

In Search of Ground

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'The situation is hopeless, but it is not serious.' Karl Kraus (Viennese saying)

The history of architecture over the past century and a half can be read as the history of its transformation under the impact of technology. A.W.N. Pugin's *Contrasts* of 1840 is prophetic in this regard since subject to the effects of the industrial revolution he already perceives the ultimate significance of this transformation not only in terms of architecture but also with regard to the mobilisation of the entire society in the service of applied technique and commodification. He patently regards this secular process as boundless and sees that all will fall grist to its mill in the fully administered Benthamite society of the future. At the same time he identifies architecture as the one site upon which the battle between value-free process and the spirit will come to be fought and this prophecy surely remains as valid today as in the mid-nineteenth century.

Since Pugin's time technology has penetrated deeply into the field of building production, not only in terms of the familiar innovations of reinforced concrete and steel frame construction but also in terms of mechanical services. Today some two thirds of the total budget of any large building is expended on mechanical and electrical provisions of one kind or another from air conditioning to piped information. Despite these inroads and the marked tendency to reduce architecture to nothing more than a fairly gratuitous aesthetic effect, that is to say to a marketing veil or 'decorated shed' drawn over the substance of processes that are exclusively economic, building remains an activity that still resists full commodification by virtue of its 'archaic' character. This intrinsic resistance arises out of a number of closely interre-

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lated factors. First there is the unavoidably idiosyncratic character of its connection to the earth, which has been an important element in making it inimicable to on-line, automated factory production. One may think of this as a kind of irreducible topographic interface between culture and nature. Second there is the matter of its size and expense, that evidently makes it into an object that cannot be as rapidly amortised as the vast range of production goods that are constantly absorbed by the metabolism of the consumer society. Third, the relative permanence is evidently essential to the speculative exploitation of the value of the land on which the work stands and last but not least, built production has so far proved intractable to the organisation of large markets sufficient to justify the investment required to sustain the full organisation of production and consumption cycles, in respect of distribution, media control, planned obsolescence, et cetera.

Thus despite the erosion of its 'ground' on all sides, from the destruction of the city and the expansion of suburbia (universally advanced as a matter of automotive economic policy after the second World War) to the present attempt to simplify the architectural object through the superimposition of cybernetic processes and the further dispersal of control and responsibility through specialisation, architecture still remains as one of the last bastions of craft practice, wherein so-called high-tech elements and hand-worked forms may still be carefully assembled.?

To stress tectonic rather than scenographic values in the constitution of architectural form is evidently a strategy by which to stiffen the resistance of the field to its further dissolution through the instrumental maximisation of international capital. As I have already suggested, the various levels at which this resistance may be applied reinforce rather than diminish the intractability of tectonic form. In order to expand this potential we need to elaborate the various ways in which the confrontation between technology and the life world may be dialectically mediated through architecture. In some respects building finds itself in much the same position as other practices such as agriculture and medicine, wherein the



Byzantine chapel, Athens

? *'The erosion of ground'; 'the last bastion of craft practice'; you tend to formulate your vision of history in a pessimistic manner, based on a strong feeling of a slow apocalypse. However, the disenchantment of the world, or the universal consumerism, also can be considered as a total pacification which at least diminishes the chance of a new holocaust. Could you give a clear moral criterion, which is obviously valid for our times, from which you derive your pejorative description of our destiny?*

! *My pejorative view, as you put it, has an ecological basis, but it also arises from a certain despair in face of the global crisis of the welfare state. I don't see how one can be so sure about total pacification given the ecological nemesis that threatens the planet. Tomas Maldonado put it already 20 years ago: 'It is not possible to make anything without waste but this is distinguishable from an ideology of waste'.*

