

***Beauty in Light of the Symbolic Form Myth.
A visit to Reima Pietila Architecture.***

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*Situated between self and thing, **beauty** is the primary **spiritual** manifestation of **architecture**. This paper adopts a Cassirerean approach, shedding light on beauty and architecture as originating in the symbolic form **Myth**, the most basic human way of relating man and world, finitude and infinity. Visiting the work of the Finnish architect Reima Pietila, connects **Myth, poetic dwelling, beauty and spirituality** as inseparable counterparts of **architectural making**.*

Cassirer's is a life-philosophy¹. The **relation between spirit and life**, between the spontaneous immediacy of life and the detached and deliberative character of spirit, is by his definition "the central problem of thought in recent times"². He sheds light on this problem by the five '**symbolic forms**', referring to all **spiritual energy** by virtue of which meaning is linked to a concrete sensible sign and innerly attributed to it³.

Mythos – the primary and most basic symbolic form, is **con-fused**, fusing together streams of experience, saturated with life and feeling: "*We are in the habit of dividing our life into the two spheres of the practical and the theoretical... we are prone to forget there is a lower stratum beneath both of them.... it is sympathetic*"⁴. The symbolic-form *art* gives the feelings shape and form. Thus, the close ties between *art* and *mythos*, and especially between **architecture as a form of art and mythos** because, according to Cassirer, **space is one of myth's dominant categories**. Existential distinction between inside and outside⁵, the sacred and the profane⁶, the material and the spiritual, the real and the symbolic, are spatial-architectural constitutions of conceptual and ontological constructions within *Mythos*. **Architecture is the spatial expression and incarnation of spiritual energy in Mythos, who is (yet) incapability of abstraction**; and the **essence of Mythical space** is the **spirit of place**.

In architectural making Mythos is always present because, as Cassirer asserts, “*Even in the life of civilized man it [myth] has by no means lost its original power*”⁷.

Furthermore: Benjamin’s distracted appreciation of architecture in the everyday life⁸ describes its mythical presence: saturated with meaning, though in a non-contoured way; impregnated with our own feelings⁹, forming a continuity with the self in the self’s deflected attention from the subject-object Modernist dualism.

Great works of architecture are always Mythical in the Cassirerean sense, binding together *life-world, poetic dwelling and the fourfold*¹⁰. Embracing the **fourfold** (Heavens, Earth, Divinities, Mortals) is the condition of *poetic dwelling* - the way humans are in the world, when they are "at home"; peaceful, caring for their place, appeased; *Dwelling* is poetic in the sense of *making*, and **poetical making is beautiful** because it is order and meaningfulness imposed on chaos, thus *beauty* is part of being at home, in harmony and serenity.

A profound example that highlights the manifestations of Mythos is the poetical making by the Finnish architect Reima Pietila¹¹. His own architectural expression is **gaining from the Finnish landscape** and his buildings are a **continuation of nature**, that he sees as an element of **genius loci – the spirit of place**, hence his neologism ‘*Nature-Architecture*’. At the Dipoli Conference Center, Otaniemi – says Pietila - the building needs back woods around itself in order to create the genius loci of *forest-urbanism*. Dipoli is the archetypal dwelling: the windows follow the Ur-form of protected entrance; The strongly protruding copper eaves that open out in bay-like forms represent cliffs, under which the Caveman builds his abode – reference to the Loulamieskilta and Jamera legends – hence architecture as **retelling of myth and imaginary identity with “Ur-Sache”**.

In the Tampere Central Public Library – “Metso” - the **topological characteristics** extend into a poetic scale. Recalling the natural history of Europe, the plan – three round centers joined by an arc - communicates the memory of the post-glacial rock landscape, hence Pietila’s neologism ‘*Object-Memory*’. The library as a whole resembles the capercaillie – Metzo – the Finnish totem-bird, associated also with

the martial Valkyrie carrying its shield, going off to war. As such, the mythical culture of Northern Europe forms the temporal depth of this architectural work, evoked by **abstract symbolism**. Both Dipoli and Metzo **vaguely convey the feeling of life**: the image of an earthbound creature, a dinosaur, is an inbuilt theme in the former, while the bird, the child of air and space - in the latter. In the Malmi Church the geomorphic architecture is saturated with “the relaxed mass” of a sleeping animal.

