

Between the Lines: Poetic Imagination and Architecture that Moves Us

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Introduction

*where light enters through broken
windows full of dust they walk
silently through empty halls
they hear the former voices
former footsteps on a floor
in numbers on concrete
in rusty rails, the traces
this all has ended years ago*

and yet: imagine

*a window, a view over the city,
a mezzanine, a desk to write, a wooden floor,
a curtain, a classroom, stairs, an opening, a door
behind that door new life begins. ¹*

This brief poem was an impression of a workshop in 2013 that took place at the former flour factory in Leiden, the Netherlands, a building that was planned to be renovated by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor. We walked through the factory with Finnish Juhani Pallasmaa, and were to meet Peter Zumthor and the German philosopher Gernot Böhme the philosopher who in the German tradition of Schilling and Schmarchow investigated the theme of Stimmung or atmosphere and related it to architecture². Later in the evening in Amsterdam, we held a public debate about the topic of atmosphere at the occasion of the release of the new issue of architecture journal OASE we prepared on the topic with these three experts: Juhani Pallasmaa, Peter Zumthor, Gernot Böhme³. The lecture hall that evening was packed, not only with academics but as well with many practicing architects. For me, this was an example of an editorial project that brought to the stage of both academia and practice, the importance to address such ambiguous themes as atmosphere in architecture, themes that are difficult to define in purely scientific terms but that are key to understand and produce meaningful architecture. Indeed, the affective relationships that people establish with places are simultaneously conscious and embodied, material and conceptual, spatial and temporal – relations, that may not be easy to pin down immediately in scientific terms. Some of the leading concepts of my work in the past years, such as narrative, experience and atmosphere may sound elusive, but I see it as exactly their strength that they cut across different registers and disciplines. Perhaps the most important task of the architect is to mediate between different disciplines, different ways of thinking and doing – and that of us, architectural writers and academics, to find the right language to do so. For my contribution to this edition of *Architecture, Culture and Spirituality*, I would like to take you to the world of poetry, as it is through poetic imagination that we may be able to deal with architecture's elusive qualities as a discipline that affects how we experience our daily environment both mentally and physically.

To Move

In *Vers Une Architecture*, written in 1924, Le Corbusier stated that “the purpose of construction is to make things hold together, of architecture to move us”⁴. What is striking in this quote is the double meaning of the word *émouvoir*, to move, as it can refer to both physical movement and to being moved mentally and emotionally. It is these two aspects of being moved, that I hope to link in this contribution. I will investigate the capacity of poetic imagination to move us, in a physical as well as spiritual sense, arguing that literary language that may offer a mediating position between embodied experience and existential thought. I will draw upon the capacity of poetic language to touch upon architectural perception, and to capture the spiritual qualities of architectures that are able to move us. How architecture moves us, both physically and mentally, is what architect and philosopher Sarah Robinson recently addressed in *Architecture is a Verb*: “what a building *does*, how we feel and sense according to our buildings, how they afford and reinforce gestures and modes of perception”.⁵ In her view, architecture is active, it acts upon its users, and therefore it could be regarded a verb rather than a noun.

Remarkably, the performance of architecture is often seen on a mere technological level, measuring energy efficiency, for instance. While these issues are of course relevant, the more experiential and spiritual aspects of architectural performance are often overlooked. My plea in this contribution, is to re-establish links between technology, art and literature technology by looking into the potential of poetic imagination, as rooted in the Greek word *poiesis* which links imagination and the craft of making. Any building is used and experienced by people, with their senses, their bodies and minds, buildings are part of people’s everyday lives, of their memories and their stories. The effect that architecture has on people, how people move through buildings and how buildings move them, caused by their very composition, construction, materiality and their perceptual qualities, is crucial to consider as a responsibility for architects, who *imagine* future buildings. The discussion on how buildings perform should thus play at different levels, the technological, the experiential, the cultural, and the spiritual, and it is in *poiesis* that these may come together.

