

The Utopia of the Everyday

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During the days of International Modernism, architecture's notion of history instigated a desire for utopia that played a significant role in architectural thought. Samir Younés, in his analysis of how history has played a role in architectural judgment,¹ identifies two concepts of history: one where the historian eschews philosophizing about history, searching for an objective description of how things really were,² and the other a philosophically oriented view that reads the passage of history in terms of overarching patterns.³ The architects of twentieth-century modernism tended to think in terms of the latter philosophical view. The dominant influence was Hegel's model of history: each age is characterized by a spirit of the time; history is a linear arrow of evolving progress where every era is able to dialectically critique the spirit of earlier times in order to improve upon it; and history's arrow is aimed at the teleological goal of a realized self-aware spirit.⁴ So even if utopia was recognized as an unachievable ideal, it still suggested a beacon that directed one's aim, and architecture was underpinned by a social idealism that sought to improve the world. The avant-garde architect was viewed as an agent of history whose intentionality helped move the world forward on this arrow of progress.

This has since fallen out of favor for many reasons. Besides the visible failures of the modernist city, post-structuralist thought has broken faith in any fixed reference point of meaning, displacing the transcendental truth of the Cartesian self with a relativistic self limited in reach to rhetorical flourishes. Today, to call someone 'utopian' is to apply a dismissive term that implies their thinking is naïve, unrealistic, self-deluded and condemned to failure. During modernist times, social idealism allowed the language of architectural theory to easily move into the realm of practice with very little change. Detachment from this idealism has made the language of theory far too esoteric to allow this to happen today, creating a schism between theory and practice. The global circulation of seductive imagery enabled by new media technologies has led to a quest for visual novelty distorting the critical dimension of avant-garde innovation. Connections to social ideals have become tenuous, with the cutting edge of design now allied with individual creativity,⁵ media attention and consumer fulfillment. The question of what inspires us as a collective culture is left 'blowing in the wind'. If we are to recover any sense of shared idealism, it is necessary to resurrect the beacon of utopia, even though we may dismiss the form this ideal took in earlier times.

A clue lies in another notion that Hegel explored that has not received the same level of attention as his philosophy of history: the importance of *recognition*.⁶ Hegel, inspired by Fichte,⁷ argued that the foundation by which one recognizes oneself is the way one is summoned by another. This is both a freedom and a limitation: freedom in an affirmation of self that launches the basis for being, and limitation in the self having to adjust to the circles of recognition within which it is located. This paradox leads to the problem Hegel called 'the master-slave dialectic': the fearful desire to transcend limitation leads to the quest to assert an unfettered ego by objectifying the other in order to negate their independent agency, even though such a quest eventually annihilates the foundation for recognizing oneself.

Hegel's thoughts on recognition have since been developed by scholars such as Charles Taylor,⁸ Axel Honneth,⁹ Nancy Fraser,¹⁰ and Paul Ricoeur;¹¹ and a great deal of this work has focused on the political challenges of recognition in multicultural societies. This work has implications for architects that have not been sufficiently explored, particularly in the question of how the city can

be designed as an inclusive common where recognition constructs an equitable balance between aspiration, multiculturalism and justice. However, the focus in this essay is on how the architect works on an individual project, and for this the work of Ricoeur is most interesting, for he argues that the politics of recognition must be founded on recognition of the individual self: a theme he expands in *Oneself as Another*,¹² a work that precedes the book focused on recognition.

Ricoeur starts with an echo of Hegel, arguing that selfhood implies otherness to a degree that one cannot be thought of without the other. To further explore this fact that the self is not fully autonomous and non-relational, he conceptualizes selfhood in two Latin terms: *idem* which means 'constancy' and *ipse* which means 'identity'. *Ipse* is a self that moves in time, projecting itself into the future, recollecting the past, and coping with change and transformation. But to be called complete life must be gathered together into a singular totality, for which the self needs to find an anchor in time. In its movement it keeps finding points of constancy, and through *idem* permanence in time is conceptualized, thereby developing the whole self. The constancy of *idem* is carried by two models of holding time: 'character' and 'keeping one's word'. Ricoeur defines character as that "finite unchosen perspective through which we accede to values and to the use of our powers",¹³ and keeping one's word as expressing "a self-constancy which cannot be inscribed".¹⁴

This theory can be validated if one reflects on the spontaneous processes by which friendship operates. *Ipse* moves in time through conversation and interaction between friends. The friendship develops because the friends find something that moves both of them, and in that resonance recognize a realm greater than either of them, thus uncovering *idem* whose mutual and transcendent constancy binds them. And the friendship moves to deeper constancy through character and keeping one's word. Ricoeur defines a good life as "to live well with and for others in just institutions and to esteem oneself as the bearer of this wish".¹⁵

