

Architecture's phenomenology and crisis

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ABSTRACT

By occurring within the limits between engineering and art, Architecture faces aesthetic and technical problems simultaneously. This turns it into an ever unfinished task, a science that emerges from the constant dialogue between two traditionally antagonistic values and renderings. This fact leads to a general tendency to place Architecture on grounds external to its own concepts, be it the individuals' creative improvisations, inherent to urban life, or the knowledge about the human being that equates universal needs to which it should provide an answer.

These preliminary considerations lead us to the core of an actual philosophical issue on the pre-reflexive grounds of the world of life (*Lebenswelt*) and, as far as Architecture is concerned, on the experience of dwelling which makes up the ontological "regional" field from which derives the science/art investigated in this article.

I

The issue of the relationship between Phenomenology and Architecture places us, at the start, face-to-face with more general problems peculiar to the relationship between Philosophy and the various practical sciences. No matter the perspective from which this relationship considered, the above all theoretical character of the philosophical reflection as opposed to science becomes evident. In his work "*Formal Logic*" Husserl makes a distinction between the technical interest that

motivates the practice of the various sciences and the philosophical one.¹ The former aiming at producing effects in the world bases itself on the effectiveness of theories to define the criterion of truth. This position allows the scientist and the technician to work with theories whose basic presuppositions and concepts have not yet been sufficiently clarified as to their full sense and validity conditions, because this kind of clarifying in depth approach often does not interfere with the result of its technical application.

Mathematics, for example, worked very well even without a satisfactory definition of number proper, or of what was the status of Logic's relationships and laws.

However, in moments of scientific research crisis, such non-clarified presuppositions and concepts guide the investigation making it return to its authentic sense once they act as a goal, directing the wise man's eye before his own science was constituted as such. In fact, the distinction between physical and biological phenomena precedes the existence of Physics proper, and the scientist started out from that distinction to raise his problems. Likewise, considering the matter of interest here, dwelling is man's fundamental experience preceding all science, meaning exactly what Merleau-Ponty meant when he said the world "was older than all thought" and that the landscape preceded Geography. Therefore it is to this fundamentally not conceptual experience of dwelling, that defines one of the original forms of being in the world, that Architecture must return whenever it faces a crisis in its grounds, thus retrieving the sensitive setting of roots that sustains the authentic meaning of its work against speculative constructs of all sorts.

The Greek word *krísis* defines a frontier region, an extreme situation, in other words the dangerous conjunctures which are in themselves decisive. Architecture's situation is not different as it occurs within the limits between Engineering and Art facing, at the same time, aesthetic and technical problems, beauty and functionalism. This instability of Architecture is also a rich factor that makes it always unfinished, a science woven within the constant dialogue with two traditionally antagonistic values and renderings, in a distension that, in its turn, brings life to it.

More than that, the architectural rendering encompasses perhaps the main contradiction of our times: that between disinterested and pleasurable fruition of beauty and instrumental rationality, subordinate to calculation, exactitude and effectiveness. In Architectural history this interiorized contradiction will place in opposite sides, for example, a Corbusier and the phenomenological current – the former talking about calculable human needs, the latter searching for an organic spontaneous order of places in the city, its monuments, houses and buildings,

¹ HUSSERL, E. *Logique Formale et logique transcendentale*. Trad. Suzanne Bachelard. Paris: PUF, 1965, p. 228.

inspired by the creational heedless power of life. However both try to ground Architecture on foundations external to its own concepts - in a creational spontaneity underlying urban life or on the rich knowledge about man that equates the universal needs to which Architecture should provide an answer.

These preliminary considerations bring us back to the core of the issue. It has been stated above that the phenomenological reflection falls upon Architecture's pre-reflexive foundation, i.e., upon the experience of dwelling that makes up the specific or "regional" ontological field from which stems the science/art discussed here. It has also been stated that, in moments of crisis, sciences tend to return to their unthought-of grounds in order to clarify their respective regulating ideals. Architecture's crisis lies on this double connection that places it in the boundary between aesthetics and technique. The return to the phenomenological and existential experience of dwelling will make it possible to define the meaning of architectural rendering by dropping such dichotomy and retrieving the times when functionalism and the fruition of beauty occurred simultaneously.