Narrative and Poetic Imagination

Design is by definition an act of imagination: architects imagine something that does not yet exist, they *imagine* a future reality. It takes imagination to think about how existing spatial realities may evolve in time, and it takes imagination to develop ideas for possible futures. Literary writers, with their imagined worlds, offer possible viewpoints, imagined alternatives to reality. The surrealist writers such as Andre Bréton and Louis Aragon celebrated the transcendence of reality, and magical realist writers, such as Gabriel García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier and Isabel Allende, sought to acknowledge the magical dimension of reality. Utopian and dystopian novels could be seen as extrapolations of certain aspects of society. Georges Orwell’s *1984*, for instance, could be seen as critique on tendencies of surveillance and control, or Kafka’s *The Castle*, a critique on the excesses of bureaucracy. Novels are means to criticize societal developments, and to speculate on possible futures- desired ones or feared ones. Each story is thus a response to reality, an imagination that is rooted in reality. Building upon the work of theorists of narrative imagination, such as Paul Ricoeur and David Herman, the Belgian professor of comparative literature Bart Keunen suggested that for an imaginary construction to evoke a lived experience, attention to details is important: there should be enough details to construct a whole, and to be ‘immersed’ in the imagined situation.⁶ Likewise, we could argue, architectural imagination is rooted in the real, responds to questions that emerge from reality, while providing details that can evoke embodied and emotional ‘movement’.

Both in the natural sciences and in artistic fields, processes of invention often pair a meticulous observation of reality with the imagination of alternative possibilities. As Pallasmaa argued, that “the poetic image exists simultaneously in two realities: the physical reality of perception and the

'unreal' realm of imagination", and goes on to say that it is precisely this simultaneity, of being both real and imagined, that renders such power to artistic works.⁷ In these poetic descriptions, a fused understanding of temporality can be at stake, as remembering and imagining can happen simultaneously. Poetic imagination is the capacity to read reality in a detailed and meticulous way, revealing clues that open to new imaginations of that reality. As Alberto Pérez-Gómez stated, it is the task of architecture to unveil place, capturing its layers of history and local culture, the "deep emotional and narrative that articulate places".⁸ Also Pérez-Gómez relates architecture to poetry, stating that both significant architecture and a "true poetic work" are both not a reduction of reality but quite the opposite: "a depiction of reality that enlarges our existential horizon by augmenting it with meaning intrinsic to its own universe of discourse".⁹

Philosopher Richard Kearney argues that imagination has both an ethical and a poetical dimension, connecting *ethos* and *poiesis*.¹⁰ If we take this to architecture, the ethical dimension of imagination points at the responsibility for architecture to collaborate, and to build trust among people. It is a call to care for sites, situations, communities and resources. The poetic dimension of imagination refers to the idea of inventive making, and making possible. It means having an open mind to alternative situations – and as architects and spatial thinkers we need to explore such possibilities. Poetic imagination renders possible to develop perspectives of what might be: innovative ideas emerge when seemingly unconnected ideas, images or strands of knowledge momentarily resolve. This notion of the possible also opens to trans-subjectivity and empathy, as it is through the poem that a reader can "imagine oneself in the other person's skin, to see *as if* one were, momentarily at least, another"¹¹. Here, poetic-ethical imagination becomes also a social project: what is at stake is not a merely individual artistic form of imagination, but an imagination that considers the perspective of the other, as Kearney makes clear "the poetico-ethical imagination we are advancing is above all an empathic imagination: versatile, open-minded, prepared to dialogue with what it not itself, with its other, to welcome the difference".¹² In *The Embodied Image*, Juhani Pallasmaa stated that "without imagination, we would not have our sense of empathy and compassion, or an inkling of the future."¹³