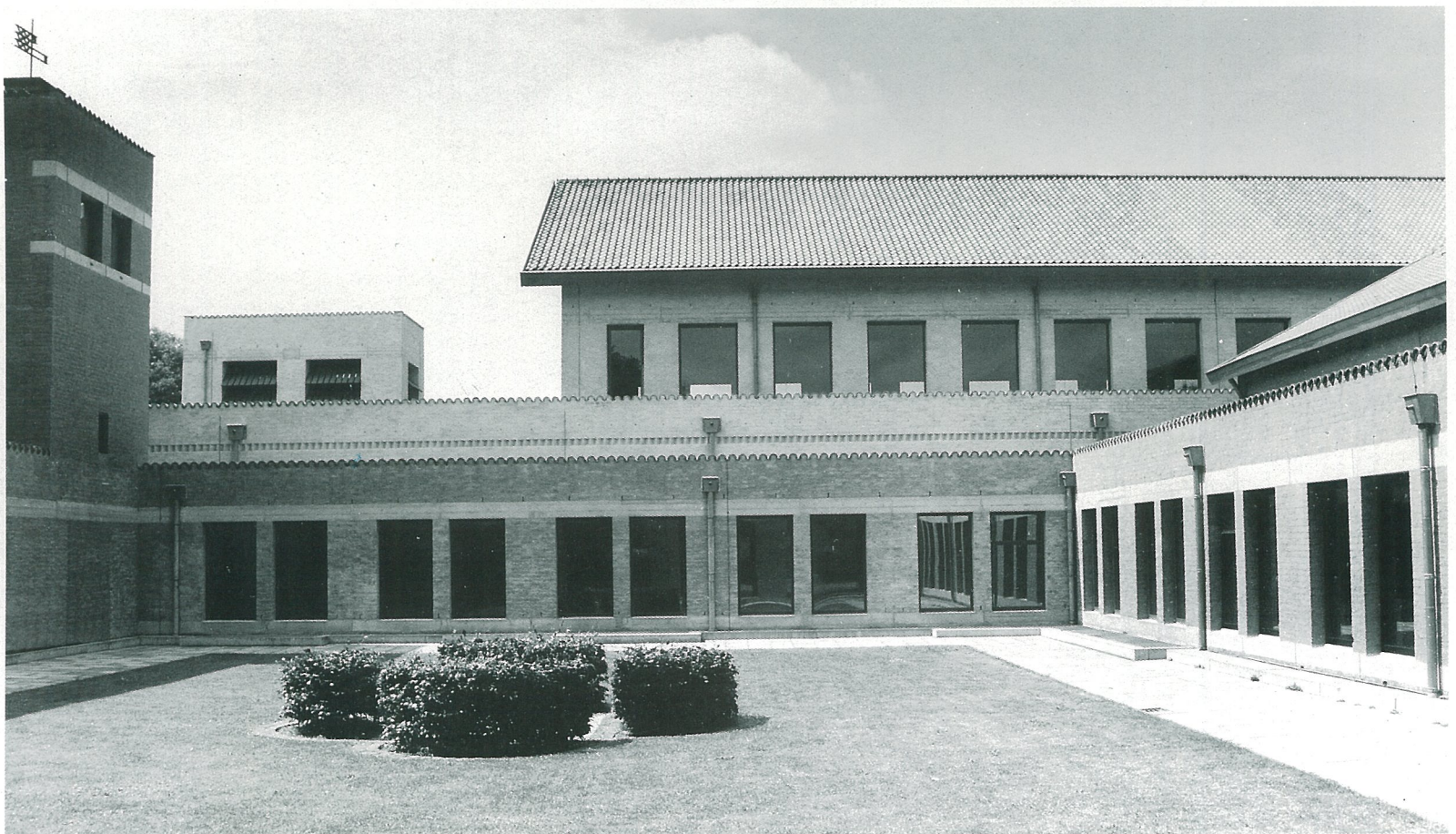
? When Heidegger asked his pupil Victor Farias to translate *Being and Time* into Spanish, Farias escaped from this awful job by saying that whoever wants to read Heidegger, has to read it in German. Heidegger is said to have been very satisfied with this answer. This short story shows the intrinsic connection between the criticism of universal civilisation and the Heideggerian version of Kultur, which as an opposition goes back to the eighteenth century (Goethe). You also want to resist the compatibilisation of architecture with the global village. Where does this culturalist momentum in your thought come from?

! Perhaps from my own agricultural past. What does the term global village mean, other than the fullest expansion possible for multinational capitalism?

application of maximising scientific technique has led to ecologically negative results, producing such undesirable consequences as world wide soil erosion and water pollution through the abuse of insecticides and artificial fertilisers or the equally deleterious side effects in allopathic medicine turning upon the overuse of antibiotics and high-tech surgery.

Despite the reactionary aspects of his thought there is perhaps no other thinker of the twentieth century who has responded more profoundly to the advent of 'technological mobilisation' than Martin Heidegger. In much of his writing, he seems to touch the very core of the modern predicament. As far as tectonic culture is concerned he has articulated a number of fundamental insights that warrant citing here in as much as they reveal the limits of the field in an ontological sense.?