As it is a primitive and familiar way of being-somewhere, not loaded with philosophical concepts, dwelling allows the understanding of other kinds of relationships experienced between soul and body, meaning and speech, space and time among other irreconcilable conceptual dichotomies that have formed man's thought along the Western metaphysical tradition. The experience of dwelling – to which Merleau-Ponty has repeatedly drawn attention – defines a kind of relationship where two terms are essentially imbricated, are intertwined in an amalgama from which they can only be distinguished through abstraction. Thus the impossibility of considering man outside his original roots in the world sets the guidelines for the phenomenological reflection on the relationships between subject and object.

II DWELLING

As previously stated, the act of dwelling is something whose meaning is known to all of us in a non-conceptual or practical way because it is a fundamental dimension of existence. The house is assuredly the most patent sphere where the phenomenon of practical vision – or perceiving one's own surroundings – that defines the main categories of Heidegger's pragmatics of "Being and Time" occurs. *The world of daily life is the horizon where the tasks of existence and the references that articulate themselves between things starting from the former unfold.* Being-in-the-world means, according to Heidegger, "the unthought-of focus, guided by practical vision, on references

that make up the manual actions of an instrumental whole”.² Thus the sphere of practical vision, of settling oneself, establishes the distance that originates from things and determines as well the **way** to access them, because it has always been previously oriented by the tasks actually carried out. Therefore the objects receive a certain **orientation** or even better a certain **oriented arrangement**. Heidegger’s book is open on my right-hand side because I am right-handed and I am working with it now. But the effective orientation, in its ontological sense, that the utensil receives in life is concerned mainly with its *raison d’être*.

Near is that towards which existence extends itself, towards which it is “turned” and directed. “All places”, writes Heidegger, are discovered and interpreted by perceiving one’s own surroundings, through paths and ways of dealing with daily life, not acknowledged and numbered by reading and measuring spaces”³. The places originally the site from which something comes towards us, opened by worries. Before being inhabited, the dwelling place is always pre-occupied. The resident’s look has the pre-determining form of looking-around-in-search-of-something oriented, in practice, by the worry of carrying out a task.

This was the kind of experienced knowledge referred to by Saint Augustine in “Confessions”, when he stated that he knew what time was without being able to define or conceptualize it, should he be asked to do so. Very well, if that is the case we can, initially, relinquish Architecture, all technical knowledge, all acquired engineering and even the whole historical experience not immediately sedimented in what is aimed at by consciousness, when we question the **experience of dwelling**. According to Henry Lefebvre, this experience was often replaced by the **place of dwelling**.

“Dwelling”, - writes the French philosopher – “a millenarian practice incorrectly and inadequately expressed in language and concept, more or less alive or decadent, but one that continued being concrete... has disappeared from thought and deteriorated considerably in the practice of the prevalence of the place of dwelling, and Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s philosophical mediation [have been necessary] to try to retrieve the meaning of dwelling”⁴

Facing this crisis, Architecture should review its concepts returning to the experience of residing. To speak as Husserl would require to place in **parenthesis** every statement and judgment not originally founded on the intuition of what is aimed at – here the act of dwelling, itself. Evidently Phenomenology would not be able to explain the infinite empirical, social and historical

² El ser y el tiempo. México: Fondo de Cultura, 1984, § 16, p. 119.

³ HEIDEGGER, 1984, § 22, p. 151

⁴ LEFEBVRE, 1978, p. 88.

practices of dwelling. This dwelling under consideration is, first of all, a simple eidetic possibility obtained through imaginary variation from the phenomenologically understood experience of dwelling, i.e. someone's own experience from which all meaning that does not correspond to an intuitive given is removed.

Thus the transitivity of dwelling becomes, above all, evidently visible: *dwelling is taking hold of a place in the world, occupying it in movement* (there is no existence without movement). Occupying a place in such a way that one secures it by settling down and projecting one's own worries there makes it a *place*, i.e. an existentially determined space with its ups and downs, sides, borders, proximities and distances, light and shadow, and at last its affective aspect (fearful, comfortable, etc.). It becomes, within its existential pre-visibility, a horizon also unfolded in time, a space with its past (where footprints, arrangements, etc. can be seen) and its future, *where* I expect something to happen and where something is actually happening now. If man is a "being-in-the-world" he will never be "without a place". Existence, corporality and world form one and indiscriminate structure with the "eks-stática" triad of temporality (past, present and future).

