is best judged fifty years after completion. The prospect that few new buildings will even last fifty years does not invalidate the significance of time and duration in architectural appreciation.

Authentic architectural settings—fully realized microcosmic entities—strengthen our sense of reality; thus, a desire for haptic architecture is clearly emerging in reaction to ocular-centricity. The haptic sensibility savors plasticity, materiality, tactility, and intimacy. It offers nearness and affection, rather than distance and control. While images of architecture can be rapidly consumed, haptic architecture is appreciated and comprehended gradually, detail by detail. While the hectic eye of the camera captures a momentary situation, a passing condition of light, or an isolated and carefully framed fragment (photographic images are a kind of focused gestalt), the experience of architectural reality depends fundamentally on peripheral and anticipated vision. The perceptual realm that we sense beyond the sphere of focused vision—the event anticipated around a corner, behind a wall, or beneath a surface—is as important as the camera's frozen image. This suggests that one reason why contemporary places so often alienate us—compared with those historical and natural settings that elicit powerful emotional engagement—has to do with the poverty of our peripheral vision. Focused vision makes us mere observers; peripheral perception transforms retinal images into spatial and bodily experience, encouraging participation.

## SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The ocular, hedonistic, bias of contemporary architecture is exacerbated and in turn intensified by architects' loss of social empathy and mission. Issues of planning, social housing, mass production, and industrialization - all-important to early Modern architecture - are now rarely touched on in publications or academic programs. Modernism sought to respond to the typical and ordinary conditions of life; contemporary elitist architecture favors the unique and the exceptional. This detachment of architectural language from the ground of common experience has produced a kind of architectural autism. Compare, for instance, the fantasy projects so often assigned in the design studios of the past decade with the socially oriented design problems of the 1950s and 1960s.

Architectural design, as well as writing and criticism, should acknowledge the need for civic responsibility. Architecture should strengthen the reliability and comprehensibility of the world. In this sense, architecture is fundamentally a conservative art; it materializes and preserves the mythical and poetic ground of constructing and inhabiting space, thus framing human existence and action. By establishing a horizon of existential understanding, architecture encourages us to turn our attention away from architecture itself; authentic architecture suggests images of ideal life.

The mastery of structure and material, and the presence of skilled craftsmanship are essential to good architecture. The general weakening of our sense of tectonic reality—a weakening intimately related to the emphasis on surface and appearances—is caused partly by the diminishing role of craft in construction, but even more by the growing power of contractors, and by the increasing importance of short-term economics at the expense of architectural value. Architecture is too often viewed as a short-lived speculative commodity rather than as a cultural and metaphysical manifestation that frames collective understanding and values. Although projects that question or ridicule this large social role are now celebrated—both avant-garde and corporate projects often emit the fetid air of architectural necrophilia—architecture cannot escape its foundations in real, existential experience. In an age of simulated experience and virtual reality, we still desire an authentic, tangible home. The inherent language of architecture speaks of permanence, durability, faith, and human care.

## CONTINUING VITALITY

Despite the general drift toward meaninglessness, some recent work offers glimpses of the continuous vitality of architecture. Much current building uses technology merely as a form of visual imagery; in contrast, Renzo Piano designs exemplary structures combining technological ingenuity with contextual concern and ecological morality. Such work underscores the fact that truly ecological architecture derives from invention and refinement, not from technical or aesthetic regression. Glenn Murcutt's delightful buildings are elegant blends of reason and modesty, common sense and poetry, technological sophistication and ecological subtlety; they are unique buildings—responses to a particular landscape—with universal applicability. Alvaro Siza's architecture fuses a contemporary formal and spatial complexity with a reassuring sense of tradition and cultural continuity. Sverre Fehn explores the mythical and poetic ground of construction. Steven Holl re-sensualizes space, material, and light. Peter Zumthor's recent projects convincingly unite opposites: conceptual strength with sensual subtlety, thought with emotion, clarity with mystery, gravity with lightness.

Western industrial culture values power and domination. Gianni Vattimo has introduced ideas of "weak ontology" and "fragile thought," a way of philosophizing that does not try to bundle the multitude of human discourses into a single system.<sup>1</sup> We can, I would argue, identify a "weak" or "fragile" architecture, or, more precisely, an architecture of the "fragile image," as opposed to the prevalent architecture of strong images. Whereas the latter strives to impress and manipulate, the architecture of the fragile image is contextual, multi-sensory, and responsive, concerned with experiential interaction and sensual accommodation. This architecture grows gradually, scene by scene, rather than quickly manifesting a simple, domineering concept.

We can distinguish between an architecture that offers less in its real material encounter than its images promise, and an architecture that opens up new layers of experience and meaning when confronted in its built, contextual, and full reality. Any encounter with a building by Alvar Aalto, for instance, is a richer experience than viewing its image. His works are masterpieces of an episodic architecture, one that aims to achieve a specific ambiance rather than a formal authority. The paved pathways designed by Dimitris Pikionis that lead to the Acropolis in Athens, Lawrence Halprin's Ira's Fountain in Portland, Oregon, and Carlo Scarpa's meticulously crafted architectural settings, are further examples of an architecture whose full power does not rely on imagery. The work of Pikionis is a dense conversation with time and history; Halprin's designs explore the threshold between architecture and nature; Scarpa's architecture creates a dialogue between concept and making, visibility and hapticity, artistic invention and tradition. Such architecture obscures the categories of foreground and background, object and context; it evokes a liberated sense of natural duration. An architecture of courtesy and attention, it asks us to be humble, receptive, and patient observers.

Focused on visual imagery, detached from social and contextual considerations, much of the architecture of our time—and the publicity that attempts to convince us of its genius—has an air of self-satisfaction and omnipotence. These buildings attempt to conquer the foreground rather than to create a supportive background for action and perception. Our age seems to have lost the virtue of architectural neutrality, restraint, and modesty. Authentic works of art,

however, remain suspended between certainty and uncertainty, faith and doubt. Architectural culture, on the threshold of the new millennium, would do well to nurture productive tensions: cultural realism and artistic idealism, determination and discretion, ambition and humility.

The most significant thought for me during my architectural education was a single sentence by my professor, Aulis Blomstedt: "For an architect, more important than the skill of fanaticizing space, is the capacity of envisioning situations of human life."