



UNDERSTANDING AND DESIGNING PLACE

– Considerations on Architecture and Philosophy

Pekka Passinmäki & Klaske Havik (editors)

DATUTOP 38

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DATUTOP
School of Architecture
Tampere University
Occasional Papers 38

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Publisher:
School of Architecture
Tampere University
PO Box 600
FIN-33101 Tampere
Finland



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Datutop 38, 2019

ISBN 978-952-03-1113-1 (print)
ISBN 978-952-03-1114_8 (PDF)
ISSN 0359-7105

Printed in Finland by PunaMusta Oy, Tampere

The seminar and publication *Understanding and Designing Place* were made possible partly with a scholarship from the Alfred Kordelin Foundation.



CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	5
Introduction Klaske Havik & Pekka Passinmäki	7
Place, Truth, and Commitment Jeff Malpas	12
Emerging Place in Contemporary Architecture: The Problem of Context in a Cosmopolitan World Alberto Pérez-Gómez	30
Placing the Mind: Existential Meaning in Architecture Juhani Pallasmaa	50
Technology, Focality and Place: On the Means and Goals of Architecture Pekka Passinmäki	64
Passing the Threshold of Time: Juxtaposing Literary and Architectural Analyses of Amuri, Tampere Klaske Havik	98
Discussion: Place in Architectural Design and Education	123
Notes on the contributors	142
Picture sources	143



TECHNOLOGY, FOCALITY AND PLACE: ON THE MEANS AND GOALS OF ARCHITECTURE

Pekka Passinmäki

Architecture is a complex discipline. It draws from many other disciplines, but it does not itself have the status of a science because it is basically a practical field. In this article, I discuss the means and goals of architecture. I examine how different fields of knowledge are combined in architecture and how the core task of architecture should be understood. I argue that architecture is above all a humanistic discipline because its goal is to situate our life in a particular place and thus to give us a home on earth.

According to architectural historian and theorist Dalibor Vesely, architecture is a humanistic discipline because of its unifying understanding, which does not mean only a bridging of the contributions of other disciplines but also an understanding of typical human situations, in which everyday life is realized. In the process of designing, architects have to grasp the space and place in its wholeness, in its full phenomenal presence. Today, a relationship between the human and the place is threatened by technology. The danger of modern technology does not lie in single devices but rather in the way, it makes everything – humans included – part of its own one-dimensional logic. Technology is universal in nature and therefore local and situational factors have remained in its shadow.

The present article focuses on the work of the American philosopher Albert Borgmann. He does not oppose modern technology as such, but instead argues that technology is reformable through focal things and practices. By engaging fo-

cal things and practices, people can re-centre their lives and provide themselves a sense of place and meaning. Focal events always need a social and physical context in order to flourish and this is precisely what brings Borgmann's philosophy so close to the practice of architecture. At the end of the article, I take a closer look at Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, whose design method and buildings, in my estimation, can be used as an example of focal things and practices in contemporary architecture.

Means, goals and place

A building is a physical structure, a fact that may lead one to think that architecture is primarily a technical discipline. Such a definition seems apt, especially nowadays, as buildings are becoming technically more and more complicated. On the other hand, architecture is also an art form. It has an aesthetic dimension, a feature that distinguishes it from pure engineering. Is architecture then an aesthetic discipline? Architecture clearly includes both technical and aesthetic dimensions, but what is the relationship between the two? Is one a means and the other an end? Is art the goal of architecture and technology the means to achieve it?

In modern thinking, our reality has been divided into two. In architecture, this subject-object division has entailed a split; e.g. between human and environment, theory and practice, and designing and building. Even, the work of architecture has been split in two: it has been understood, for instance, as a combination of building and decoration, of a technological structure and an aesthetic cladding. The idea of architecture as a technical or aesthetic discipline is a product of modern thinking, as well as the means-end schema that is being considered here. We face the modern world everywhere.

In modern architectural theory, the building is sometimes understood as a technological object (functionalism) and sometimes as an aesthetic object (postmodernism) but the relationship between the two has remained problematic. It is not the case that art – as an aesthetic object – is the goal of architecture, and technology a means to achieve it nor vice versa. Something more is needed. The ultimate task of architecture is to interpret a way of life during each historical period, and therefore architecture as pure engineering, an autonomous artwork or a combination of these two is insufficient. What, then, is the goal of architecture? What kind of discipline is it? Vesely describes the task of architecture as follows:

[A]rchitecture is not in the first place a technical but a humanistic discipline. This must be clear to everyone who sees a distinction between means and goals, and agrees that the goal, the essence of architecture, its main purpose, is to situate our life in a particular place and create the right conditions for our existence and coexistence, not only with other people, but also with the given natural conditions and cultural circumstances. Skills, techniques and technologies are only means that can help us to fulfill this purpose and goal.¹

In the quotation above regarding the essence of architecture, Vesely states that the goal of architecture is to situate our life in a particular place and thus to give us a home on earth. Technology is seen as a means to this goal but when looking at the matter more broadly, its role is actually a bit more complicated. On the one hand, technology helps us to construct better houses but, on the other hand, it often increases the human sense of homelessness. How then should we understand human homelessness and the role that technology plays in it?