Ricoeur's analysis takes on further power when juxtaposed with a text written twelve centuries earlier: the spiritual poem *Vivekachudamani* by the Hindu sage Adi Śankarācārya.¹⁶ Like Ricoeur, Śankarācārya defines a dialectic between constancy and change as lying at the core of identifying the self. He argues that because the changing world is what is immediately perceived by the senses we fall into *maya* (illusion), believing that to be reality. We fail to perceive an eternal unchanging divine spirit in the world, which can be recognized if one acquires *viveka* (discernment). *Viveka* springs from training in practice rather than intellectual understanding, and can only be acquired through substantive time invested in rigorous and disciplined practice committed to faith, rejection of ego, eschewing desire for material fruits of one's actions, meditation, and an intense desire for liberation. As our recognition of constancy expands, this forms the anchor of our being, and we realize this constancy is a reflection of ourselves, recognizing for the first time our own inherent divinity that we had always possessed yet never seen. We finally know our true self,¹⁷ and through this attain *moksha*¹⁸ (liberation).

Discernment is nothing but refined recognition, and we fail to acquire it because we tend toward certain traps. We seek the comfort of habit, an anesthetic that blinds us to what is in front of our eyes.¹⁹ We often cling to our habits because we are unwilling to confront our fears. We get seduced by our senses and material desires. Or we get obsessed with our ego, thus falling prey to the master-slave dialectic that Hegel warned us about. *If we avoid these traps, in constancy we can find our own utopia. But this is not one that can begin with a public definition: it is based on a highly personal foundation that cannot be taken for granted as stable, for perceiving it requires a continuous and sensitive discrimination that is blocked by a fall into habit or any of the other traps. This is a utopia of the everyday, needing to be seen afresh every day through a discerning recognition that will disappear as soon as our alertness drops. Continued recognition of the universal and constant within unique moments is what makes us most alive.*

To avoid the binding of habit, we must learn to always break routine, to wander, but to do so in a way that we are continuously aware of the constancy that we must remain in touch with. Rebecca Solnit points out our lives must reflect the wisdom of the woodsman who can wander into unknown woods with an ability to read signs such as the sun and stars, the movement of the wind on his skin, the smell of the soil, so that even in the most unfamiliar places he remains anchored in the permanence of the universe and knows how and where to return. As the title of Solnit's book evocatively reminds us, we need '*a field guide to getting lost*.'²⁰

How is such a utopia relevant to architecture? For if we want our architecture to reflect this utopia, we have to move it from its highly personal foundation into a public domain. Ricoeur identifies this as happening through ascription: an encapsulation of the choices we make by reifying them in a form that can stand on its own. He defines ascription as a "reappropriation by the agent of his or her own deliberation: making up one's mind is cutting short the debate by making one of the options contemplated one's own".²¹ While the forms of ascription that Ricoeur refers to are mainly speech acts, actions and narratives, one could also say that every act of design is an act of ascription, and we must know how our architecture can reflect our discernment of constancy. Acts and products of ascription mediate between the personal and the social.

Juhani Pallasmaa, in apparent empathy with Śankarācārya's premise that discernment opens an awareness of the whole world and not just other living beings, articulates how sound in architecture tunes us to the constancies of the rhythm of the universe: the awareness of cycles of the day in the sounds of a house heard over a twenty-four hour cycle, the presence of wind and rain, how wind is so different in a monsoon than when the leaves are dry, or the echo that a space returns to us.²² Such rhythms, which require a discerning ear to perceive their significance, define the timeless aura of a space, and such an aura breathes energy into the space so that it is recognizably alive without the need of any external prop such as the architect's intentionality. To Pallasmaa, the architect's challenge is to develop the ability to create an aura, and the dialog between aura and inhabitant is the foundation of meaning in design. He remarks, "In the experience of art, a peculiar exchange takes place; I lend my emotions and associations to a space and the space lends me its aura, which entices and emancipates my perceptions and thoughts."²³ In a trip to Sri Lanka in 2011, partly dedicated to seeing the work of the master architect Geoffrey Bawa, Pallasmaa made revealing remarks on how Bawa was able to evoke in his work an aura whose constancy resists the vicissitudes of time.²⁴ At Lunuganga, Bawa's country estate, he observed that the place cannot be labeled either as traditional or as contemporary as it has a very different relationship with time, and how unfortunate it is that one sees such little modern architecture that is able to achieve this. At Bawa's town house in Colombo, he remarked on the eclectic range of furniture, particularly the fact that there must have been close to fifty different designs of chairs, and how they did not clash, not because they matched aesthetically but because they fuse together under an aura of lived life conjured by the clear constancy of Bawa's equal affection for all of them.