The **fourfold**, the primordial structure of the world, is recalled by Pietila in the Kaleva Church, Tampere. Here the spirit of place becomes metaphorical and the architectural imaginary communicates. “The church is “a limenphenomenon”: an ‘eternal-between-two-worlds’; a metaphor for ‘this-side-ness’ and ‘that-side-ness’ ... Kaleva Church is a functionalist building if we accept that its function is to be a metaphor of metaphysical ideas“¹²

Pietila speaks of peaceful coexistence with nature, of contextuality and balance. In the Lieksa Church he wills harmony and peaceful coexistence of elements. He does not require final inseparable unity and does not mention *beauty*; but if *beauty* is a way in which being reveals itself, a mode of truth (“*aletheia*”), a **recalling of the mystery of being**, then it is there, in his creative process: something that begins to appear from its concealment, a becoming that is only loosely trapped; that is concealed again if one approaches it too soon, too directly.

Heidegger was one of Pietila’s favorite philosophers¹³ (thus he was indirectly acquainted with Cassirer’s *Mythos*). His search for a deep truth, one beyond Modernist rationalism – is interpreted as overcoming insufficient forms of rationality¹⁴ and here it is suggested his architecture is a sought of spirituality.

¹ Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) was an influential Neo-Kantian philosopher in the mid- twentieth century. A forerunner of many ideas prevailing in critical theory and in architectural concerns in cultural theory, he was generally forgotten after his death; although some new interest in his writings has arisen in recent years, e.g. “The Body and Embodiment: Intersections of Imagery, Literature, and Science”. Symposium. Göteborg University 7-9 May 2004

“Communication in and beyond the concept of power, with particular reference to Ernst Cassirer's work on culture and communication”. Danish Centre for Philosophy and Science Studies, 2005

"Against Harmony," Ernst Cassirer Conference,. Yale University, 2006

² Schilpp, Paul (edit) *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, The Library of Living Philosophers. Mensha, Wis. Banta, 1949:858.

³According to Cassirer, there are five modes by which humans render order and meaning in the Heraclitic flux of appearances: *myth and religion, language, history, art and science*. These are the five ‘symbolic forms’ – or spiritual energies. Though not totally excluding each other, they activate distinct human capacities. No symbolic form is superior to any other in its truth-value, but the mythical is the primal one and the scientific - the latest; no culture is bereft of any of the five symbolic forms.

(Cassirer, 1975 in Mandoki, Katya. *Everyday Aesthetics*. Ashgate Pub Co. 2007:116)

⁴ Cassirer, Ernst . *An Essay on Man*. New York: Bantam Books 1970: 90

⁵ See also Mark Wigley’s interpretation of Semper’s woven cloth wall function as constituting community – “us”. Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001.

⁶ Ernst Cassirer, (1955) *The Philosophy of the Symbolic Form, vol. 2, Mythical Thought*. New Haven: Yale University Press , p.103-4

⁷ Cassirer, Ernst . *An Essay on Man*. New York: Bantam Books 1970: 89

⁸ Benjamin, Walter (1936) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

On website: <http://www.digitalartsinstitute.org/benjamin/benjamin5.html> part XV.

⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*. NewHaven: Yale University Press (1946) 1967:45

¹⁰ Heidegger was deeply influenced by Cassirer’s notions of *life-world, dwelling and fourfold*. See Ernst Cassirer, (1955) *The Philosophy of the Symbolic Form, vol. 2, Mythical Thought*. New Haven: Yale University Press pp. 85-110; and Heidegger, Martin. (1971) “Building Dwelling Thinking”. In *Poetry, Language, Thought* (trans. by Albert Hofstadter). New York: Harper Collins, pp. 141- 159.

¹¹ Norri Marja-Riitta (1985) Pietilä; Intermediate Zones in Modern Architecture, (exhibit catalogue), Museum of Finnish Architecture & Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä.

¹² Seminar on architecture and urban planning in Finland 1982 : Genius loci - a search for local identity. SAFA Helsinki : SAFA, [ca 1983].

¹³ Connah, Roger (1990) *Writing Architecture: Fantomas, Fragments, Fictions - An Architectural Journey Through the 20th Century*. MIT Press

¹⁴ Thorsten Otz-Bornstein. 'Play, Dream, and the Search for the "Real" Form of Dwelling: From Aalto to Ando'. <http://www.freewebs.com/botzbornsteinarticles/>