

The Practice as a Place (A Workshop)

Prem Chandavarkar
CnT Architects, Bengaluru, India
prem@cnt.co.in

Introduction: The Lack of a Critical and Rigorous Definition of 'Practice'

We talk a great deal about the practice of architecture, but we rarely give thought to the architecture of practice. Despite being the profession's modality for actualizing architecture, practice, as a concept, has received insufficient critical attention and definition. Two anecdotal models (or a mix of them) prevail:

1. *The Creative Personality* constitutes the cutting edge. When pioneering frontiers of the discipline are discussed, whether famous or not, specific individuals are usually named. Innovation in architecture is primarily perceived in personality-centric terms.
2. *The Business Organization* constitutes the mainstream and has led to the protocols of design process and contractual form that drive most practices.

Neither serves the profession adequately. The 'Business Organization' model lends stability to operating protocols but inherently prioritizes imperatives of management over quality of design. The 'Creative Personality' model has undoubtedly produced many wonderful works of architecture, but its prominence has inculcated a schizophrenic professional culture of heroes and followers rather than one of widespread mastery. Neither model offers clear replicable protocols on how architecture can offer value, transcendence, and ecological harmony to life.

This workshop will explore an alternative model that seeks the core of design value without being personality centric. The model, which is termed "The Practice as a Place", can be defined thus: *The practice is a democratic place for sheltering and nurturing the sacred spirit of humans and the world so that this spirit may be reified in architecture.*

Propositional Foundations of 'The Practice as a Place'

The idea of 'The Practice as a Place' is founded on six primary propositions:

1. *Although we are physical beings with bodies constituted from particles bound by laws of physics, those particles mysteriously cohere into a sacred spirit manifest in a consciousness that can dream, love, ideate, wonder, play, exchange, explore, and venerate.*¹
Science, for all its accomplishments, has made little progress in explaining how we receive this mystical gift. All we can do is gratefully acknowledge it and learn to revel in its grace.
2. *Our inner spirit tacitly knows the immeasurable as tangible reality.*
Louis Kahn is often quoted as having said, "A great building must begin with the immeasurable, must go through measurable means when it is being designed, and in the end it must be unmeasured." Achieving such an architecture of immeasurable quality seems to require resolving the paradoxical riddle of knowing, perhaps even measuring, the immeasurable. The resolution of this paradox comes from acknowledging that the immeasurable may not be intellectually definable but can be tangibly known experientially.

¹ Brian Greene, "This Tiny Slice of Eternity," interview by Krista Tippett, *The On Being Project*, American Public Media, Accessed July 15, 2021, Transcript. <https://onbeing.org/programs/brian-greene-this-tiny-slice-of-eternity/>

One sees this in the primordial facets of existence that make life worthwhile: love, joy, beauty, wonder, to name but a few. One would be hard pressed to conceptually define them, but when they are experienced they are indubitably known as manifest reality. Similarly, when the experience of the aura of great architecture or magnificent landscape silences us into humility and wonder, we affirm the reality of this aura when we see our companions in this experience being similarly moved.

3. *The powerful creativity of our sacred core reveals itself in ordinary and everyday actions.* John O'Donohue points out how the everyday act of speech is miraculously creative in the way we coax sound and meaning out of silence.² In a similar vein, within our daily routine, we display remarkable creativity in myriad ways: we walk and out of stillness we coax purpose; we focus our gaze and out of background we coax significance; we laugh and out of the mundane we coax joy; we love and out of solitude we coax community and conviviality; we dance and out of banality we coax rapture; we sing and out of sound we coax melody, we think and out of chaos we coax order.

This innate creative capacity we hold within us is so powerful, the terrain of potential it opens is so vast, that many of us get overwhelmed by its power, clinging instead to predefined refuges of certainty we stumble across. O'Donohue remarks, "One of the sad things today is that so many people are frightened by the wonder of their own presence. They are dying to tie themselves into a system, a role, or to an image, or to a predetermined identity that other people have actually settled on for them. This identity may be at total variance with the wild energies that are rising inside in their souls."³

4. *Our sacred spirit is the wind that fills our sails.* There are two ways of attaining significance in the world.⁴ The first is 'The Way of Self Power', where you pursue achievement through your internal capacities. This is, by far, the harder of the two ways; but is the way social and educational convention persuades us to adopt, treating the world as a frontier we must conquer by marshalling our own greatness. It is possible to do this, but the capacity to do so is available only to a privileged few who have been blessed with the necessary genius or caliber.

For the majority who are not born with such privilege, there is another, and easier, way: 'The Way of Other Power', in which one relies on an external power or grace. 'The Way of Self Power' is like climbing a mountain, where you must work hard to develop physical and mental strength and ability. Whereas 'The Way of Other Power' is like a sailboat that uses the grace of the wind to fill its sails to glide forward with relative ease. The innate spirit we are all blessed with, properly channeled, will be the wind that fills our sails.

Modern art and design are conventionally taught by asking students to deploy 'The Way of Self Power.' Whereas most hand craft in traditional societies accepts the blessing of a spirit that is beyond ego to operate by 'The Way of Other Power', and, when taken across the discipline, the average level of artistic quality and workmanship it achieves is higher than what we typically find in modern art and design.

² John O'Donohue, *Walking on the Pastures of Wonder: John O'Donohue in conversation with John Quinn* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2015)

³ Ibid., 28.

⁴ Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989), 132-133.