Technology and the problem of homelessness

Homelessness in architecture can be defined in at least three different ways: I call them “housing shortage”, “homelessness of human existence”, and “homelessness of contemporary people”. In everyday language, homelessness is generally understood as the housing shortage. The housing shortage is linked to a quantity of buildings and apartments. People need a physical shelter, a house or an apartment that affords a home. According to this definition, the goal of architecture is a functional construction and thus technology is, of course, a proper means to the desired end. Here the role of technology appears mostly in a positive way.

Homelessness can also be understood as a fundamental feature of human existence. We do not know the ultimate purpose of life and therefore human beings have always been searching for meaning, for the true home in the universe. Religion, philosophy, art, etc. are human responses to this kind of homelessness. People need a physical shelter but also a spiritual shelter. Greek temples and medieval cathedrals are examples of buildings that gave spiritual shelter to the people in their own time. This definition outlines the humanistic task of the architecture. It tells how the goal of architecture is to make our lives meaningful.

The term “homelessness of contemporary people” is adopted from Martin Heidegger, according to whom, this kind of homelessness is a symptom of the oblivion of Being that is the ultimate ground of our existence.² I use the term to describe the third kind of homelessness, which is related not to the quantity but rather to the quality of buildings. Contemporary technology enables the production of imposing constructions, but the problem is a lack of meaning. Airports, highways, housing areas, and glass skyscrapers are similar the world over. Placelessness is a typical feature of contemporary architecture.

Fundamentally, construction technology and architecture are not reasons for the homelessness of contemporary people. They are just symptoms. The current architectural problems are part of a more extensive and more profound crisis of western people, as Alberto Pérez-Gómez has described in his eminent book *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (1983). The impact of the crisis pervades all areas of life: science, art, and everyday life. The crisis began at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when modern thinking was born.

One central reason for the current crisis is a lack of meaningful goals. Friedrich Nietzsche declared the death of God and, accordingly, all ideals and values, which resulted to radical relativism and nihilism. It seems that nothing is sacred any more. In the absence of commonly shared values, aesthetic spectacles (“wow-factor architecture”) and all kinds of technical efficiency (e.g. a zero-energy building) have replaced the deeper goals. In order to provide spiritual shelter, architecture should situate our life in a particular place in a meaningful way. A Cartesian subject-object division means, however, a split between a human and the environment and therefore aesthetic and technological approaches – that are based on this division – are unable to bind human beings to the place.

Today, we live in a technological world, and technology shapes our relationship with the place. Technology is not, however, only a means or tools, machines, and structures but rather it determines our whole existence in a very fundamental way.

Technology as a means and as an enframing

We normally understand technology as a means to an end or as a human activity. These two definitions of technology belong together. Human activity sets an end and then selects the means to achieve it. Heidegger calls this conception of

technology the *instrumental* and *anthropological* definition of technology. According to this definition, technology is something neutral and innocent – a mere means.³ The conventional approach sees technology as a value-neutral means, whereas an end is interwoven into a context and values. The determination of ends and values is seen to be a matter of rational thinking.

Technology has not always been a means. The word “technology” is derived from an ancient Greek term *techne*, which meant a radically different way of producing things than technological manipulation. *Techne* meant both “craft” and “art” and actually, it was the name of all human making. But what is most important, it was not a means at all. Heidegger writes that “[...] what is decisive in *techne* does not lie at all in making and manipulating nor in the using of means, but rather in [...] revealing.”⁴ Revealing (*aletheia*) meant that something that does not yet exist comes into being. Greeks called this kind of occasioning *poiesis*, bringing-forth. According to Heidegger, *poiesis* can happen in two ways: in nature (*physis*) or through human making (*techne*). In nature, something arises from out of itself, e.g. a plant blooms into a flower. In addition to this, human beings can bring-forth things that nature itself cannot reveal.⁵ *Techne* was not acting and manipulating but receiving and responding. It was a kind of “freeing”, or producing, in which a human being as a kind of catalyst brought-forth things in an analogous way to nature. In ancient times and in the Middle Ages the human and the world were one.

The way artefacts were produced changed radically in the transition from a pretechnological era to an era of modern technology. Modern technology differed from earlier ones because it was based on modern physics and exact sciences. Heidegger states, however, that this feature is not enough to define the essence of modern technology, nor is the instrumental and anthropological understanding of technology.⁶ For

Heidegger, modern technology is no mere means, it is a way of revealing.⁷ He calls the essence of modern technology “enframing” (*Gestell*) and describes it as follows: “It [enframing] is nothing technological, nothing on the order of machine. It is the way in which the real reveals itself as a standing-reserve (*Bestand*).”⁸

The revealing that occurs through modern technology is totally different from that, which took place in *techne*. In the technological epoch, Being is revealed as a resource (*Bestand*) that can be used. The emergence of modern technology meant not only that simple tools became complicated machines but also a machine’s relation to other machines changed. Machines were no longer autonomous but were formed into networks. Single machines completely lost their autonomies because they became only parts of some bigger system. Modern technologies have taken larger and larger territories of human praxis and as a result of this everything – humans included – has become only resources of the technologies. Enframing means that everything is ordered to stand by as material for later use.⁹ In this framework, means are more important than goals. What is important to technology as a means is that it works and is efficient: “the maximum yield at the minimum expense.”¹⁰ Deeper goals of human life are missing. It is just this one-dimensionality – when everything is mere human construction – which gives rise to the homelessness of contemporary people. An oblivion of Being occurred when the standing-reserve replaced a more original revealing.