Embodied Experience

In architecture, the poetics is often found in the details, in the way things are made: in the way materials meet, in the way our presence in space sounds, in textures, shadows, light and reflection. It is this aspect of perception, our engagement with the material world, that is often expressed in poetry. In poems, we often find detailed descriptions of architectural spaces and details, expressing how materials meet, how objects move in wind, how our footsteps sound on a floor, the steps on a stairwell, how the light falls on walls. A poem metaphorically takes the reader somewhere, evoking embodied experiences of imagined places. Poetry evokes embodied experience, a poetic text makes the reader imagine the sounds, smells and other sensory experiences, upon reading or hearing a poem, one can have the impression of moving, shivering or trembling. Poetry thus evokes movement: in its form, sound, rhythm, its spatiality, it invites the reader to climb, descend, look, move, touch, hear, or smell. While the poem, through its meaning, can take the reader to a place, it has a spatial dimension in itself as well. More than a narrative text, a poem is spatially constructed, its shape and rhythm matter, it is its composition, including the white between the lines, that makes language dance, move, touch, and breathe.

Poets, Bachelard said, are phenomenologists par excellence because they note "that things 'speak' to them."¹⁴ A poetic attitude is simultaneously a phenomenological one, as being poetic means looking at the world around you with a certain receptivity, allowing us to see things as anew, with a sense of curiosity and wonder¹⁵. Poets are pre-eminently capable of perceiving the most ordinary things in an extraordinary way, finding unexpected connections between objects, subjects and atmospheres, between memory and imagination.

Poetry thus invites the reader to take part in spiritual experience and existential thought, where embodied experience of reality and the imagination of new situations, meanings and emotions come together. In my earlier work, I addressed how literary writing can address such thresholds of architectural experience, between subject and object, naivety and expertise, individual and collective, between parts and whole, between here and now and then¹⁶. It is as if the oppositions between reality and imagination, individual and collective, perception and thought, momentarily resolve. And sometimes, this happens precisely between the lines, in the silence, the pause, the unspoken. In 1972 Francis Ponge formulated it as follows, “Poets ... are the ambassadors of the silent world. As such, they stammer, they murmur, they sink into the darkness of logos - until at last they reach the level of *roots*, where things and formulas are one.”¹⁷ A poetic approach dissolves boundaries, breaks down dichotomies such as subject and object, as Bachelard noticed: “at the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions”.¹⁸ In this way, a poetic attitude to architecture, expressing how it moves us, in the double sense of the word, may offer productive ways to deal with, and even embrace ambiguities.

A Poetic Approach to Architectural Knowledge

In this brief contribution, I have made a plea for a *poetic* approach to architectural experience and architectural knowledge, and argued that it is through poetic language that experiential and spiritual aspects of architecture can be brought to the fore. Such an experiential take on architectural knowledge has gained momentum in recent studies on situatedness. Criticising the pragmatic and formal understanding of architecture that prevailed in the past decades, architecture scholar Dalibor Vesely advocated a new approach to architecture which he described as “situational”.¹⁹ The notion of situated knowledge, introduced by American philosopher Donna Haraway in 1984, arguing that every viewpoint is particular and situated has recently gained a lot of attention in discussions at schools of architecture world-wide²⁰. Sarah Robinson spoke of *situated poetics*, seeing the role of the architect as one “whose professionalism consists in responsibly interpreting, integrating and poetically responding to interdisciplinary facts”.²¹ This *situated* take on architecture can thus be understood as a call for an attentive attitude towards the particular and multi-layered components of a specific site or situation, its embodied experience and its multiple socially and culturally defined meanings. This attentive attitude, I argue, could be developed through poetic imagination – and not only to address the complexities and ambiguities of architectural experience, but also those of architectural knowledge.