Achieving constancy in architecture requires attention to a hierarchy of scales, so that the aura pervades the overall design as well as the smallest detail, creating a sense of stillness as the same spirit is visible whichever way the body or gaze may move. This has been achieved in a great deal of historical architecture, but is a comparatively lost art in modern design. If one looks at the few architects who have achieved it (Frank Lloyd Wright, Carlo Scarpa, Geoffrey Bawa, Tadao Ando, to name a few of the better known examples), one finds that while they are all internationally recognized as masters, unlike the other masters they do not breed schools of followers and imitators. To work this way one has to go through the rigor of acquiring discernment oneself: there are no 'isms' that offer ready short cuts. As Śankarācārya reminds us:

*The true nature of things
is to be known personally,
through the eyes of clear illumination,*

*and not through a sage.
What the moon exactly is,
is to be known with one's own eyes;
can others make him know it?*²⁵

This requires a significant reorientation in how architects think. We must prioritize discerning recognition over intellectual sophistication. The quest should be for achieving the inhabitant's communion with the work, rather than communication of the architect's intentionality. Once the work is handed over for inhabitation, the thoughts and utterances of the architect are left behind: the work must stand on its own, and the architect must learn how to come to terms with this moment of silence. And education needs to reverse its approach, for the demand that students must speak on their work breeds an assumption that theory is the first step of innovation, and practice subsequently applies this step. If the goal is to silently offer a work that communes, architects must place faith in practice as a primary site of discovery for it is the place where mastery is pursued and it is through mastery that the tacit ability for discernment can be acquired. Theory's role is to offer a counter to this space: a necessary wander to break habit so that discernment can be sustained.

Martha Graham offers a powerful articulation of the attitude we must have toward practice:
I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes in some area an athlete of God.

*Practice means to perform, over and over again in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired.*²⁶

A utopia of the everyday is possible. It will resist intellectual or political definition, for it is founded on dedication to a practice that commits to living every moment as an athlete of God.

Endnotes

¹ Samir Younés. *The Imperfect City: On Architectural Judgment* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016)

² Wilhelm von Humboldt and Leopold von Ranke are examples of this school of thought.

³ Karl Marx and Georg W.F. Hegel are examples of this school of thought.

⁴ Georg W.F. Hegel. *The Philosophy of History*. Trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956)

⁵ In this sense, the residue of earlier models remains, and even if the architect is no longer the agent of history, his/her intentionality is seen as the primary generator of meaning.

⁶ Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Trans. J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977)

⁷ Johann G. Fichte. *Foundations in Natural Right: According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

⁸ Charles Taylor. "The Politics of Recognition". *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994)

⁹ Axel Honneth. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995)

¹⁰ Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth. *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. (London: Verso, 2003). Also see Nancy Fraser. 'Rethinking Recognition'. *New Left Review* 3 (2000): 107-120, and Nancy Fraser. 'Recognition Without Ethics?'. *Theory Culture & Society*. 18:2-3 (2001): 21-42.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur. *The Course of Recognition*. Trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005)

¹² Paul Ricoeur. *Oneself as Another*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 119.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 123.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 352.

¹⁶ Śri Śankarācārya. *Vivekachudamani*. Trans. Swāmi Madhavānanda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2010)

¹⁷ Śankarācārya's anchor is the term *atman*, a word that does not offer precise translation into English. It is, at times, translated as 'self', but is often translated as 'soul'.

¹⁸ A concept perhaps better known through its Buddhist equivalent, *nirvana*.

¹⁹ Take, for example, the process of learning how to drive. The first time one drives, the unfamiliarity and tension of the experience keeps us hyper-alert to every detail. But by the time we become experienced drivers, and drive on a familiar route like the journey between home and work, we acquire the ability to do this on auto-pilot, pre-occupied with other thoughts, arriving with no conscious memory of what we have seen on the way.

²⁰ Rebecca Solnit. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Viking, 2005)

²¹ *Oneself as Another*, p. 95.

²² Juhani Pallasmaa. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: Wiley Academy, 2005)

²³ *Ibid.* p. 12.

²⁴ Remarks made to the author, who was privileged to accompany Pallasmaa on this trip in August 2011

²⁵ *Vivekachudamani*, p. 15.

²⁶ Martha Graham. "An Athlete of God". *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*. Ed. Jay Allison, Dan Gediman, John Gregory and Viki Merrick (New York: H. Holt and Company, 2006), 84-86.