In the end of his analysis of modern technology, Heidegger states that “here and now and in little things” we can try to overcome enframing and the danger it entails.¹¹ In his late essay *Building Dwelling Thinking*, he gives an example of how some everyday things, for instance a bridge, can open a world for local people in a meaningful way.¹² Here, however, I will not go deeper into Heidegger’s examples but turn instead to

Borgmann's thinking on the philosophy of technology. His analysis of technology is based on the notion of the "device paradigm" that owes much to Heidegger's thinking on en-framing. Borgmann states: "Technology becomes most concrete and evident in (technological) devices, in objects such as television sets, central heating plants, automobiles, and the like. Devices therefore represent clear and accessible cases of the pattern or paradigm of modern technology."¹³ We live our everyday lives in the midst of the technological devices and structures but every now and then there are moments when the holding sway of technology breaks down and we feel our lives to be full of meaning. Borgmann calls these moments "focal events". Focal events are based on focal things and practices.

Focality and the unity of means and ends

Technological devices have brought many improvements to human dwelling conditions but what they cannot do, however, is provide us with a sense of place or meaning. That is the problem. The problem is recognized but what is more difficult is to conceive what humans – and especially we architects – can do in this situation. Borgmann does not oppose technology but instead argues that technology is reformable through focal things and practices. His most well-known example deals with the differences between a pretechnological wood-heating and modern central heating. I think it is worth running through the example here in its entirety.

Focal things and focal practices belong together, which means that focal things are possible only through the related practice. Borgmann illustrates his understanding of focality through a Latin word *focus*, which means a hearth or fireplace. In old cultures, the warmth of the building could not be taken for granted. Warming up the hearth or another fire-

place required a lot of work. In the pretechnological era, the hearth was a centre of the house, a focal object that gathered together the family for daily practices. These focal practices of warming engaged family members bodily and socially to the world of the fireplace.¹⁴ Borgmann describes the world of the fireplace as follows:

Thus a stove used to furnish more than mere warmth. It was a focus, a hearth, a place that gathered the work and leisure of a family and gave the house a center. Its coldness marked the morning, and the spreading of its warmth the beginning of the day. It assigned to the different family members tasks that defined their place in the household. The mother built the fire, the children kept the firebox filled, and the father cut the firewood. It provides for the entire family a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons that was woven together of the threat of cold and the solace of warmth.¹⁵

While writing the text above, Borgmann states that he had an old Montana lifestyle in mind, but he also refers to older cultures, where the hearth had even still greater significance in people's lives. For example, for the Romans the *focus* was a holy place where the housegods resided. The hearth was a place where a marriage was sanctified, the dead were buried, and where sacrifices to the housegods were made before and after meals. Our own present-day houses no longer have such a focus in the ancient sense but, as Borgmann states, the hearth's significance can still be seen in the fireplace of many modern homes. The fire is, however, mostly symbolic nowadays because it rarely gives sufficient warmth. Heating is automatized and therefore the fireplace and the activities intertwined with it no longer play a central role in the family members' daily lives.¹⁶ Borgmann's fireplace example is a background against which he outlines the specific character-

istics of the device. The world of the central heating plant is completely different from that of the fireplace:

A device such as a central heating plant procures mere warmth and disburdens us of all other elements. These are taken over by the machinery of the device. The machinery makes no demands on our skill, strength, or attention, and it is less demanding the less it makes its presence felt. In the progress of technology, the machinery of a device has therefore a tendency to become concealed or to shrink. Of all the physical properties of a device, those alone are crucial and prominent which constitute the commodity that the device procures. Informally speaking, the commodity of a device is “what a device is there for.” In the case of central heating plant it is warmth, with a telephone it is communication, a car provides transportation, frozen food makes up a meal, a stereo set furnishes music.¹⁷

Devices produce commodities and disburden people by releasing them from various requirements concerning skills, activities, and attention. They furnish dwellers with conveniences but at the same time leave them as outsiders. They make available goods and services but they do not reveal a place and its particular orientation towards nature and culture. Devices are for commodities; in other words, devices are means and commodities are ends. In the device paradigm, means must be efficient but also as inconspicuous as possible because devices should constitute a neutral and homogenous background for everyday life.¹⁸ Nowadays, we find the ideas of availability, inconspicuousness, and spatial indifference in smart-house and smart-city ideologies but they were strongly present already in the machine metaphors of modern architecture. Robert Socolow’s description of a 1960s office building is an excellent summary of the device paradigm in architecture:

The downtown office building of the 1960s already stands as a metaphor for the whole society’s desire for independence from the natural setting: temperature, humidity, air exchange, and lightning are all controlled mechanically, independent of season, wind speed, or whether one is on the north or south side of the building. Neither materials nor design change as the location is moved in latitude by thousands of miles.¹⁹