5. *This spirit is manifest in the world around us.*

We can never know ourselves without considering how we are called upon by others: self and otherness are inextricably intertwined.⁵ We see the echo of our inner spirit in others, thereby validating both ourselves and the other.

But we find echoes of inner spirit in other entities too, even those we may consider insentient. We find it in materials, and above all, in landscape. John O'Donohue writes, "One of the things that humans have done, and especially in western consciousness, is that we have hijacked all the primary mystical qualities for the human mind, and we have made this claim that only the human self has soul, that everything else is 'de-souled' or 'unsouled' as a result of that. I think that is an awful travesty, because landscape has a soul and a presence, and landscape – living in the mode of silence – is always wrapped in seamless prayer."⁶

We must accept that sacred spirit pervades the entire world, break free of modernity's distorted perception of the world as a passive resource for our enjoyment, and recognise a re-enchanted world imbued with a spirit we revere because it echoes our innermost being.⁷

Christopher Alexander delineates how every meaningful work of architecture is anchored in a greater wholeness,

"In any part of what we call nature, or any part of a building, we see, at many levels of scale, coherent entities or centers, nested in each other, and overlapping each other. These coherent entities all have, in varying degree, some quality of 'life.'

For any given center, this quality of life comes about as a result of cooperation between the other living centers at several scales, which surround it, which contain it, and which appear within it. The degree of life any one center has, depends directly on the degree of life that is in its associated centers at these different scales. In short, I had identified a kind of wholeness: in which the life of any given entity depended on the extent to which that entity had unfolded from the wholeness."⁸

This requires a rethink on the source of a work's aura, shifting from the conventional assumption of it springing from individual genius to acknowledgment of how the artist recognizes and channels the spirit of the world. As Joseph Rykwert, speaking on Rudolf Steiner, observes, "The fundamental doctrine, which Steiner claimed to have found through – rather than in – Goethe, was that the artist does not (as Hegel thought) make a sensory phenomenon out of an idea; but on the contrary, he shapes the sensory phenomenon into an idea. The artist's work does not open the doors for the spirit to enter everyday life; on the contrary, he raises the everyday to the spiritual plane, he releases the spiritual content of physical reality."⁹

6. *The 'practice as a place' nurtures embodied practices that validate, reify, and refine sacred spirit.*

Given the sacred dimension of inner spirit is immeasurable, our bodies always know more than they can tell, and all practices are inherently embodied, deploying the full range of

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

⁶ O'Donohue, *Walking on the Pastures of Wonder*, 66.

⁷ Morris Berman, *The Re-Enchantment of the World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981)

⁸ Christopher Alexander, *The Long Path that Leads from the Making of Our World to God*, Accessed 15 April, 2022, <https://www.buildingbeauty.org/resource-center-entries/2019/8/6/christopher-alexander-the-long-path-that-leads-from-the-making-of-our-world-to-god>

⁹ Joseph Rykwert, "The Dark Side of the Bauhaus" in *The Necessity of Artifice* (London: Academy Editions, 1982), 47.

memory: brain, gut, muscle, bone.¹⁰ As bodies within a practice interact with each other, with stakeholders in the project, with sites and landscapes, with materials, if they simultaneously acknowledge and share sacred spirit, they validate and refine that spirit.

Further, spirit is reified in various forms of work product: intermediate forms such as drawings, notes, models, theories, and so on, as well as in the final form of built work. These reifications, through their exactitude that stands apart from the chaos of unstructured experience, form beacons and anchors that shape the interactions of practice.

Over time, as inner and outer spirit converse, as spirit converses with its reifications, the ensuing repetitive practices train the cognizance of spirit to a refinement that empowers emergence of new perceptions that went unrecognized earlier, either because one had not been looking for them, did not have the training to see them, or had not acquired the discernment to admit the power of subtlety and/or organic complexity. This distilled cognition emancipates spirit's potential, causing a shift from claims of expertise to immersion in wonder, from pedestals of knowledge to sanctuaries of wisdom, and from the desire for individual glory to the fulfilment of personal mastery.¹¹

Workshop Structure

The 90-minute workshop is designed for 3 or 4 groups of not more than 5 persons each, making a maximum of 20 participants. Each group will independently critique, rework and expand the original hypothesis to generate further reflections on the idea of 'the practice as a place'.

The workshop will be structured into the following sessions:

1. Launch: Introduction of theme, underlying propositions, and preliminary discussion (10 minutes).
2. Guided Meditation: To ground participants in their sacred core so that it may feed into workshop deliberations (10 minutes).
3. Group Work: A brainstorming charette by each group to reflect on the idea of the practice as a place that nurtures and reifies sacred spirit (30 minutes). This will be broken into the following sessions:
 - a. Shared dimensions of sacred spirit (10 minutes).
 - b. Individual and shared practices, founded on these shared dimensions, that reinforce the presence of sacred spirit in design practice (10 minutes).
 - c. Summarizing of thoughts (10 minutes).
4. Sharing: Short presentations by each group sharing their thoughts (20 minutes).
5. Reflection: Discussion on group output and speculation on future directions (20 minutes).

Given that a topic of this depth can never be adequately covered in 90 minutes, the workshop's goal is to provoke inquiry on how the 'architecture of practice' can shelter, nurture, and reify sacred spirit rather than to arrive at comprehensive conclusions.

¹⁰ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009)

¹¹ Prem Chandavarkar, "Wonder, Wisdom, and Mastery in Architecture" in *Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality*, eds. Thomas Barrie, Julio Bermudez, and Phillip James Tabb (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 211-220.