

Notes on the Source of Continuity in Architecture

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

Architecture and the Inner Self of the Architect

Frank Lloyd Wright's proposition of 'continuity' implies a transcendent architecture: if surroundings are inseparable from the work, architecture scales all the way to infinity. But what do we understand as 'continuity' and where does it spring from? Does it spring from the attributes of architecture, or from the inner self of the architect?

In some of his writings, Wright places the source of continuity in tectonic attributes of architecture, as evidenced in the following statements:

I promoted plasticity as conceived by Lieber Meister to continuity in the concept of the building as a whole....So why not throw away entirely all implications of post and beam construction? Have no posts, no columns, no pilasters, cornices or moldings or ornament; no divisions of the sort nor allow any fixtures whatever to enter as something added to the structure.....Instead of many things, one thing.¹

Where the beam leaves off and the post begins is no longer important nor need it be seen at all because it no longer actually is. Steel in tension enables the support to slide into the supported, or the supported to grow into the support somewhat as a tree branch glides out of its tree trunk. Therefrom arises the new series of interior physical reactions I am calling "Continuity".²

In integral architecture the room-space must be seen as architecture, or we have no architecture. We have no longer an outside as outside. We have no longer an outside and an inside as two separate things. Now the outside may come inside, and the inside may and does go outside. They are of each other.....it is in the nature of any organic building to grow from its site, come out of the ground into the light – the ground itself held always as a component basic part of the building itself.³

But were the full import of continuity in architecture to be grasped, aesthetic and structure become completely one, it would continue to revolutionize the use and wont of our machine age architecture, making it superior in harmony and beauty to any architecture, Gothic or Greek. This ideal at work upon materials by nature of the process or tools used means a living architecture in a new age, organic architecture, the only architecture that can live and let live because it can never become a mere style.⁴

An assumption that attributes of architecture define the disciplinary core of design has always been a prevalent trend. It is found in analyses that do not necessarily seek a transcendent

¹ Frank Lloyd Wright, "The Natural House" in *The Essential Frank Lloyd Wright: Critical Writings on Architecture*, ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 322.

² Wright, "The Natural House", 334.

³ Wright, "The Natural House", 332

⁴ Wright, "The Natural House", 321.

dimension, such as Ching⁵ or Venturi;⁶ and is also the method adopted when seeking the transcendental, such as Norberg-Schulz^{7, 8} and Alexander.⁹ This springs from an Enlightenment quest for rational detachment, suspicious of the inner self of the artist as subjective, non-replicable, and therefore to be excluded from epistemological foundations. If transcendentalists, like Norberg-Schulz, propose a phenomenological approach that modifies a purely rational model to include human consciousness, analysis still seeks objectivity, building on the philosophy of Heidegger¹⁰ and focusing on the inhabitant's existential anchors rather than the architect's inner compulsions.

But Wright also spoke of another perspective on continuity, one with a spiritual focus, when he wrote, "To get continuity in the whole, eliminating all constructed features just as Louis Sullivan eliminated background in his ornament in favor of an integral sense of the whole. Here the promotion of an idea from the material to the spiritual plane began to have consequences."¹¹ This spiritual dimension was not objective, it was intensely personal, and more significantly sourced from within himself. He elaborated on this spiritual dimension, saying:

Constantly I have referred to a more 'humane' architecture, so I will try to explain what humane means to me, an architect. Like organic architecture, the quality of humanity is interior to man. As the solar system is reckoned in terms of light-years, so may the inner light be what we are calling humanity. This element, Man as light, is beyond all reckoning.¹²

Mankind has various names for this interior light, "the soul" for instance.....And so when Jesus said "the kingdom of God is within you," I believe this is what he meant. But his disciples betrayed his meaning when they removed the Father, supreme light, from within the human heart to inhabit a realm of his own, because it was too difficult for human beings to find faith in man. So Christianity, itself misled, put out the interior light in order to organize worship of life as exterior light. Man is now too subject to his intellect instead of true to his own spirit. Whenever this inner light of the man is submerged in the darkness of discord and failure, he has invented "Satan" to explain the shadow. Insofar as light becomes thus inorganic, humanity will never discover the unity of mankind. Only by interior light is this possible.¹³

A different, yet foundational, source of transcendent continuity is posited here; one that has remained relatively unexplored in the profession. Being interior to humanity and beyond reckoning, the first site of inquiry can only be an experiential exploration by the architect of his/her own interior, expanding outward from there toward continuity with a humane architecture. The architect must now be included in a philosophical appraisal of how architecture comes to be. To explore this aspect, it is necessary to look at the levels at which humans encounter the world.

