

Charles Meyer

At Home

It is nowadays more and more difficult to recognize architecture as an entity, its main attributes. We know that since the end of the Second World War, architecture has suffered a particular and sharp identity crisis. From the early 50' when architects were still in the shade of the evangelists of the modern movement, believing fervently in mottos such as *form follows function* until the mid-60 where architecture almost grabbed sociology, hoping to find a credible answer to much broader problems. In the 70's, semiotics invaded the realm of architecture, trying also to find a *system* through this device that would give satisfactory answers. The 80' rediscovered a kind of classicism through *postmodernism*, reflecting the reinforcement of conservative political power on one side, but also the fairly deep confusion in which architecture seemed to be confined. In the 90's, architecture witnessed the emergence of so called deconstructive architecture often characterized by fragmented structures, but also the emergence of compact architecture. During that period another tendency developed in relationship to the two former, with reappropriation of materials as an intrinsic device to elaborate the formative strategy of an architectural process. Materials almost speak by themselves, again almost self referentially. Swiss architects such as Peter Zumthor or Herzog and de Meuron adopted this way of understanding architecture successfully. Particularly through this span of time, it seems that architecture is still finding it difficult to gain trust by its inherent attributes and has often been searching the justification of its existence outside the realm of architecture, living a split life. We can often observe it in the way houses are built, a kind of atomization between design and construction, which often evokes a sense of any whereness, missing the very specific localization, a sense of foreignness to itself and maybe also a sense of exile, dissolving the sense of gravity in its dual senses.

But how did architecture end up in this condition in those last decades and finally what are the mere attributes of architecture?

The notion of exile, in the large sense, as mentioned above, could be a path to try to understand this situation. It is very possible that one of the main attributes of modernity is exile,

both geographically and socially. The simultaneous development of transportation means and deep structural changes that allowed a fundamental atomization of the family contributed to this sense of strangeness to ourselves and to the land. As Edward Said quotes in his *Reflections on Exile*:

Exiles feel an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people.

The opposite of exile is obviously to belong and to be rooted as Simone Weil expressed it 60 years ago:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.

The fading sense of awareness of the very specific localization through the act of building in this case, has maybe older philosophical origins too, as the philosopher Jonathan Sacks points out intuitively:

According to Plato's parable of the cave in the Republic, the world we see, in which we move and live, is a mere play of shadows. The true essence of things is not matter, but forms, ideas, not their concrete embodiment in the world of the senses. It is a wondrous dream, that of Plato, that has never ceased to appeal to his philosophical and religious heirs: the dream of reason, order set against the chaos of life and eternity beyond the here and now. Its single most powerful idea is that truth-reality, the essence of things, is universal. How could it be otherwise. What is true is true for everyone at all times, and so the more universal a culture is, the closer to truth it comes. Is that not, after all, how we grow to maturity as individuals? We begin, in childhood, by being attached to our immediate family. Then, as our exposure to the world widens, we come successively to embrace friends, neighbors, the community, society and eventually all mankind. So it is with civilization itself. The history of homosapiens is precisely the move from small, roving bands to tribes, city states, nations and ultimately, if not yet global governance. So particularity – the world of senses and the passions – is the source of conflict, prejudice and war; universality is the realm of truth, harmony and peace. The move from primitive to sophisticated, parochial to cosmopolitan, local to global, is the journey from particular attachments to universal reasons.

It leads to the belief that there is only one truth about the essentials of the human condition and it holds true for all people at all times. If I am right, you are wrong. If what I believe is the truth, then your belief, which differs of mine, must be an error from which you must be converted, cured

and saved. From this flowed some of the great crimes of history, some under religious auspices, others – the French and Russian revolutions, under the banner of secular philosophies, but both under the enchantment of Plato's ghost.

Plato's assertion of the universality of truth is valid when applied to science and the description of what is. It is invalid when applied to ethics, spirituality and our sense of what ought to be. There is a difference between physis and nomos, description and prescription, nature and culture. Cultures are like languages. The world they describe is the same but the ways they do so are almost infinitely varied. Each language is the product of a specific community and its history, its shared experiences and sensibilities. There is no universal language, concretely speaking. There is no way we can speak, communicate or even think without placing ourselves within the constraints of a particular language whose contours were shaped by hundred of speakers, storytellers, artists and visionaries who came before us, whose legacy we inherit and of whose story we become a part. So we cannot place ourselves outside the particularities of language to arrive to a truth, a way of understanding and responding to the world that applies to everyone at all times.

Those thoughts have a special weight when we know that one of the drivers of globalization, the sixth universal order after ancient Greece, ancient Rome, medieval Christianity, Islam and the Enlightenment, is being the first one to be driven not by a set of ideas but by a series of institutions, among them the market, the media, the multinational corporations and the Internet. The proliferation of channels of communication – e-mail, chat groups, internet on-line journal and the thousand of cables and satellites televisions channels mean basically that we no longer broadcast. We narrow cast. Today we can target those who agree with us and screen out the voice of dissent. It is also maybe a way to react to the fact that until very recently, most people for most of their lives were surrounded by others with whom they shared a faith, a tradition, a way of life, a set of ritual and narratives of memory and hope. Under such circumstances it was possible to believe that our truth was the only truth, our way the only way. Outsiders were few, dissidents fewer still. That is not the situation today. We live in the conscious presence of difference. In the street, at work and on the television screen we constantly encounter cultures whose ideas and ideals are unlike ours. That can be experienced as a profound threat to

identity and seems to lead to an age of politics of identity, the former orders dominated by the politics of ideology. Those universal orders brought inestimable gifts to the world, but they all contributed to diminish difference.

