

LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND
– *the inner space of the world*

We tend to think of landscapes as external settings for our life and architectural structures. However, there are no external settings for us to settle in, as our perceptions and awareness unavoidably imply an exchange; when we enter a space, the space enters us. Physical and geographical landscapes are also mindscapes. We are not living on a given *mise-en-scene*, as the world is of our own making, to some degree materially, but in its entirety in terms of its mental implications. “I am the space, where I am”¹, Noël Arnaud, the poet, confesses, whereas Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher, reasons: “The world is wholly inside, and I am wholly outside of myself”². He calls this process “intertwining” or “chiasma” implying a simultaneous co-existence of the world and the Self within the other without causal or temporal precedence.³ Rainer Maria Rilke, the master poet, uses the beautiful notion of *Weltinnenraum*, the interior space of the world in reference to the experienced, internalized and embodied world – the landscape of one’s intimate domicile and mind⁴.

Erieta Attali’s horizontally stretched photographs of buildings in their settings immediately invoke this fused unity, or singularity. The format emphasizes the horizon line, although it may not be visible, and makes the landscape appear endlessly continuous and without boundaries. Attali’s landscapes are sublime, bare and powerful, and they address the skeleton and the skin as much as the eyes.

Her photographs record some of the most extreme locations of human dwelling. In these barren landscapes of isolation and solitude, merciless heat and cold, wind and rain, the architectural structures project a sense of arrival, destination and comfort. In Martin Heidegger’s words, they express our “coming into the nearness of distance”.⁵

The house tames distance, heat and cold, it dims the light, and silences the rage of the storm. The house provides us with our second skin and re-calibrated senses; the house is an instrument that readjusts our vision, hearing and haptic sense. We cannot think clearly in the wild and open nature. We need the focusing device of a constructed room with its ordering geometry and intimate resonance with the body in order to give directionality and determination to our thoughts. An open landscape makes our thoughts stray and hover. As Gaston Bachelard asserts, “[T]he chief benefit of the house [is that] the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.”⁶

Buildings are set in the landscape but the landscape is equally mirrored in architecture. Profound architecture always enters a respectful, humble, but at the same time, courageous and proud dialogue with the setting. Paradoxically, the house expresses per-

manence (albeit, temporary and futile) while the landscape projects the changes of the seasons and hours of the day. The house constitutes the static gnomon on the face of the dynamic sundial of the landscape. As Adrian Stokes remarks, “the hesitancy of water reveals architectural mobility”.⁷ The house gives the landscape its point of gravity and focus, while the landscape clarifies and amplifies the geometric voice of the house. This is a timeless dialogue and double caress; the landscape embraces the house while the house caresses the landscape.

In our frustrated and misguided time, architecture is usually regarded as an aestheticized object. Yet, profound architecture is never an object, as it is always relational and a mediation. Architecture is a verb which frames what exists and provides a horizon for understanding. For understanding what? Understanding and internalisation of the human condition, the enigma of existence and of our shared history and destiny with the world. Every profound building mediates between the world and ourselves and settles and inhabits us in the “flesh of the world”, to use the wonderful notion of Merleau-Ponty. This is a form of existential understanding that does not call for concepts, words or theories. As Jean-Paul Sartre points out; “Understanding is not a quality coming to human reality from outside, it is its characteristic way of existing”.⁸ True architecture does not require any explanation, not to speak of apology. It ties the strands of here and beyond, matter and image, usefulness and futility, perception and imagination, into a unity that is lived rather than understood. The true meaning of architecture is an existential and embodied wonder that directly articulates our sense of being and Self. We do not live separately in physical and material, mental and spiritual, worlds. These faculties and dimensions are fully fused in the human existential experience.