⁵ Francis D.K. Ching, *Architecture: Form, Space, & Order, 4th Edition* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014)

⁶ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art Press, 1966)

⁷ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space, and Architecture* (London: Praeger Publishers, 1971)

⁸ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980)

⁹ Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe, Book One, The Phenomenon of Life* (Berkeley: The Center for Environmental Structure, 2002)

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), 141-160.

¹¹ Frank Lloyd Wright, "The Natural House", 331.

¹² Frank Lloyd Wright, "A Testament" In *The Essential Frank Lloyd Wright: Critical Writings on Architecture*, ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 438.

¹³ Wright, "A Testament", 438-439

Humans in the World: Levels of Encounter

In the introduction to their edited collection of essays on the study of consciousness,¹⁴ Francisco Varela and Jonathan Shear identify three levels at which humans encounter the world:

1. First-Person Experience: This is the personal experience of internal cognitive and mental states through which one has primary access to the world. What one knows at this level may be appreciated, but never fully known in the exact same form, by another. We often refer to this level as 'consciousness', and it is a poorly understood notion in Western rational epistemology.
2. Third-Person Accounts: These are seen as independent of any one person's experience. They may be physical, such as objects in the world, works of art and architecture, or texts, but also include intangible manifestations such as concepts, theories, memes, belief systems, shared identities, auras, etc. Every person's perception of them may not be identical, but the overlap is sufficient for a group of persons to acknowledge their independent existence as the foundation for what we call 'reality'.
3. Second-Person Mediation: Exchanges, conversations, interactions with others, which can be one-on-one conversations or group dialogues. Often, the engagement is with teachers, or persons with greater expertise or wisdom, and the exchange serves to enrich the relationship between the self and the world.

To speak about the architect's interior is to speak of first-person experience, whereas to dwell on attributes of architecture is to articulate third-person accounts. Mainstream academia pursues a rational definition of truth that focuses on third-person accounts, fearing that inclusion of first-person experience in epistemological models will lead to subjectivity and bias. This consequently sidelines the role played by second-person mediation, also leading to an impoverished perception of human experience. An existential authenticity known only through personalized sensory experience is ignored. More significantly, a connection is lost with an infinite creative power that we use on an everyday basis that lives within each one of us: when we speak we coax meaning out of silence, when we dance we coax beauty out of stillness, when we love we coax community and conviviality out of solitude. This redoubtable creativity should evoke wonder within us, but is so powerful that we have to learn how to come to terms with it, and are not always successful in doing so. As John O'Donohue remarks, "One of the sad things 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, an image or a predetermined identity that other people have actually settled for them."¹⁵

This misperception erodes the core of the design process: (a) the value of tacit knowledge¹⁶ receives insufficient recognition; (b) poor acknowledgment of tacit knowledge pushes the transcendental to the background;¹⁷ and (c) the profession valorizes a perception of architecture where interpretation is privileged over experience, obstructing a true quest for continuity.¹⁸

Foundational significance should not be assigned to any singular level of human encounter with the world. First-person experience, second-person mediation and third-person accounts are

¹⁴ Francisco Varela and Jonathan Shear, eds., *The View from Within: First-Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness* (Bowling Green: Imprint Academic, 2002),

¹⁵ John O'Donohue, *Walking on the Pastures of Wonder*, in conversation with John Quinn (Dublin: Veritas, 2015), 15

¹⁶ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009)

¹⁷ Michael Polanyi, "Transcendence and Self-Transcendence", *Soundings*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Spring 1970), 88-94.

¹⁸ David Heymann, "A Mound in the Wood", Accessed 4 January 2019, <https://placesjournal.org/article/a-mound-in-the-wood/>

woven together within socio-cultural and natural networks where each level validates the other.¹⁹ The self cannot know itself without examining how it is recognized by another, and the other cannot be appreciated without validation by the authenticity of experience that only the self knows. And both self and the other existentially anchor themselves within third-person accounts. Self and otherness are inextricably intertwined.²⁰ Second-person mediation plays a crucial bridging role, validating first-person experience and containing the processes by which third-person accounts get reified. Rather than seeking authenticity in any one level of encounter, consistent movement between one level and the other is the source of authenticity.²¹

This movement across levels is fundamental to the nature of living systems and has been termed as *autopoiesis* by the biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela.²² The term means 'self-making' and refers to how an autonomous living being is never a closed system: if it were, it would fall under the second law of thermodynamics which states that every closed system keeps increasing in entropy until it merges with the entropy of the universe (which is what happens when we die). While the self that is alive possesses an autonomy that is defined by a boundary, that boundary is porous, allowing energy flows through the self by which it remakes itself. The nature of the exchanges that take place through that boundary are fundamental to life, and the sensitivity of the being's boundary to the environment is crucial to the success of autopoiesis.