The neo-structuralist philosopher Peter Sloterdijk points out in a similar way this issue mentioning that

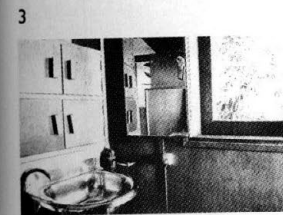
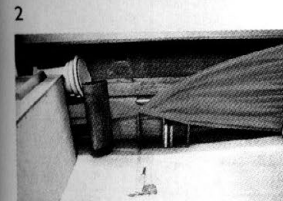
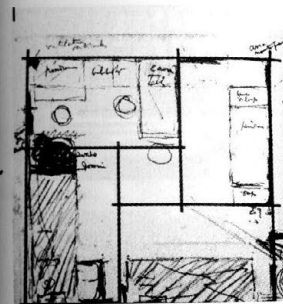
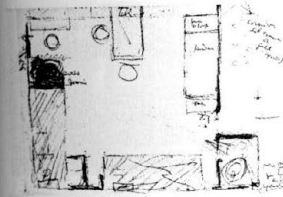
The dangerous sense that Plato gives in the *Politic* concerns the blind point of all pedagogies and politics highly developed, is the actual inequality of human beings in front of power given by knowledge. In the dialogue of the *Politic*, Plato develops the preamble of an anthropo-technique politic. In this discipline, we don't only pay attention on taming herds that tame themselves already, but most of all to focus on a new systematic breeding of humans beings close of the primitive model, the most dignified guard and breeder remaining the sage who has the most vivid memories of the best of celestial visions. Without the ideal of the sage, the care of domestication of man by man remains a worthless passion.

All those reflexions strongly suggest a more balanced relation between universalism and the particular, revealing also the dignity of difference, as Jonathan Sacks elegantly defines it. By which means? A fragment of answer could be articulated in a conference that Elie Haddad and myself gave a few years ago, trying to identify what is the current meaning that tradition could held in the present situation in architecture:

The lucid interpretation of tradition necessitates an examination of the deeper levels of the architectural traditions, where atmosphere, memory and imagination fuse together and reveal the formative principle of a work. It may allow us also to perceive the delicate equilibrium existing between two notions apparently antagonistic, permanency and evolution, unveiling the deep and intimate relation existing between identity and tradition.

This last point leads to the former question of this presentation: what are the mere attributes of architecture and how to reveal them?

It should be clear that architecture is definitely not a building, but the spirit that evokes comfort and protection revealed in its most eloquent way through the act of building by human beings, but not exclusive: clothes, food, inherit also all the characteristics of architecture: comfort and protection of course, but also structure, construction, proportions, texture, context, public/private, etc... In fact architecture is



contributing to give shape compassionately to the scenery in many aspects of life.

But is it possible to teach architecture? I hardly believe so for simple and complex reasons. First of all it is impossible to teach a spirit, teaching is a process reduced and composed mainly of two aspects: broadcasting knowledge and appropriating it. Paradoxally our highly developed media tend to enhance this Pavlovian way of considering knowledge. This process lacks a crucial issue that the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor insightfully pointed out in a recent interview:

The sphere of emotions is much larger, more spacious than intellect, the latter is a line for me.

In other words, the by-product broadcasting and appropriating knowledge misses crucial elements that require to be integrated in conveying architecture.

Broadcasting knowledge of course is a necessity, but also intimately linked to the latter is to develop the recognition of knowledge, leading to familiarity with it and only then the process of appropriation may take shape and place. At this moment, appropriation acquires a totally different meaning, highlighted by emotional intelligence conveyed by recognizing and familiarity. The following four steps that are knowledge, recognizing, familiarity and appropriation enable us to perceive more easily the sense of inhabiting and being inhabited, the very mere sense of home in some ways. Those four steps could be reunited through a single word: initiation, fairly different from teaching. But integrating emotional intelligence requires often a different pattern wave of time from intellect and cannot develop without the presence of an *atmosphere*. Henceforth architecture requires to be conveyed through initiation and this implies to integrate atmosphere not yet related to space and time but possessing the *footprint of a presence*, not formally discernable but often conscient. The next crucial element to understand is the notion of archetype or the basic association to which we are receptive, it is the first formal statement anchored in space and time. The following step refers to the type, which is the fundamental architectural organization and finally the architectural elaboration which deals with more generic knowledge such as technique, proportions, light, etc...