When the two above described lifestyles are placed side by side, the old Montana lifestyle appears nostalgic and even obsolete. That is not, however, the point. Borgmann argues that technological devices have disburdened our lives, but they have not guaranteed a deeper and more meaningful life. Instead, technologization has led to ever-increasing consumption and entertainment and to the boredom that often follows.²⁰ He states that the danger of technology does not lie in single devices but in the pervasiveness and consistency of the system and that, the rule of technology can be challenged only through the practice of engagement.²¹ That is the point. It is not about nostalgia but about today’s solutions. Focal practices should re-centre human lives; that is, make them meaningful in the midst of the technological everyday life, and therefore a rejection of the contemporary technological world is not an option. Borgmann emphasizes that the turn to focal things and practices cannot be based on a setting aside or escape from technology but a kind of affirmation of it. He sees that traditional things and practices can have a new splendour within contemporary technological context.²²

Technological production is based on means-ends division, whereas in focal practices means and ends are one and the same. Actually, focal practices mean the overcoming of subject-object dualism as a whole, which can be seen, for example, in the unity of means and ends, body and world,

and individual and community in the fireplace example. Borgmann states that focal things can prosper only through the related practice and therefore one thing is to find proper traditional practices from today's everyday life. A festive meal is one such practice. Eating in a focal setting differs sharply from the anonymous fast-food meal. We can satisfy human needs by making a quick visit to McDonald's, consuming a Big Mac and a Coke without concentrating on the event at all. Borgmann calls this "technological eating". Contrary to the fast-food meal, the festive meal has a structure enacted by the discipline of table manners. As a focal event, the dinner gathers a family and friends around the table and its offerings. The grand meal is a social event that unites present and tradition, culture and gifts of nature. A runner and the running route is another typical focal setting today. In long-distance running, effort and joy, means and ends, mind and body, and body and world are one. Borgmann's other examples are fly-fishing, music, gardening, hiking in the wilderness, and the arts and crafts.²³

Focal things and practices aim at overcoming the one-dimensional technological world and, at the same time, they can be seen as a contemporary response to the homelessness of human existence. They give spiritual shelter by providing us with a sense of place and meaning. This spiritual shelter is not, however, public but limited to certain private or local situations. Borgmann emphasizes that today's focal practices differ considerably from their eminent pretechnological predecessors. The latter ones, such as Greek temples and medieval cathedrals, were public and prominent social and physical settings, whereas our focal practices are humble and scattered. Sometimes they are so private and limited that they can hardly be called practices at all. For the present, focal activities flourish at the margins of public attention but nev-

ertheless Borgmann sees them as a foundation for the reform of technology.²⁴

Architecture, focality, and place

According to Borgmann, the physical environment is the ultimate ground of human existence. It is given to us through the being of things. Both Heidegger and Borgmann state that a deep and meaningful life in the midst of a technological world can only be attained if we find a proper relation to the reality of things. There is nevertheless a certain difference between Heidegger's and Borgmann's thinking on things. In their essay on Borgmann's philosophy of technology, David Strong and Eric Higgs clarify that Borgmann has highlighted and developed an under articulated side of Heidegger's late thinking on things, on the basis of which almost any material object can be interpreted as a thing. Borgmann has moved the locus of Heidegger's thinking more towards those special things of our lives that are relevant to our well-being.²⁵

According to Heidegger, the origin of meaning lies in our engagement with the world of things that stand out in their own right and speak to us in their own voice. Also, Borgmann's understanding of significance has its roots in this conception but, according to him, meanings emerge first and foremost through focal things and practices:

This is a very general answer, given that "significance" is nothing but the highest generic term for things and practices that stand out in their own right. What specifically are those things and practices? A less general answer was given when it was said that the present critique of technology is moved by a concern for those things and practices that used to and still can engage and grace us in their own right and which are now threatened by technology.²⁶

In the past, temples and cathedrals gathered entire cultures together but nowadays, focal things can centre only individuals, families, and local communities. Thus, what we architects can do in this situation, according to Borgmann, is “to reshape our cities so that they provide prominent and thoughtfully designed places for the exercise of the various focal practices that have engaged us, for sports, music, the arts, worship, and engaging work.”²⁷ In other words, architects can promote the reform of technology by applying Borgmann’s ideas to public things and communal practices.

Focal events always need a social and physical context in order to flourish and just here a central role for architecture in the reform of technology stands out. Focal things and practices can interweave in many different ways and in many different scales but always they take place in some natural or built setting. Strong considers that “Borgmann’s most important philosophical achievement beyond and departure from Heidegger, for whom the essence of technology is nothing *technological*, is his physicalism: getting us to attend to the significance of our physical world and tangible things.”²⁸ Matter matters because all our everyday activities and events are directly tied to material settings and physical things. Strong characterizes Borgmann’s philosophy as a “philosophy in the service of things”,²⁹ which means that this philosophy comes close to the practice of architecture.