The idea of reading between the lines also resonates with the recent discussion on tacit knowledge in architecture.²² Michael Polanyi addressed the false dichotomy between mind and body, introducing the notion of tacit knowledge, which concerns the knowledge that is imbedded in ways of doing, in embodied practices, and that as such, this knowledge is not easily expressed in theoretical language.²³ Here, the idea of embodied and practiced knowledge came to the fore, acknowledging that there are things that we know but cannot theorize. If scientific language may not be able to capture this unspoken, tacit knowledge, it is poetic language that may be able to do so. As A.S. Bessa explained, the French poet Mallarmé saw “writing poetry as a philosophical practice, a practical manner of thinking. Through writing, thinking takes form, expands, takes place”²⁴ By allowing poetic language in discourse on architectural knowledge, we may open up a path to include evocative descriptions of buildings, addressing lived experience and that may offer a mediating position between theory and practice.

Epilogue

between sand and stone
between dream and thought
between now and later and then

*between ever these same lines
we write and build
because the lines, inescapably
own us as we own them*

Endnotes

- ¹ The poems at the start and end of this paper are written by the author, and were published in Klaske Havik. *Way and Further* (Montreal: Right Angle Publishing, 2021)
- ² Böhme, Gernot *Architektur und Atmosphäre*, (München : Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006), Gernot Böhme. "Atmosphere as Mindful Physical Presence in Space", in OASE 91 op cit note 2.
- ³ Klaske Havik, Gus Tielens and Hans Teerds (eds.). *OASE 91, Building Atmosphere. With Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2013).
- ⁴ "L'architecture, c'est un fait d'art, une phenomene d'emotion ... La construction, c'est pour faire tenir, l'architecture c'est pour emouvoir." [Architecture is an object of art, a phenomenon of emotion.... Construction is to keep in place; architecture is to move.] Le Corbusier, *Vers Une Architecture* (Paris, Les éditions G. Crès et Cie. 1923), English translation from: *Towards a New Architecture*, (New York: Dover publications 1986), p.19.
- ⁵ Sarah Robinson. *Architecture is a Verb*, (New York and London: Routledge 2021) p. 9
- ⁶ Bart Keunen, "Learning from Stories. Narrative Imagination in Urbanism and Architectural Design", in Klaske Havik, Susana Oliveira et al (eds). *Writingplace, Investigations in Architecture and Literature* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2016), p 19-20
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92
- ⁸ Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2016), p. 108
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189
- ¹⁰ Richard Kearney. *The Wake of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1988/1994) p. 366
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 368
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 392
- ¹³ Juhani Pallasmaa. *The Embodied Image, Imagination and Imagery in Architecture* (Chichester/London: Wiley 2011), p. 11
- ¹⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1964 /1994)) p. xxviii
- ¹⁵ Klaske Havik. "How Places Speak. A Plea for Poetic Receptivity in Architectural Research" in Angeliki Sioli and Yoonchun Jung. *Reading Architecture. Literary Imagination and Architectural Experience*. (New York/London: Routledge 2018) p. 61-71
- ¹⁶ Klaske Havik "Writing Atmospheres. Literary Methods to Investigate the Thresholds of Architectural Experience" in Jonathan Charley (ed.). *The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and the City* (New York/London: Routledge 2019)
- ¹⁷ Francis Ponge *The Voice of Things* (New York: McGraw-Hill,1972), p 109-110
- ¹⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press,1994), p. xix
- ¹⁹ Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, (Boston: MIT Press 2004), p. 373
- ²⁰ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in *Feminist Studies*, 14 (3) (1988)
- ²¹ Robinson 2021, 12
- ²² Claudia Mareis, "The Epistemology of the Unspoken - On the Concept of Tacit Knowledge in Contemporary Design Research' Design Issues, Vol 28, No.2, 2021; Lara Schrijver (ed.) *The Tacit Dimension. Architecture Knowledge and Scientific Research* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021)
- ²³ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966/2009)
- ²⁴ A.S.Bessa, "Vers: Une Architecture" in María Eugenia Díaz Sánchez and Craig Douglas Dworkin, *Architectures of Poetry* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi 2004), p. 51