Perhaps his most crucial insight pertains to the irreducibly topographic character of the bounded domain as opposed to the space endlessness of the megalopolis. This he first articulated as a generic opposition in his essay *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* of 1954:



Dom H. van der Laan, Chapel, monastery, Lemiers, 1986

'What the word for space Raum, Rum, designates is said by its ancient meaning. Raum means a placed cleared or freed for settlement and lodging. A 'space' is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary, Greek peras. A boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greek recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing (...). Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds. That for which room is made is always granted and hence is joined, that is, gathered, by virtue of a location, (...). Accordingly spaces receive their being from locations and not from 'space' (...). The space that is thus made by positions is space of a peculiar sort. As 'distance' or stadion (in Greek) it is what the same word stadion means in Latin, a spatium, an intervening space of interval. Thus nearness or remoteness between men and things can become mere distance, mere intervals of intervening space (...). What is more the mere dimensions of height, breadth, and depth can be abstracted from space as intervals. What is so abstracted we represent as the pure manifold of the three dimensions. Yet the room made by this manifold is also no longer determined by distances; it is no longer a spatium, but now no more



Between home and heaven. Stuart Klipper, Road to Bonneville Raceway, Utah, 1990



Martin Heidegger



Alberto Campo Baeza, Garcia Marcos House, 1992

than extensio-extension. But from space as extensio a further abstraction can be made, to analytic-algebraic relations. What these relations make room for is the possibility of the purely mathematical construction of manifolds with an arbitrary number of dimensions. The space provided for in this mathematical manner may be called 'space', the 'one' space as such. But in this sense 'the' space, 'space' contains no spaces and no places.'

By 'place' Heidegger clearly intends a domain wherein it is possible to dwell in a permanent, caring and revealing sense, particularly as our life process is limited by the biosphere and by our psycho-biological character. The consequences of this for tectonic form are surely that the built domain has to be inscribed in such a way as to be able to stand against the rapacity of technological space-endlessness. For Heidegger the rootlessness of the modern world begins with the translation of the Greek experience into the administrative edicts of the Roman imperium as though the literal translation of Greek into Latin could be effected without having had the same experience. Against this misunderstanding, Heidegger seems to posit the presence of tectonic form and with it the materiality of things.

'That which gives things their constancy and pith but is also at the same time the source of their particular mode of sensuous pressure - coloured, resonant, hard, massive - is the matter in things. In this analysis of the thing as matter, form is already co-positd. What is constant in the thing, its consistency lies in the fact that matter stands together with a form. The thing is formed matter. This interpretation appeals to the immediate view with which the thing solicits us by its looks ...'

This concept of things looking at us rather than vice versa seems to imply by way of contrast the implicitly dominating and distancing effect of the perspectival view-point.

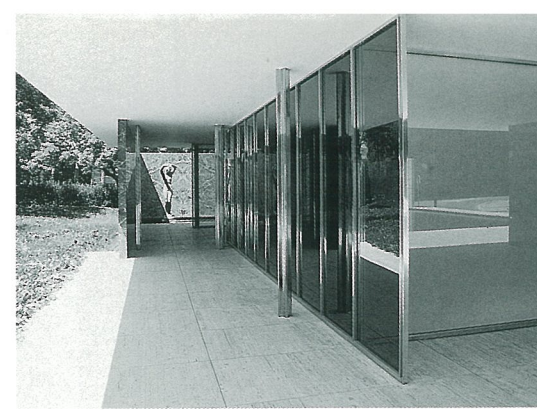
Heidegger's aperspectival vision counterbalances our tendency to overemphasise the appearance of things rather than their substance. All of this turns on the paradoxical opacity of the retinal as opposed to the tactile revelatory character of the things in themselves. More critically it also implies an opposition to the domination of the panoptic viewpoint.