We tend to think that architecture is solely a vehicle and instrument to confront space. Yet, architectural structures are equally importantly instruments for the domestication of time. We cannot exist mentally in a measureless time. Physical space and natural time have to be scaled to human measures in order to be grasped by our perceptions and understanding. The most adorable products of architecture create a specific center of gravity and meaning, a focal point from which “the world appears complete and right”, to use the touching description by which Pierre Teilhard de Chardin characterizes the magical locus of perfection which he calls “Omega”.⁹

There is an unconscious correspondence between the landscape and the human body, in the same way that the house and the body are reversible metaphors. We exist in the landscape as embodied beings sharing with it its very flesh. “Our human landscape is our autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations and even our fears, in tangible, visible form. We rarely think of landscape that way, and so the cultural record we have written in the landscape is liable to be more truthful than most autobiographies because we are less self-conscious about how we describe ourselves”, Pierce F. Lewis writes.¹⁰

In addition to being a testimony of the deepest qualities of culture, or of their absence, ordinary landscapes expose and externalise our inner mental landscapes, the landscapes of our soul. “In the fusion of place and soul, the soul is as much a container of place as place is a container of soul, and both are susceptible to the same forces of destruction”, Robert Pogue Harrison, the literary scholar, asserts.

Indeed, every act of construction contains an element of destruction; terrain and vegetation are violated, daylight and sight conditions altered, and the virginity of the natural landscape is lost forever. As Paul Valéry appropriately points out, “Destroying and constructing are equal in importance, and we must have souls for the one and the other [...]”¹¹

Irresponsible construction creates irreparable wounds and scars on the face of Mother Earth, whereas responsible and sensitive architecture caresses her features, and underlines her dynamics and characteristics. Sensitive architecture even has the power to mend and cure landscapes, both natural and man-made, that have been violated by thoughtless and senseless acts of our fellowmen. Encountering a scene of brutal force, carelessness and lack of aesthetic sensibilities in the man-made landscape is a moment of looking deep into the troubled soul of man. When a culture loses its sense and desire for beauty, it has already lost its joy of life and sense of optimism. This culture has lost its ethical judgement and is already on its way towards self-destruction.

Architecture creates constructed and lived metaphors of the world and human existence. Like all profound works of art, meaningful architectural works are microcosmos, complete and autonomous constructed and abstracted worlds of their own. Great buildings are universes, worlds within the world. Yet, they are in respectful and invigorating dialogue with their settings; together with their setting they create a symphonic relationship. “[H]ave you not noticed, in walking about this city, that among the buildings with which it is peopled, certain are *mute*; others speak; and others, finally – and they are the most rare – *sing*?”, Paul Valéry asks.¹²

A true piece of architecture always enhances, celebrates, clarifies and strengthens the reading of the landscape and gives it specific meanings. The two are intertwined; the landscape frames architecture from outside, while the architectural structure frames the landscape from within.

Erieta Attali’s photographs convey convincingly and poetically this essential intertwining and internal dialogue. In her images the landscape empowers the architectural structure whereas the building underlines the sublime beauty of the setting. This relationship of the landscape and architecture is an erotic one. As in an amorous relationship, the autonomy and separateness of the other is respected while protecting and supporting the other’s vulnerability.

References

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- 2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962, p. 407.
- 3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm", *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1992.
- 4 As referred to in Liisa Enwald, editor, "Lukijalle" [To the Reader], Rainer Maria Rilke, *Hiljainen taiteen sisin: kirjeitä vuosilta 1900-1926* [The silent innermost core of art: letters 1900-1926], TAI-teos, Helsinki, 1997, p. 8.
- 5 As quoted in John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear; Dispatches on survival and resistance*, Vintage Books, New York, 2007, p. 144.
- 6 Bachelard, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- 7 Adrian Stokes, "Prologue: at Venice", *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, vol. II, Thames and Hudson, Plymouth, 1978, p. 88.
- 8 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Emotions: An Outline of a Theory* (1939), Carol Publishing Co., New York, 1993, p. 9.
- 9 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2008.
- 10 Peirce F. Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape", in D. W. Meinig, editor, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, Sunstone Press, Santa Fe, 1975, p. 8.
- 11 Paul Valéry, "Eupalinos, or The Architect", *Paul Valéry: Dialogues*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1956, p. 70.
- 12 Paul Valéry, *op. cit.*, p. 83