Focal thing or “focal reality” – a term that Borgmann also sometimes uses – engages human beings within a place. He writes that focal reality “is simply a placeholder for the encounters each of us has with things that of themselves have engaged mind and body and centered our lives.”³⁰ Focal practices always involve the habitation of places, but as Paul B. Thompson argues, Borgmann’s philosophy does not give a clear answer to the question of how a focal thing and place are conceptually related. Thompson considers place to be a more

fundamental entity than thing and, according to him, this holds true also with regards to Borgmann’s philosophy, even though his writings allow different interpretations as well.³¹

How then can architects promote focal events in practice? How should design work be done? What features should a finished building have? How does one get people to commit to focal activities? Before answering these questions, some preliminary remarks are necessary. First, focal events – whether designing or experiencing a building – can only come about through reciprocal action between humans and things. Second, focal activities require people to have a receptive attitude towards things. And third, focal events mean that both humans and things are realized in a new and eloquent way. Strong sums up this reciprocal relationship as follows:

Once we have limited philosophy to being in the service of things – tethered to things, working in tandem with art, and carrying out evaluations in the light of things – is there room in any guiding ideas in the philosophy? [...] On my reading, at least, I find that there exists such an idea in Borgmann’s philosophy in the service of things. Pivotal for him is the idea that there exists “a symmetry between human life and its setting” [...] Our very being is tied to things in this philosophy in the service of things. Things and ourselves are codisclosed in this relationship. [...] As people act and develop in relation to things, the things themselves are also disclosed in their manifold depth. So the potential both of what people are capable and what things are capable of are simultaneously realized in this relation. [...] By responding to things in their full dimensions, I too emerge in the fullness of my dimensions.³²

A focal event can occur either explicitly or implicitly. It can happen when one decides to commit to a focal activity or when a focal thing in favourable circumstances makes a

focal event happen.³³ Architecture can support both of these possibilities. Building can provide suitable conditions for a focal activity or, as a built thing, it can open a focal reality in a more general level. Yet ultimately, architects can only create environments that enable and encourage focal events to happen, but they have no power to force people to experience the environment in a certain way.

Although, architecture may not be able to create focal experiences in a strong sense, it still has an important role to play as a ubiquitous context of human activities. A building – or a city – can be seen as a focal thing from both functional and aesthetic viewpoints. A functional viewpoint is self-evident: architecture provides designed places for various focal practices. Architecture as a work of art that more implicitly affects the disclosure of focal reality is, however, a more complex issue to deal with. Borgmann has not written much about a work of art as a focal thing. He has mentioned that Greek temples and medieval cathedrals were focal things that opened up reality to the people in their own time, but he has not written about the meaning of modern artworks. However, he has discussed the central importance of buildings and cities from a slightly different perspective, that is, from the perspective of place and space.

Borgmann has been concerned about the fate of contemporary cities. Big cities, along with their high-rise offices, hotels and apartment buildings, constitute technological spaces – realizations of Cartesian three-dimensional coordinate systems – which, he argues, do not have a proper relation to a particular nature or culture, in the sense that for example a Greek temple, medieval castle or a baroque orchestral suite had. In those abstract environments, people lack a sense of position or location; they are not oriented as they were in more traditional towns. Old towns and city districts are places where orientation is easier and more natural, but today's urban city culture cannot be based solely on an admiration for old urban environments.³⁴

Technological devices and buildings constitute a neutral and homogenous space, whereas focal things disclose a place and reveal a particular orientation with nature and culture. According to Borgmann, as a “memorable place” a city or a building has the status of focal thing. He writes: “As Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore point out, a city is a memorable place if it is oriented by nature, history, divinity, or a great and common task. A memorable city is a focal thing writ large. It gathers and focuses the crucial dimensions of the world.”, and he adds: “These memorable places include buildings as well as towns or cities.”³⁵ The quotes show that Borgmann treats major buildings and cities as places, not as works of art but, in any case, it seems that buildings can act as a focal thing and centre for local communities also on the basis of their non-functional characteristics. In my interpretation, on this point Borgmann comes quite close to Heidegger's thinking on buildings as things.

Even though Borgmann has not discussed the meaning of work of art, he has raised arts and crafts as an example of a focal activity. Building design can be seen as a similar activity. As a focal activity, artistic handwork and building design should be seen as receiving and responding, a revealing that resembles ancient Greek *techne*. Focal making goes beyond the means-ends division and brings forth things without reducing them to objects or devices.

After these quite general remarks on architecture and focality, I will next take a closer look at an architect whose design method and buildings, in my own estimation, can be used as an example of focal things and practices in contemporary architecture. The architect in question is Peter Zumthor. He is not a theoretician, but his work is nevertheless based on certain philosophical ideas that bring him quite close to Borgmann's thinking.

Focality in Peter Zumthor's practice

Especially at the time of his international breakthrough in the 1990s, Zumthor was very inspired by Heidegger's philosophy. I do not know whether he has ever read any of Borgmann's books, but what is interesting is that, just like Borgmann, he has moved from Heidegger's philosophy on things towards its concrete implementation. Without linking him too strongly to any other thinker – which might lead to a misunderstanding of his own design philosophy – one thing is clear: Zumthor is a practitioner, who is interested in dwelling, things and places in the manner that is familiar to us from phenomenological discourse. In his lecture *The Hard Core of Beauty* held in 1991, he describes the roots of his thinking as follows:

The concept of dwelling, understood in Heidegger's wide sense of living and thinking in places and spaces, contains an exact reference to what reality means to me as an architect. It is not the reality of theories detached from things, it is the reality of the concrete building assignment relating to the act or state of dwelling that interests me and upon which I wish to concentrate my imaginative faculties. It is the reality of building materials, stone, cloth, steel, leather ..., and the reality of the structures I use to construct the building whose properties I wish to penetrate with my imagination, bringing meaning and sensuousness to bear so that the spark of the successful building may be kindled, a building that can serve as a home for man.³⁶

Zumthor started out as a cabinetmaker and only later moved into architecture. Actually, he still sees himself as a craftsman, one who makes buildings. He avoids theoretical speculation and conceptualization and rather relies more on experiences, memories, and the imagination, on his own inner and outer images, which he then turns into concrete bodies

and forms. His physicalism is even more radical than that of Borgmann. Zumthor has explained that if there is an abstract concept he immediately tries to translate it in his mind into a physical form, so that he can somehow feel it with his body, soul, and emotions. He does not make design decisions through abstract concepts but always imagines his projects as being part of the physical world.³⁷ Because of this, Zumthor's office is full of scale models and installations made from real building materials such as wood, concrete and metal.