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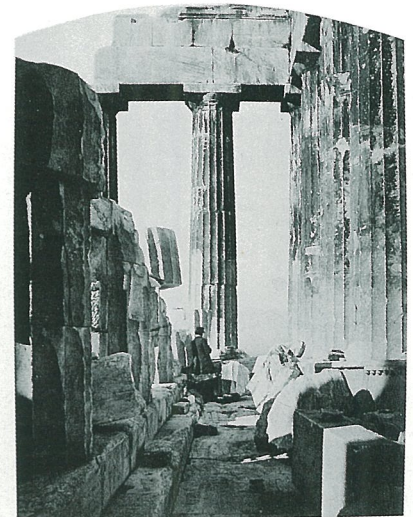
To the extent that architecture lies suspended today between world creation, (Arendt's 'the space of human appearance') and the maximising thrust of technology it must, try to save itself, by remaining committed to discriminating between different states and conditions, that is between the inertia of the thing and the instrumentality of equipment or between the worldliness of the institution and the unworldliness of the *domus*. The tectonic becomes an essential mode by which to embody, reveal and express these differences; the various conditions that is, under which different things appear and sustain themselves. Under this rubric different parts of a building may be rendered according to their ontological status. As Heidegger will put it in a later essay treating with *The Origin of the Work of Art*, architecture not only has the capacity to express the intrinsic character of the materials from which it is made but also to reveal the different instances and modes by which the world comes into being.

'In fabricating equipment (e.g. an axe) stone is used and used up. It disappears into usefulness. The material is all the better and more suitable the less it resists perishing in the equipmental being of equipment. By contrast the temple-work, in setting up a world does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the open of the work's world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colours to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak. All of this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and lustre of metal, into the lighting and darkening of colour, into the clang of tone and into the naming power of the word.'

Two further insights from *The Origin of the Work of Art* seem particularly relevant to our understanding of the scope of the tectonic. The first of these turns on the conceptually related but etymologically distinct term *techne*, derived from the verb *tikto*, meaning to produce. However, according to Heidegger this term has further connotations. On the one hand, it means both art and craft, the Greeks failing to distinguish between the two. On the other, it implies knowledge, in the sense of apprehending



Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion, 1929



? This disqualification of a critique that repeats verbally the language of post-modern architecture, seems in a way to correspond with the reluctance of giving the word too much influence in the strategy of authenticity. If the tectonic form is directly related to the experience of the body, and if this dimension of architecture is considered as an area of resistance, then criticism as such could be a mental tool which has long-lasting negative effects on the experience of the real. How do you estimate the role of criticism in the strategy you are opting for?

! There is no such thing as a neutral mode of beholding and all writing, all thought must in some way or another affect our manner of experiencing the world. How could it be otherwise? There are I suppose almost as many different kinds of critique as creativity with the one fusing into the other and vice versa. Negative thought has its limits, since it is not only a negation of a negation, but it also tends towards a negative regression, in which everything, all life has to be postponed and nothing can be affirmatively asserted. Under such a purview reality cannot be brought into being; cannot be experienced.

? *Topos and typos both transcend the individual capacities to enter a certain discussion, with rational arguments, on what architecture is all about. You tend to diminish the role of the individual to strengthen architecture as a category in a global erosion of meaning. How do you consider the individual, trying to transform the type as institution?*

! I subscribe very much to Alvaro Siza's aphorism, 'Architects don't invent anything, they transform reality' and his insistence elsewhere that the architect who gives the people what they want is a demagogue. He goes on to say that 'the architect must learn from the people, but the people must learn from the architect.' Between these two aphorisms there is surely sufficient ground for individuals to transform the world as it is given including both types and institutions. The operative term however is trans-form and not the arbitrary repudiation of traditional form.

? *Apparently the tactile quality of architecture seems a possible sign of resistance to the easy consumption of the architectural image. But even tactility has become a marketing technique. (See today's Sony designs for example where, contradictorily enough, the remote control is wrought into a very bodily shaped form. Or the display of Mario Botta's realness in tourist brochures of Tessin.) How do you consider this annexation of the body by a marketing representation?*

! As Jean-François Lyotard, amongst others, has remarked, the body is no more immune to subjugation by techno-science and commodification than any other aspect of the life world. I find it interesting that your 'counter-examples' illustrating the co-option of the body, happen to be drawn from two particular areas: (1) consumer products and (2) tourist advertising. In neither case are we talking about the experiencing of architecture as such. The role played by second order cultural phenomena is certainly omnipresent in and around architecture but they are always one remove from the direct experience of the space and material from which the building is made. This applies as much to new work as to the experience of existing environments. It may be noted that the work of Peter Eisenman is at its best as a piece of graphic design or as a conceptual idea or as a mixture of both. The built Kozimi Building in Tokyo however is a far weaker proposition in reality than as a drawing or a photo. The same disappointing pheno menon may also be found in the work of Daniel Libeskind or even in the work of Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid. All this architecture is better drawn than built and this almost proves *de facto* its lack of tactility. This proposition can be put the other way round. The elevation of the Tugendhat House proudly displays the absence of a graphic aesthetic. It has to be built to come into being and the result is of a higher order than any drawing. In all this I am talking about acts of marginal resistance, not about any kind of total overcoming.