But such determinations of the inhabited place – the here, the now, the affective aspect – only make sense in relation to corporality. By means of its power of abstraction, universalization and idealization thought makes us open to all possible worlds, to all and none of the places. Only the body takes roots. Therefore **dwelling denotes essentially the appropriation of the space that determines the body, as a site or place, in relation to its experienced corporality**. Geometrical space, with its rigorously precise points, absolute coordinates and measurable distances, a pure construct of thought, is not inhabitable even though several exact sciences are frequently used for building houses, streets and cities. Spatial concepts determined by geometry are often inhuman.⁵

It now becomes clear that first we dwell in the world itself. Man is a being-in-the-world (*Sein-in-der-Welt*). It is not the case here to discuss all the implications of this fundamental concept of Phenomenology. We are merely interested in emphasizing its relationship with the dwelling place. Thus being-in-the-world means, for man, to inhabit the world in an essential way, not in a contingent one. In fact, existence could not occur as such giving itself from its own experience of being, but as a way of existing being in the world – in this opening through which man is for himself.

But this "world" we inhabit originally must not be conceived as a space that holds everything, as a universal vessel or container. The world is, above all, a horizon of presence, of manifestation and visibility in a way that being in the world is being open to this horizon from

⁵ Take the disobedience of pedestrians in relation to geometrically designed pathways, opening up paths in the middle of flower beds in parks, avoiding crosswalks, etc.

which things and people come to meet us, and not closed within oneself bound to truths, certainties and ideas that would reencounter the things of which they are representations, by means of an internal, mysterious agreement of thought – or consciousness – with the being, assured by God.

Criticizing the *cogito* Husserl observes that consciousness – considered naïvely as the internal sign of the self, the “internal consciousness” – is intentionality, i.e. the consciousness of something that is not itself. Sartre goes as far as saying that consciousness does not have any interiority, it is born “transported by a being that is not itself”.⁶ “I am for myself being in the world”, writes Merleau-Ponty⁷ because being for oneself is above all recovering the irreflected existence one already is and, as such, in relation to the world.

The opening of consciousness, i.e. of a first plan of externalism, is therefore the phenomenological field where the ego's and subjective life's being unfolds. It is the radical externalism of the essence of consciousness, in relation to oneself, that can never reveal “to itself” the “self” that originally constitutes it. This originates the identification of man with nothingness in Sartre and Heidegger, when the former identifies nothingness with “human reality (considered) in itself”⁸ or when the latter states that “man's essence belongs to nihilism's essence”.⁹ Man is made, therefore, from his freedom, in the opening and externalism of his world's horizon. Living is, above all, taking hold of a world *from which* I find myself.

The body proper belongs to this same way of being of consciousness if the identical notion of intentionality is extended to it. This being the case, corporality no longer could be defined by means of the disorderly experience of synesthetic sensations. My body is open to the world's horizon and to things that come towards me from it in such a way that, if I accept the experience of corporality, as it is given me, I can see that it is always a certain attitude, i.e. a position towards the world and the others. Thus whether the body or consciousness is considered, we always find out that they are aiming at something, according to a certain affective tone, if it is the former or an attitude towards the world if it is the latter. That is why existence always encompasses something.

In fact the determinations of existence are all types of relationships with the others and the world that depend, on their turn, upon historical and social determinations we do not choose (social class, family, country of origin, etc.). This is what Sartre calls facticity. It must not be considered as an obstacle or limitation to freedom but from the point of view of implicit task in the possession that also leads us to the issue of recognition. In fact, if inhabiting the world means first

⁶ SARTRE, J-P. L'Être et le Néant. Paris: Gallimard, 1956, p. 128.

⁷ Phénoménologie de la perception. Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 466.

⁸ SARTRE, 1956, p. 230.

⁹ Sobre o problema do ser. Trad. Ernildo Stein, São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1969, p. 54.

to take hold of one's own existence always being one, then such inhabiting is also a task that can both succeed ("adaptation" to the real situation)¹⁰ and fail. This is the case, for example, of madness, suicide or rebellion.

Stating this concept more precisely let us say that dwelling incurs a certain circumscription or delimitation of the world as the perception that always distinguishes figure and background by considering the figure that is seen as if it were a relief in relation to the background. Thus the inhabited space emerges as a kind of casting anchor of existence in the world's horizon: shelter, refuge, residence, hiding place, a casting of anchor that is necessary exactly because the world is determined as a horizon.