At that moment it is possible to perceive architecture as an undivided and coherent entity, irreducible, with no *details*, liv-

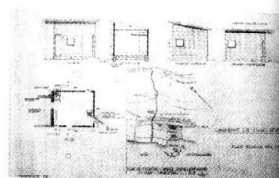
ing by its own, allowing to enter but also to irradiate from its own natural order, and not considered as a mere sum of a checklist. At this moment also, it maybe easier to sense what Sacks means by language, the verbal conveyor of irreducible existence and sense, particularly when developed through the art of conversation, both locally and universal.

Through this perspective the notion of *progress* at all cost, inventiveness, creativeness could be tempered also and permit to focus in an easier way simply on what is...different, always present, individually and collectively.

I would like to present some examples of buildings that evoke to some extent this sense of homeness.

First of all, a well known house realized by Le Corbusier in the beginning of the fifties for his own leisure use in the South of France. In this case, as usually with Le Corbusier's compulsive need to universalize his architectural investigations, he projected this house of 3.66 x 3.66 meters [Fig. 1] with the intent to expand it later. Six architects including Jean Prouve developed the concept of this house in six months. In this case, three issues seem particularly interesting and are linked together: obviously it is an absolute manifesto of the Modulor at the domestic scale, the house measures 3.66 meters, a multiple of 2.26 its canonic dimension [Fig. 2], of course the size of the beds [Fig. 3] and all the pieces of furniture [Fig. 4] are also in ratio with the Modulor, with a *coiling space* [Fig. 5] in the center of this room. Secondly, the intent to respect the free plan which means to study individually all the components of this house: beds, table, cupboard, sink, etc in their dimensions, shape, materials and to assemble them again in space, the context or the site in some sort. Finally the most strange and moving issue of this house is maybe the choice of the material for the skin.

In the first drawings Le Corbusier projected in a modern way horizontal steel planks [Fig. 6], the final result is horizontal planks, but cut in rough wood, evoking in a Rousseauist way, the humble hut of the noble savage [Fig. 7], as if the the interior spatial richness should remain private [Fig. 8]. In this project the last family house built in La Plata by Le Corbusier in the 50's for a famous Argentinian surgeon Dr Currutchet, the intense dedication to settle took shape particularly urbanistically. Le Corbusier never saw the site nor surveyed the construction, receiving only those two photos of the site and the site plan by the client when the contract was agreed upon [Fig. 9 & 10]; and yet, if we observe in this perspective study, the will to set, to match, to fit and inhabit very strongly the context [Fig. 11]. Through those photographs, his partners patiently rebuilt the nineteenth century house with its clas-



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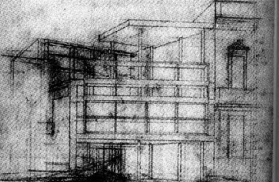
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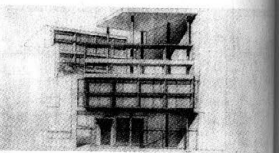
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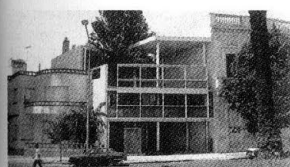
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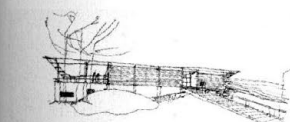
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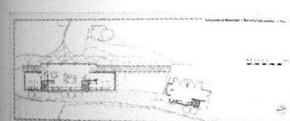
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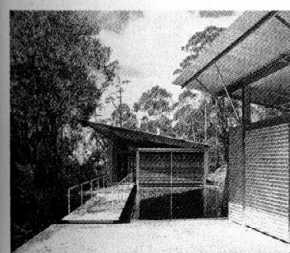
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sical language, trying to recognize a scale, a measure that acknowledges the prevailing atmosphere of a built context, without negating the Corbusean language and scale, the roof of the terrace in relation with the upper cornice on the right, the articulation of the the left side with the curve of the 1930 house [Fig. 12], but especially [Fig. 13] how the scale of the void delimited by the canopy of the terrace enables the house to vibrate by its own temper and yet sensing the scale of the neighboring buildings.

The third and last example refers to a family house built in 1996 by Glen Murcutt in the Australian outback, the Simpson-Lee house. This building epitomizes to some extent the deep relation that Murcutt has with nature, transmitted mainly through his long and deep relation with local Aborigines. Their vision of nature overlaps the notion of home and embodies a characteristic cosmic power transmitted mainly through dreams, their home. One of his first sketches describes [Fig. 14] clearly the structural value of this house with its vertical structure almost the same size as the trees in the foreground. The different entities [Fig. 15 & 16], composed of one main building and a guesthouse separated by a water pond, follow the contour line and remind us also of the irreducible topographic presence of the site.

The thinness of the roof dialoguing with the fragile tree leaves as well as the scale and modenature of the horizontal tin pannels [Fig. 17], the overall evokes materially nature endlessly changing and yet the strong horizontal [Fig. 18] line of the overall anchors the building in the site, but unharmpfully. The floor, the handrail, the light passing through the shutters present an order and a scale that intends to communicate with the place's attributes, evoking lucidly the multiple meanings of the place.

Knowledge and atmosphere, when activated by emotional intelligence, enable us to open the way of dwelling. I am grateful that architecture allowed me to see through its eyes.