what is latent or present within the work; that is to say it implies the idea of *aletheia* in the sense of ontological revelation. Are we not close here to Gianbattista Vico's aphorism *verum, ipsum, factum*; that is to say to the fact that man can only finally know what he himself makes. In other words a work becomes an artwork through the manifestation of a made *factum*. Beauty in this sense is contingent on the emergence of what we may identify as an ontological ethic. All of this is distinct from connoisseurship where works of art are offered solely for aesthetic enjoyment or where later by virtue of preservation they are withdrawn from the world. Of this withdrawal Heidegger would write, 'World withdrawal and world decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the same as they once were. It is they themselves to be sure, that we encounter here, but themselves are gone by'. Elsewhere Heidegger asserts the necessary opposition between the culture of the world creating work and the nature of the earth; the one being dependent on the other and vice versa. 'Measure' and 'boundary' are the delimiting terms by which Heidegger articulates the interface between the world-work and the earthwork.

Heidegger's thinking in this regard combined with his later emphasis on 'dwelling, caring and letting-be (*Gelassenheit*)' have led a number of commentators to see him as a pioneer of eco-philosophy. Global technology was anathema to Heidegger in as much as it lacked insight into the intrinsic limits of things. Aside from the direct impact of such phenomena as acid rain or global warming, Heidegger thought that neither nature nor history would be able to withstand the unworldliness of technology if and when it would be fully applied at a planetary scale. As Michael Zimmerman has put it in his study, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity*; 'Letting something be, taking its measure - these activities can occur only within a world. As we saw earlier, "world" names the historical clearing opened up by a work of art, of statesmanship or of thought.'

Amid the political, cultural and ideological depletions that have attended the last decade of this century, techno-science asserts its universal prowess as the one remaining discourse about which any kind of consensus can be reached, thereby always extending the reach of planetary mobilisation with all the disturbing ecological, cultural and ethical consequences that this would seem to entail. And while the fields of pure science and mathematics may have aporias of their own, these pale beside the 'loss of centre' that has affected architecture, as one superficially fashionable post-modern style has succeeded to another under the ever changing impact of the media, with its insatiable appetite for the fashionable. The same must unfortunately also be concluded about much of the theoretical elaborations that have accompanied these developments.?

How then should we begin to reclaim the 'ground' within which architecture might be reconstructed as a critical and creative discipline? I would like to advance here the model of a converging paradigm comprised of three strands, *topos*, *tectonic* and *type*, the topographic as the changing configuration of the site as given -, the position of the earth on which the work will stand; the tectonic as the substance of the built-work, as the irreducible thingness of its material, and finally the type as the constitution of the space of human appearance.

Thus the 'site' in the deepest meaning of the term needs to be recognised and defined at two different but necessarily interrelated levels; on the one hand, the *topos* or a transformed, transforming and transformable landscape/townscape and on the other the *typos* as the evolved, evolving and evolvable institution.?

In all this we are returned to the *political* and the phenomenological and hence to what I would like to call the *cantonal*; the *canton* that envelops both the idiosyncrasies of the site and the experience of the body. The ideological domination of techno-science tends to suppress the *inter subjective*, the one thing that by definition is never 'value-free'. I am of course alluding to the ideal of direct democracy, to the idea of the *canton* as the site within which the institution must be brought into being. This notion of *canton* returns us, I believe, to the notion of undistorted communication as posited by Jürgen Habermas; the still extant Enlightenment potential for the self-realisation of the species-being through discourse. This means that architecture must constantly strive to return itself to the concrete, if open-ended, space of human appearance, rather than to the maximisation of processal or biological functions as ends in themselves. As Hannah Arendt reminds us it is the aspiration of the human spirit rather than life itself that is ultimately the highest good. This aspiration can only be fulfilled through lived experience, through the politicised, phenomenological base of the *canton*. To identify and sustain such realms, in the face of global mobilisation, is, of course, extremely difficult. But once this aim out of passivity or opportunism is relinquished, the one remaining hope, the sign of the 'not yet', will be erased.?