

# PLENARY SESSION II: TECTONICS IN PRACTICE THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE

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## THE POETIC LOGIC OF CONSTRUCTION

Architecture is both a tightrope walk and a balancing act. The art of architecture is suspended between a multitude of polarities, between functionality and metaphysics, utility and expression, tradition and invention, concept and materiality, design and making, theory and practice.

During the past two decades, we have witnessed a deluge of theorizing on the nature and value of architecture, to the degree that verbalized intentions and interpretations have often become more important than the actual materialization of—or the physical and sensory encounter with—the work of architecture. Today's obsessive logocentric theorizing and the panic of representation expressed by a multitude of contemporary projects clearly signal that architecture is losing its sense of ground and mission. Philosopher Karsten Harries writes, "One thing the widespread interest in philosophy that has become so much part of the post-modern architectural scene suggests is that architecture has become uncertain of its way."

In recent years, part of the academic world of architecture has distanced itself from the realities of architectural practice. Some schools have completely turned their back on the practice of architecture and instead are now engaged in the fabrication of mere images and metaphors of construction. This withdrawal from the practicalities of the architectural trade is certainly motivated by the prevailing vulgarity of today's standard architectural practice. On the other hand, the separation of the intellectual endeavour from the reality of construction has resulted in an atmosphere of self-referentiality and autism. It is alarming, indeed, that only a few schools today are interested in the issues of planning, housing, mass production and industrialization, all of which were seminal concerns of Modernism.

For 35 years, I have pursued the conceptual analysis of architecture and sought a verbal mediation of the essence of architectural experience. Yet I am suspicious of—and critically distant from—the recent development of architectural theory. In the first place, I do not believe in a causal relationship between theory and practice, or in the possibility of—or even the need, for that matter—of a generative and prescriptive theory. In my view, theoretical investigation and the making of architecture are two different approaches, two parallel lines of sight of the phenomenon of architecture. These views might well inform each other, but they are not necessarily interdependent. Architecture is not an expression of knowledge and certainty, but one of faith and a perpetual search for reconciliation with the world. Architecture is born in the embodied world of flesh and matter through the constantly interacting processes of ideation and making. Architecture is a form of thinking, but it is thinking

through the particular corporeal and materialized mode of construction.

A curious polar condition of architecture—or any art form, for that matter—is its simultaneous existence in two different worlds; the world of material, execution or performance, on the one hand, and the world of image, suggestion or narrative, on the other. The enticement of a work of art arises precisely from this double-existence. A work of art short-circuits our ordinary consciousness by making us experience its materiality and actuality simultaneously with its symbolic and representational dimension in the realm of dreams, ideas and ideals. The mysterious sensuality, plasticity and multiplicity of an authentic work arises from this double-focus, in the same way that a stereoscopic image enables us to perceive three-dimensionality.

The artistic strength of a work is born of a tension between material and form, execution and image. A great piece of sculpture is a piece of stone and an image at the same time, theatre is acting and the simultaneous narrative of the play, and music is the reality of music making and the abstract progression of musical sound, painting is paint on a canvas and an image. The Rondadini Pietà is a more deeply touching work of art, in my view, than Michelangelo's early virtuososo work on the same motif. The pietà of his final years is almost shockingly a piece of stone and an image at the same time, and it touches our emotions deeply, whereas the virtuososo piece of his youth tends to turn too easily into the illusory presence of flesh and cloth.

The strongest architectural impact, in my view, derives similarly from a tension between the realities of construction and the metaphoric architectural representation; I am here thinking of embodied existential metaphors, not literary symbolic representations. An architectural image needs the resistance of matter and gravity in order to enter with authority the existential domain that we inhabit.

In our time, however, architecture has been reduced to mere unarticulated quasi-industrial assembly and exercises in shallow visual seduction. The technological, ahistorical, asensual and simulated environment of the Consumerist world turns into dreamlike images of unreality. The functionalized and commodified architecture that conceals its constructional and material reality turns into images of alienation and necrophilia.

Gaston Bachelard makes the seminal distinction between "material imagination" and "formal imagination." In my view the essence of architecture is related with the first; images of materiality, physical forces and acts are transformed into the tectonic entity. the tectonic ensemble is a microcosmos, a still-life, a metaphoric representation of the experiential world. The currently fashionable "images of form" are peripheral to architec-

ture, as they are unable to address the gravitational center of our own self-experience.

Architecture is an art-form that addresses man's bodily being in space, time and place. It mediates basic existential causalities and helps to define the horizon of meaning. Physical structures are grasped as embodied sensations, through an unconscious bodily mimesis. The language of the body is bio-historically formed, and consequently, an assuring architecture has to reverberate with this archaic stratum of experience. A deeply moving architectural experience is archaic and refined, heavy and light, physical and spiritual, all at the same time. Architecture reinforces our experience of gravity at the same time that it expresses our desire to overcome it. Paradoxically, in order to open a view to the other world of ideals and dreams, architecture has to strengthen our foothold in reality. A work of architecture can achieve spirituality only strengthening the experience of reality.

Architecture is tied with the realm of ethics by a two-fold bond: first through the veracity of its tectonic essence, and secondly, through the sincerity of its societal mission.