When these exchanges are recurrent, then the living being learns, and can structure its behavior in terms that transcend immediate 'in-the-now' experience. In autopoietic terms, the cognitive boundary of consciousness absorbs a part of the environment, occupying a larger territory than the sensory boundary of the physical self. Humans can take learning to radically different levels with significant impact on their cognitive capacities, for they have the unique ability to be reflexive, thinking in the abstract about themselves and the world and changing themselves through that thinking. For non-reflexive beings, the cognitive boundary of consciousness and the sensory boundary of physical being are relatively close together. The reflexivity of humans allows them to shift the boundary of consciousness significantly beyond the physical boundaries of self. This can be seen in everyday ways one often recognizes: the loving wife who can intuit what troubles her husband of long standing, or the experienced stage actor who can read the audience's attentiveness and engagement from the sound (or absence of it) of their bodies and feed this energy into the performance.

This expansion of boundaries of consciousness is the aim in many established contemplative practices, as well as the rigorous training one goes through in acquiring the mastery of any craft. The consciousness of the masterful practitioner gets intertwined deeply with his/her craft: the musician and music feel as one, the master architect unifies with materials and aura of space. This shapes the way others encounter the craft. When you hear the performance of a masterful musician, both you and the musician hear the larger voice of music; when you inhabit the work of a masterful architect, both you and the architect have sensed the larger presence of architecture. The resonance within you happens because both you and the master, inherently as human beings, have the inborn impulse to expand and emancipate the autopoietic boundary of your consciousness. The acquisition of personal mastery and the layperson's recognition of its value happen through radically different processes, but they connect because both strike a resonance between innermost being and observed reality.

¹⁹ Varela and Shear, *The View from Within*, 9

²⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)

²¹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003)

²² Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1980)

This calls for a re-examination of the conventional modes of architectural practice and architectural education.

Implications on Architectural Practice

When the architect's interior is eliminated from consideration, the architect at the creative cutting edge is reduced to superficial recognition as a heroic figure. This breeds a shallow culture of professional practice constituted largely by a bulk of followers in the wake of a handful of heroes, reproducing an idiom or philosophy without genuine access to the source of the creativity they admire. A widespread culture of deep and creative reflection that could propagate the ideal of continuity remains elusive.

Practice should not be reduced to the expression of an established visual language or philosophy. It should be predicated on two ongoing critical dialogs between the architect's inner values embodied in his/her sense of being and the outer world he/she inhabits. One dialog would be with collaborators and stakeholders within and without the practice to validate the existential self; and the other with the attributes of architecture relevant to the design challenge faced. While merely applying a theory would be 'reflection-*and*-action', the effective practitioner achieves 'reflection-*in*-action', using each professional challenge as a means of expanding his/her boundary of consciousness, thereby increasing the degree of mastery.²³ This happens through a process of 'double-loop learning', going beyond the single loop of learning through experience into a wider loop of contemplation where one critically comes to terms with overarching factors.²⁴

The practice, rather than being seen merely as the vehicle for individual expression, should be structured as a crucial site of second-person mediation. When the dialogs it contains cross a threshold quantum of repetition, the inner and outer worlds achieve a high degree of tacit intimacy. At that point, personal mastery is achieved, and popular wisdom stipulates a minimum of 10,000 hours of practice to reach this level.²⁵

Mastery renders the transcendental tangible and personal. When great architecture entralls its inhabitants, they are enchanted by a voice greater than either inhabitant or architect: the voice of *architecture*. The mastery of the architect renders this voice alive to speak as intimately to inhabitant as it does to the architect. A state of *flow* occurs here, where the architect surrenders himself/herself to a greater reality that flows through his/her body,²⁶ such that this transcendent reality becomes apparent to others.