Zumthor's design method differs from conventional ones. He does not start from aesthetic or functional issues but from the physical reality of things: "[...] let things take effect. That is exactly how I want to proceed; I want to start by taking a look at what I experience and feel."³⁸ After these first impressions of a site, he continues by imagining everything that needs to be considered in relation to the object he envisions: place, use, and the people who will live there. All these present inner images are then mixed with older ones, i.e. with Zumthor's own memories, and little by little the first images of the new building emerge. At the end of the process, Zumthor and his staff transform the images of the building into concrete building forms.³⁹

The concrete design work is always done with real materials and sometimes even in real size. Zumthor does not see materials as "mute" matter intended for aesthetic or technological use but rather tries "to expose the very essence of materials, which is beyond all culturally conveyed meaning." He considers carefully which material or materials – he often limits the selection to just three – are appropriate to the work at hand, and he then tries to bring forth those materials in their own being in such a way that mutual tensions between the materials and structures create the desired atmospheric quality.⁴⁰ He believes in the inherent power of material things: "Material is stronger than an idea, it's stronger than an image because it's

really there, and it's there in its own right."⁴¹

Zumthor considers himself a craftsman who solves practical design problems. He is not a theoretician who solves the conceptual problems of architectural theory. In academic circles, this often leads to confusing situations because people approach him as an intellectual, one who can give answers to the most varied theoretical questions of architecture. The confusion shows how difficult the idea of "letting things be" still is to understand, even though Heidegger's phenomenology has been much discussed in architecture for already a relatively long time.

The Thermal Baths in Vals (Graubünden, Switzerland, 1996) is probably Zumthor's most celebrated building. It is also the building whose design process he has most extensively described in his writings. The building appears paradigmatic in terms of both its design and implementation; a unique and highly personal design approach has produced a unique building. The thermal baths are situated in the small mountain village of Vals and, according to Zumthor, the planning process was a joint effort of the whole village. The village was the client: different phases and stages of the project were discussed and approved in communal meetings and when completed the villagers could use the baths at a reduced price.⁴² The baths gather the local community but it also has international significance. When the building is examined on the basis of Borgmann's philosophy, it is easy to see it, on the one hand, as a memorable place and, on the other hand, as a building that provides suitable conditions for a focal activity.

Zumthor has said that the two most important things concerning the baths were that it belongs to the village and that it looks like it has always been there.⁴³ He wanted to create a building that in a natural and archaic manner would be part of the environment and the everyday life of the villagers. Zumthor's studio started the project by trying to find answers



Fig 1. Peter Zumthor, Therman Baths, Vals, 1996: outdoor pool.

Fig 2. The archaic-looking spa located among older hotel buildings.

to questions posed by the site, purpose and materials: mountain rock and water. Working with the inherent laws of the materials in connection with a building assignment, they then produced structures and spaces that, according to Zumthor, possessed a primordial force and were “culturally innocent”.⁴⁴ The final outcome was a building that looks like a huge artificial stone block with a cavernous space carved into it and with grass growing on the top (Figs. 1-2). In the baths, nature is revealed to the local inhabitants in new forms, and thus the building embodies both ancient and current experiences of the place. As a modern piece of architecture that bespeaks its natural origin, the building creates a memorable place that enables focal events.

Discussing the Vals baths from the point of view of focal things and practices is most rewarding when focusing on the baths’ interior spaces and functions (Fig. 3). Zumthor’s example shows the great possibilities architectural design – when done well – can provide in improving people’s well-being. The project consisted of a preliminary programme, within which Zumthor, however, was able to implement his own visions in very broad way. As always with his work, he started from scratch by pondering what the baths and the bathing itself could be. The act of bathing was actually at the very core of the whole design process; according to Zumthor, the building was designed from the inside out.⁴⁵ A standard hotel swimming pool was something he wanted to avoid; he did not want to make a place for entertaining and consumption, but instead sought a deeper bathing experience. Certain design solutions show that a busy consumer society has consciously been left outside the baths: for instance, there is no café connected to the indoor or outdoor pool, and the only clock in the pool spaces is hidden at the top of a low post, where it can be found initially only by chance, though having discovered it thereafter the bathers know where to look for it. All kinds of typical lap



Fig 3. Peter Zumthor, Thermal Baths, Vals, 1996. The main indoor pool is to the right. An image like this can give some indication of the atmosphere of the bathing-spaces, but the actual bathing experience cannot be conveyed through images. In addition, photography is not allowed inside the spa facilities, and therefore the building contains a number of spaces with no published photos.