But the term horizon does not mean simply a limitation for existence. The horizon is the limit of space man can never reach because it is, simultaneously, what in retrospect seduces us to distances and futures. It is the field of unfoldings where existence is projected through desire. It is an unreachable limit and opening space and as such that which allows man to find himself in the world just as he is in his own house once the horizon encompasses spaces and determines it as a *surrounding finite world reached by vision*.¹¹

Perspective is inseparable from the experience of horizon. It defines man's taking roots in its opening, the "point" from which things are organized as far as worries and projects of existence are concerned. But this sense of the concept has nothing to do with the problems of pictorial representation and particularly with perspective in Architecture because a certain affective tone is also perspective – as any type of vision (intellectual, practical, aesthetic, etc.). Thus perspective does not correspond to the limitation of vision in relation to a given point, a limitation that should be surpassed in order to reach a totaling understanding as can be obtained through the idea or the concept. Acting in such a way we would imitate the bird referred to by Kant in the "Introduction" to "Critique of pure reason" that, feeling the air resistance, imagined it could fly more easily in the vacuum. On the contrary, perceiving is seeing in perspective. Vision is finite because perspective is the ontological determination of the horizon to which it is originally open.

Thus the concept of perspective refers to a sense of world experience in which "physical" space and that of existence are indissolubly undetermined once seeing is directing one's look over things from the world's horizon, from a place in space but, above all, according to a certain previous understanding some prefer to call *pre-conception*. This term may cause mistakes since it presents the previous understanding of the world horizon as something preceding

¹⁰ In the sense used here the term adaptation does not exclude, evidently, the possibility of critical distancing and transforming engagement of the situation of existence in general.

¹¹ Cf. BOLLNOW, F. *Hombre y espacio*. Barcelona: Labor, 1969, p. 73 e segts.

conceptual vision with the purpose, one might say, of overcoming the familiarity of our **commerce** with it. Quite contrarily, pre-understanding is the originary space where existence itself unfolds previously to all reflection, all tethic consciousness or construction of thought and even previously to language. It is an understanding in the sense of a manipulation capacity that allows us to have a good relationship with things and the world. To comprehend or understand something means less a kind of knowledge than a placing or finding oneself in the world. We live so intensely in this daily understanding, in the “elementary, interpreting pre-understanding of things in our environment at the level of *Dasein*” that it remains unexpressed, as a way of being, and non-thematic for itself. “In spite of all things and occurrences we deal with in our vital world, they are pre-interpreted from this preceding understanding as objects for this or that purpose”.¹²

We frequently find in Architecture this same retroactive movement towards a non-conceptual foundation of its own rendering that would be able to support a radical reform of itself under the guise of the search of the primitive idea of dwelling. This idea would finally give rise to a genuine understanding of architectural forms.

“No doubt almost everyone agrees with something. If the renewal of Architecture is necessary, if its authentic function should be reinterpreted after years of disregard, the return to the pre-conscious state of building – or alternatively – to the origin of consciousness will make explicit those primary ideas from which emerges a genuine understanding of those architectural forms”.¹³

This idea of returning to the origins that was, mainly in the 18th century, the previous condition for all systematic thought will make Architecture, in the first place, depend upon the knowledge of the *archetypical house*. Speculations on the essence of construction send us back to the idea of the primitive shack that revealed the adequate relationship between man and the world. This “perfect” construction is also presented as a forever lost object that leads us to the religious view that considers human existence as a degrading from the original and paradisiacal state of grace.¹⁴ Like all human techniques and arts, Architecture would also result from a state of lack to which mankind would have been condemned because of its promethean arrogance or sin. Therefore it would be necessary to retrieve Adam’s house in paradise – an exemplary dwelling.

¹² GRONDIN, J. Introdução à hermenêutica. São Leopoldo: UNISINOS, 1999, p. 161

¹³ RIKWERT, J. La casa de Adán en el paraíso. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1974, p. 34.

¹⁴ RYKWERT, 1974, p. 56.

This attitude presupposes that the concept of house must necessarily take an original, an archetypical model. We shall not insist here upon the equivocal character of this procedure. We only intend to show how phenomenology proposes a return to the issue of the grounds of architectural thought by means of the open way of the experience of dwelling. It is not the case of recovering the exemplary form of an impossible paradisiacal dwelling place, but of paying attention to the several ways of man being present in the world and his house.