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The Existential Act- Interview with Juhani Pallasmaa

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D: Education is primarily vision centric, dealing in the world of ideas not reality, and lacking tactility. Is vision centric representation in school the primary reason architecture as a whole has become so flat and vision focused? If so, why?

JP: Vision is the sense of control and dominance, not of participation and sharing. Our western industrial culture as a whole has developed towards the dominance of vision since antiquity. Cultures vary in the hierarchies they give to the senses and even our culture was dominated by hearing and smell until the eighteenth century, historians argue. We associate vision, truth and knowledge, and it is an intellectualized value judgment that makes us prioritize vision, although vision has been connected with truth since the Greek philosophers. Our educational philosophy has adapted this vision-centered view. Along with the recent cultural development, architecture
has turned increasingly visual and it has lost its sense of materiality, tactility and presence, and turned into an immaterial image. The technological development has further advanced this attitude of distancing and unreality.

D: Do you find this to be a problem? If so how do you suggest we shift this perspective?

JP: I see this as a huge problem. For me, the task of architecture is to place and house us in the world. But being in-the-world authentically, is a multi-sensory and existential act, through which we feel our unity with the world. Vision separates us and makes us outsiders in the world. This distance calls for new thinking and a re-tuning of our sensory balance. We can become more conscious of our sensory reality and emancipate our suppressed senses. The most important sense for architecture is touch, not only touching by the skin, but especially the ideated touch experienced unconsciously through vision. We touch the world through vision, but our culture tends to reject this essential existential connection with the world.

D: Many students feel the pressure to focus their studies within their architectural education. Do you see architecture as a field to be studied in order to prepare for the professional filed, or is it a way of thinking that should reach beyond?

JP: I have always been critical of strictly professionalist education. The main purpose of university education is to make us knowing, observant, critical and deeply feeling individuals. Architecture is too widely and existentially rooted in the human existential reality, to be seen merely as a formalized practice. In my view, architectural education should not be controlled by the profession, but be independent and critical of it. Universities at large are losing their ethical and scientific autonomousities when they are made to serve directly the economic and production world. Architects need to be educated as free and comprehensive thinkers and they should exemplify critical independent wisdom.

D: In your experience as an educator, have you pursued alternative approaches to teaching? e.g. installation based studio?

JP: I have always taught architecture through other art forms, literature, visual arts, theater, cinema, and music. Architecture is an expression and articulation of the human existential condition – how it feels to be a human being in this world – and this can be learned through the other arts. There is a special category in art that of epic art, which includes art forms that deal with culture, human life, and their historical continuum. Architecture used to be an epic art form, but it has regrettably regressed to an episodic art form, that only provides interesting moments instead of rooting us in the grand continuum of culture and life. The fundamental existential issues in architecture are usually lost behind the dense layers of rationalization, instrumentality, technique, codes, regulations, etc., whereas in poetry, music, and painting, the mental layers are directly present and pure. The fact that students today are losing their personal contact with history and books, and they do not work with materials by their own hands, will have catastrophic consequences. We are losing our silent embodied skills and wisdom. Simply, Google and the computer will not replace human curiosity, imagination, and the power of emotion and feeling. We need to get back to the “flesh of the world,” to use the wonderful notion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. We need to return to a “thick,” sensory and sensual reality.
our most humane capacity, that of imagination. The world, “the flesh of the world,” and our minds, memories, and imaginations form a continuum, a magical Möbius strip that has two sides, but only one single continuous surface.

D: Do you see writing as an architecture, or possibly as a space to inhabit?

JP: Too many practicing architects have a belittling view of architectural writing and philosophy. However, during the past few years an interest in architectural writing and approaching architectural issues through verbal means has increased as have international competition in architectural writing. I can mention a general history of architectural writing Architektur wie sie im Buche steht edited by Winfried Nerdinger (2006), Marilyn R. Chandler's book Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction (1991), and Klaske Havik's Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing (2014), on the use of the verbal approach in design work itself. For me, literary, painterly and cinematic depictions of settings and spaces have been seminal for my understanding of the mental, emotive and mythical dimensions in buildings. I have myself written a book on cinematic architecture, The Architecture of Image: existential space in cinema (2001).

Architecture has a material existence and an experiential and mental existence, and the latter can be encountered through literary means – the title of Chandler's book suggests actual dwelling in text [which] has to be taken metaphorically, but the experiential and mental dimensions and meanings of dwelling can well be mediated by text.

D: What role do you believe your writing has, both in your own practice of architecture, and also in the larger architectural discourse?

JP: The most dramatic shift has been the move to the digital world. It has, of course, opened unforeseen possibilities, but it has also impoverished our embodied and mental worlds. It would be naïve to speak against the computer, but is responsible to oppose the misuse of the computer. The most dangerous distortion is the technological hubris, and a blind confidence in the computer is an example of this. In terms of thinking, the most important one has been the recent strengthening of the experiential reality of architecture through the phenomenological interest in the art form. The new consciousness of the biased hegemony of the eye and the consequent suppression of the other senses has given a philosophical and historical ground for a critical position and an alternative ground for thinking about and making architecture. The ground of sensory realism, which keeps us away from manipulation, aestheticization and formalism.

D: What role do you believe your writing has, both in your own practice of architecture, and also in the larger architectural discourse?
When I began to write seriously in the 1980s, which necessarily implied taking time away from my design work, I had hesitations. I felt that I should focus on design work in order to have a presence in the field of architecture. In a few years, I realized that I could actually have a wider presence through writing. Now, wherever I travel in the world – and I do travel a lot, last year four and half rounds around the globe, this year three and half; there is always someone who comes to thank me for my writings. Three years ago I actually closed down my design activities in order to write, lecture, and teach. I guess my writings today fuse my perspectives from half a century of architectural practice with a serious engagement in the arts and rather active reading in various fields. My writing always arises from my personal experiences and thinking, although I use a lot of references. My most important frame of thinking is phenomenological philosophy, but I have recently also written on architecture and neuroscience, as well as empathy and atmospheres. I do not have a personal project or overall plan; I go wherever my observations, thinking and writing take me.