pools, slides and gadgets are missing as well. In order to deepen the bathing experience, Zumthor focused on a ritualistic side of the bathing. The building is located at the heart of the hot spring (the only one in Switzerland), which brings its own mystical nuance to the ritual. In fact, the intertwining of all things happened just at the level of the mystical images, on which Zumthor has commented:

Consequently, the design process was a playful but patient process of exploration independent from rigid formal models. Right from the start, there was a feeling for the mystical nature of a world of stone inside the mountain, for darkness and light, for a reflection of light upon water, for the diffusion of light through steam-filled air, for the different sounds that water makes in stone surroundings, for warm stone and naked skin, for the ritual of bathing. From the start, there was a pleasure of working with these things of consciously bringing them into play. Only much later, when the design was almost complete, did I visit the old baths in Budapest, Istanbul and Bursa, and understand more fully not only the sources of these seemingly universal images, but their truly archaic nature.⁴⁶

Zumthor explains that the ritual of bathing in the baths entails the silent experiences of bathing and cleansing, the body's contact with water at different temperatures and in different kinds of spaces, relaxing in the water, and touching the stone.⁴⁷ Architecture supports and enables this ritual, on the one hand, with very strong and almost theatrical solutions, like the long entrance corridor, the “sexy” red-lighted changing rooms and a mystical drinking fountain, and, on the other hand, with an open and continuous internal space at the level of the baths, where people can freely stroll and find their own paths. All spaces have been designed to serve a pleasant atmosphere for the body, not only as experienced by oneself but also as seen

by others.⁴⁸ Zumthor states that “The basic thing is that I have tried to make spaces that people look really beautiful in, and people who are pale faced and wrinkled look nice there too. It's easy to make a pool in which only, what's her name, Claudia Schiffer, looks good. There was an old woman there who told me, I know exactly why you are doing what you do here; so that people look nice.”⁴⁹ When I myself personally visited the baths, I realized that even though it is a public building, the bathing experience itself is very private and intimate. The silent and pleasant atmosphere makes one turn inwards and experience one's being in a very intense manner. It is easy to call that experience afterwards a focal event.⁵⁰

Zumthor trusts in the power of architecture. He believes that even in our secular age architecture can provide a home for people. It all depends on the quality of architecture and, particularly, on how the goal of architecture is set. In his book, *A Feeling of History* (2018), Zumthor explains how his buildings, while being all different, still share one common feature concerning the way they are connected to the ground, to a particular place. His goal is to give people a place on earth where they feel at home.

My buildings are grounded in ways that are not formal. I believe it has to do with something more basic and more essential. Mircea Eliade talks about certain personal and sacred places that give us a place on earth, that ground us. I like to think that my buildings are grounded in a similar way, to become a *place*, either sacred or profane, so that they can become a part of a *home* – for me, for a few, for many.⁵¹

Architecture as a humanistic discipline

As stated earlier, Vesely regards architecture as a humanistic discipline. According to him, the main purpose of architecture

“is to situate our life in a particular place and create the right conditions for our existence and coexistence, not only with other people, but also with the given natural conditions and cultural circumstances.” In Vesely’s understanding of architecture as a humanistic discipline, humanism does not refer to the influence of the humanities on architecture or to a separate role of the humanities in design but rather he thinks that architecture itself is a humanistic discipline. Such a viewpoint is motivated by a unifying understanding of architecture; unlike individual techniques and specialized sciences and humanities, architecture faces reality in its entirety. While designing, architects have to grasp the space and place in its wholeness, in its full phenomenal presence. Therefore, the humanistic approach in architecture is not based only on the unifying of knowledge, i.e. the bridging of the contributions of individual disciplines, but also on an understanding of the typical human situations.⁵²

Our everyday life is full of recurring situations in which a certain experience or praxis is intertwined with a particular place or space. Vesely calls them “typical (paradigmatic) situations”. Those situations are typical because they are closely related to habits, traditions and customs, and in the deeper level to institutions and archetypes, and furthermore they are paradigmatic because they have the power to gather and maintain an immense richness of human experience. Situations represent the most holistic way of understanding our experience of the surrounding world. Everyday routines, such as eating, working and learning, are simple examples of typical situations that need typical places but also more complex institutional settings can be viewed in the same way. A French café, for example, is a typical paradigmatic situation based on invisible and visible aspects of French culture. As Vesely states, an essential nature of French café is only partially revealed by its visible appearance and hence a proper understanding of the

identity and meaning of the institution requires a deep commitment to French life. Typical (paradigmatic) situations can be fully understood only by experiencing and living them.⁵³

Vesely sees the humanities – as they are generally practiced today – as being incapable of understanding the lived world in its wholeness. The wholeness can be better understood by more poetic approaches, such as painting, sculpture, literature, and theatre, or by phenomenological and hermeneutical analyses.⁵⁴ Also Heidegger had discussed the problem of modern humanism. According to him, the world “humanism” has lost its meaning because its essence has become metaphysical. Modern humanism is based on a subject-object division and it thus persists in the oblivion of Being. In order to restore its meaning, Heidegger returns to the older meaning of the word *humanitas* and redefines the concept in more primordial way. The redefinition requires a new understanding of the human being, according to which the essence of human being lies in *ek-sistence*.⁵⁵ That means that, as Heidegger sees it, “the way that man in his proper essence becomes present to Being is ecstatic inherence in the truth of Being”⁵⁶ Based on this, “humanism” now means, respectively, that “the essence of man is essential for the truth of Being.”⁵⁷ Humanism has its roots in *ek-sistence*, in humans’ being-in-the-world, and so have building and dwelling as well. In Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, “being-in-the-world” and “(poetic) dwelling” mean the same: it is the manner in which humans exist on the earth. From the point of view of Heidegger’s philosophy, a humanistic approach in architecture can be seen to mean above all that people should seek for a new relation to the world. His often-quoted phrase “only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build”⁵⁸ refers just to a need for that change. The thinking that merely represents should be replaced by the thinking that responds and recalls. Only then do things appear as things again.⁵⁹