"Structure is the mother of the architect," wrote Auguste Perret. I wish to articulate this thought further: the tectonic articulation of structure, material, scale and the processes of making is the mother tongue of architecture. The need for dimensional and proportional modulation of the architectural ensemble follows from the very essence of construction. Since ancient Egypt, proportional coordination has the metaphysical task of tying architecture both the harmony of the Spheres and to the scale of the human body. Buildings are unavoidably compiled of parts through distinct processes and crafts, and this assembly constitutes the tectonic narrative of architecture.

Instead of the mere visual seduction of today's architecture of image, a tectonic materiality and a veracity of construction give rise to tactile intimacy. Even vision contains an unconscious element of touch: "Through vision we touch the sun and the stars," as Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote. Tectonically authentic architecture offers surfaces and edges for the pleasurable unconscious touch of the eye. This, I believe, is the significance of Le Corbusier's notion of *modenature*. Actual and implied tactility gives architecture its sense of authenticity and authority. Visuality, isolated from the other senses, makes us outsiders and spectators whereas tactile intimacy turns us to insiders and participants.

Architecture is essentially an art-form of all the sense, because its task is to embed us into our world. We define the world and the world defines us, and architecture articulates and facilitates this interface and two-way definition. Cities and buildings create a cultural horizon of experience and understanding. Every work of art expresses one's being in the world. "How could the painter or poet express anything other his encounter with the world," writes Merleau-Ponty, and in the vein, how could an architect express anything but the very same existential encounter?

In Ezra Pound's view, "Music rots when it advances too far from dance, and poetry withers away when it advances too far from music." Every art-form echoes its ontological beginning. The art-form of architecture was born in acts of ritual, and in accordance with the poet's logic, architecture disappears when it loses its connection with its mytho-poetic beginning. As a consequence of its primordial origins, the essence of architecture continues to be acts, interactions, con-

frontation and encounters more than a fascination with visual imagery. Architecture is *verbs* rather than *nouns*. Architecture consists of petrified acts which are mediated by the language of tectonics.

The presence of the act of construction in architectural experience, the reality of its materials, joints and crafts, connects architecture with its timeless poetic ground. Architecture represents the primary mythical confrontations with gravity, the elements, matters, spatial dimensions and light. A building devoid of tectonic reality remains a mere picture and an empty stage-set for the eye.

It is pretentious, of course, to show one's own work after an ideological statement. I agreed, however, with the Conference organizers to speak about the tectonic intention in my own design work. I will simply attempt to illustrate the affinity of intention between my verbal and material work, that is to say, how my ideals of architectural tectonics have developed in the course of 35 years.

I was educated in the classical Functionalist and Constructivist spirit of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Finland. The Modern position was never questioned or detached from its societal connection; the Modern stance was not seen primarily as a stylistic preference but as a position of dialectical questioning. Clear modulation and expression of structure were seen as having an ethical value. Clarity and simplicity were considered as virtues, not, however, as formalist preconceptions, but as qualities resulting from a laborious process of condensation and reduction. Deliberate anonymity, restraint, lack of expression, and silence were valued over individual expression. I was strongly influenced by the studies in the Pythagorean tradition of musical and architectural harmony made by my professor, Aulis Blomstedt. It seems to me that the Pythagorean idea of proportions, based on operations with small even numbers, is closely related with the tectonic essence of architecture; the act of construction is engaged with the processes of addition and subtraction. From Blomstedt and his Viennese idol, Dr. Hans Kayser, I inherited a certain suspicion of the mystification of the Golden Section.

In the end of the 1960s I was engaged in developing industrial systems, which call for a very clear and logical tectonic syntax. These exercises in industrial building were inspired by traditional Japanese architecture, the structural classicism of Mies van der Rohe and the California Rationalism that had developed in the 1950s around the Case Study Houses sponsored by *Arts and Architecture* magazine.

Until my two years experience as a teacher of architecture in Africa in the beginning of the 1970s, I used to consider architecture as a visual art-form. But I have learned to regard it increasingly as the art-form of the body, of touch and all the senses. In those years, I also began to understand the importance of the mythical dimension that continues to be concealed in architectural phenomena. Tectonics, for me, is not merely a technical or rational matter, but a matter of sensuality and erotic suggestion. Authentic architecture always seems to project an erotic air; this is an air of enchantment and desire.

Architecture expresses the encounter of the horizontal and the vertical, the juxtaposition of materials and the articulation of the joint. The joint elaborates the meeting of structural elements and different materials. Whenever one begins to articulate a support, one ends up with the classical column; the code of the column is embedded in the body and in the

perceptual system.

In my work, I believe, I keep molding my self-image, and this is the reason for its thematic continuity and distinct repetitiveness. I believe that throughout our life we all are continually constructing a single edifice in our self-image. All genuine work is autobiographical, in my view, and articulates one's early experiences. At the age of 60, I find myself often reliving certain youthful sensory experiences at my grandfather's humble farm.

Materiality and light have also gradually gained importance for me. The essence of architecture is revealed in the encounter of matter and light, and in the simultaneous materiality and immateriality of architecture.

In my youth, I used to consider architecture as the art-form of space, as we were taught according to the Modernist doctrine. But nowadays, the ways that architecture structures, slows down and halts time are far more important to me.

Architecture suspends and halts our experience of time as a mysterious ever-lasting present, one capable of crossing the abyss of centuries.

#### SOURCES

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