The structure of practice must shed the cult of personality and the crutches of theory. Practice must be reinvented as a place that shelters critical and rigorous dialogs between inner self and outer world that promote the acquisition and development of personal mastery.

Implications on Architectural Education

In the quest for objectivity, curriculum tends to foreground content and product, with pedagogy reduced to an instrumental means for achieving excellence on these counts. Once content and product are externalized from the self, the student can sustain rigor only when the surrounding context is supportive. On graduating from the crutches of academia and entering the world of commercial practice, ideals held in college begin to fade. This is why, even in cities where the standard of architectural education is considered high, the bulk of professional architectural

²³ Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (London: Temple Smith, 1983)

²⁴ Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974)

²⁵ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Allen Lane, 2008)

²⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990)

production tends toward reproduction of the familiar. Students who sustain an internalized critical rigor well after graduation may do so more because of their innate capacities than how they were taught. There are studies that suggest that the success of reputed colleges ensues more from the profile of students they attract than the caliber of education they deliver.²⁷

Pedagogy needs to transcend its instrumental status to lie at the core of curriculum. The focus should be on the self being educated, such that aspirations on content and product are not external beacons but internalized within an aspiring self as personal mastery. It is not possible to logically understand the state of flow that brings mastery into being. It must be attained through lived practice, which is why the core of architectural education should be a pedagogy that provokes the infection of passion between members of the community of learners, teachers *and* students, to ignite the spark of flow within the learning self. A critical pedagogy does not seek external standards, it aims for the evolution of committed and consistent selves who can critically engage with reality in order to personally participate in the renewal of their world.²⁸ Such a self eschews mere reproduction of the familiar or imitation of a hero, pursuing a personal mastery that is driven by an awakened inner light. The goal of education is a pedagogy that fires this inner light.

Conclusion: Continuity, Ephemerality and Truth

To seek continuity only in the attributes of architecture is to search for the meaning of life. But as Joseph Campbell reminds us, “People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that the life experiences that we have on the purely physical plane will have resonances within that are those of our own innermost being and reality. And so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive, that’s what it’s all finally about.”²⁹

To connect with this ‘rapture of being alive’, the inner self of the architect must enter the reckoning so that the source of continuity is recognized as lying in the continuous critical engagement between this self, the attributes of architecture, and the networks within which they are embedded, so as to bind them all. Continuity truly exists only when this process sustains the personal mastery that is able to reify this resonance.

To argue this is to pursue a phenomenological argument that seeks to reconcile the later Heidegger with the early Heidegger. The later Heidegger emphasized ‘dwelling’,³⁰ and this is the aspect that architectural theory has focused on when it has taken a phenomenological approach. The early Heidegger emphasized ‘being’, particularly the fact that ‘being’ was always within ‘time’, and was therefore continuously being erased and reconstructed.³¹ Heidegger proposed a repetitive looping in a hermeneutic circle, where one half of the circle was in a mode of ‘understanding’, and the other half in the mode of ‘experiencing’. This is nothing other than a shift between first-person experience and third-person accounts: a process underpinned by second person mediation. But understanding is an act of claiming, whereas experiencing is an act of

²⁷ Stacy Berg Dale and Alan B. Krueger, “Estimating the Payoff to Attending a More Selective College: An Application of Selection on Observables and Unobservables, NBER Working Paper No. 7322 Issued August 1999”, Accessed 16 September 2018, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w7322>

²⁸ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, Continuum, 1970)

²⁹ Joseph Campbell, “Interview with Bill Moyers, The Message of the Myth, Episode 2”, Accessed 18 January 2019, <https://billmoyers.com/content/ep-2-joseph-campbell-and-the-power-of-myth-the-message-of-the-myth/>

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*

³¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962)

surrender, a willing suspension of disbelief in order to maximize one's conscious awareness of the world in all its power and subtlety.

The crucial role of surrender means that truth cannot be pinned down in a belief, theory, or philosophy that encompasses reality. The architectural reification of continuity rests on an ephemeral truth that is an act of being alive, moving continually across all levels of encounter with the world to be immersed in the 'rapture of being alive'.

The kernel of the argument of this paper is summarized in this verse from Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching:

*The things of this world
exist, they are;
you can't refuse them.*

*To bear and not to own;
to act and not lay claim;
to do the work and let it go:
for just letting it go
is what makes it stay.³²*

³² Ursula K. Le Guin, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching – A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way*, in collaboration with Prof. J.P. Seaton (Boulder: Shambhala, 1998), 5