In this article, I have discussed in particular the humanistic goals and their implementation in the field of architecture. Borgmann's contribution to the topic has been at the heart of this study. Like Heidegger, Borgmann strives to find a solution to the problem of modern technology. In this project, they both share certain premises but later go in different directions. Heidegger insists on the shift in thinking, a new approach that is also called "letting things be". In letting-be one seeks for a free relation to technology, which means saying "yes" and "no" to technological devices.⁶⁰ Technology itself is not changed. Borgmann's reform of technology is based on focal things and practices. In his approach, technological devices and their modifications are also discussed.

The main purpose of the present article has been to highlight Borgmann's thinking and its connections to architecture. Building, however, let alone a city, is a very complicated thing in terms of both technology and use, and therefore my analysis remains very preliminary. Borgmann makes a sharp division between a device and a focal thing, and he seems to be very selective in discussing which focal things and practices are appropriate for promoting human well-being. But as Strong and Higgs note, basically, "Borgmann thinks of things and devices as being on a continuum: between the clear examples of things and devices are many degrees of variation."⁶¹ Such comments can be found here and there in his writings. It would be well worth furthering that discussion because, especially in architecture, the boundary between device-like (technological) and thing-like qualities is shifting. Another interesting view opens up from the fact that the range of potential focal practices associated with buildings and cities is almost unlimited. Engaging with those issues would deepen the idea of how Borgmann's "philosophy in the service of things" should be understood and implemented in architecture.

Endnotes

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3. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" [1954], in Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated and with an introduction by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp.4-5.
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27. Ibid, 244.

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29. Ibid, p.333.

30. Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.119.

31. Paul B. Thompson, "Farming as Focal Practice", in Higgs, Light and Strong (eds.) 2000, p.175, 178-179. On the relation between thing and place, see Jeff Malpas' article elsewhere in this book.

32. Strong 2000, p.329.

33. Borgmann 1987, p.210.

34. Ibid, p.67, 79, 242-244, and Borgmann 1993, pp.58-59. Here, Borgmann distinguishes between culture as scenery and culture as enactment. Modern city cultures are cultures as scenery, which means that they are taken in by looking or listening, whereas a Greek temple, medieval castle, or baroque orchestral suite were created and taken in in different ways; they were enacted as culture. See Borgmann 1987, p.244.

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36. Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*. Second, expanded edition (Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2006a/1998), p.37.

37. Francesco Garutti: "Interview with Peter Zumthor", *Klat magazine*, 2011. <https://www.klatmagazine.com/en/architecture-en/peter-zumthor-interview-back-to-the-future-07/33335> (accessed 4.3.2018)

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39. Ibid, pp.202-205. Sometimes Zumthor starts his design process from a concept: "The design process does not necessarily have to proceed from image to form, that is from image to body. It is also possible to find a form by starting with a purely abstract concept.", see *ibid.* pp.208-209.

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44. Zumthor 2006a, p.31.

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50. I visited the Thermal Baths in Vals on 14.8.2015.

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60. See, Martin Heidegger, “Memorial Address” [1959], in Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*. Translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969/1966), p.54.

61. Strong and Higgs 2000, p.22 footnote 3.

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Klaske Havik

Fig 1. Amuri Workers' Museum, Tampere. Photo courtesy of the author.

Fig. 2. Material collages by Annu Kumpulainen, Pekko Sangi, Yiran Yin and Clara Grancien. Source: Annu Kumpulainen.

Fig. 3a-b. Aerial photos of the Amuri neighbourhood in 1957 and 2017. Photo: E. M. Staf, 1957, Tampere Museum archives (Tampereen museoiden kuva-arkisto). The same area in 2017; Source: Google Earth.

Fig. 4. Memory Map of Amuri, Tampere. Source: Annu Kumpulainen

Fig. 5. Sketch proposal for a community centre, Amuri, Tampere. Source: Annu Kumpulainen.

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"Nothing is that is not placed" wrote Aristotle. Everything *takes place*, and architecture, by default, is a profession that deals with, intervenes in, transforms and creates places. In the architecture of the contemporary globalized world, however, the understanding of the particular place in which a building or a city is situated is often taken for granted or not addressed at all. *Understanding and Designing Place: Considerations on Architecture and Philosophy* comprises five essays on architecture and philosophy from the standpoint of *place*. The essays are based on presentations held at a seminar at the Tampere School of Architecture in 2017. The seminar concluded with a discussion, the transcript of which completes the book.

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DATUTOP

School of Architecture

Tampere University

Occasional Papers 38

UDC 72.01

ISBN 978-952-03-1113-1

ISSN 0359-7105



Cover visualisation: Neomi Nartus

