

PALLASMAA
THE
EYES
OF
THE
SKIN
ARCHITECTURE
AND THE SENSES



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THIRD EDITION



A John Wiley and Sons, Ltd, Publication

THIN ICE *STEVEN HOLL*

Foreword

When I sat down to write these notes in rainy New York City, thinking of the fresh white snow which had just fallen in Helsinki and the early thin ice, I remembered stories of Finland's cold winter, where every year short-cut roads are improvised across the thickly frozen north lakes. Months later as the ice begins to thin, someone will take the gamble to drive across the lake and crash through. I imagine the last look out over white ice cracks spread by cold black water rising up inside the sinking car. Finland's is a tragic and mysterious beauty.

Juhani Pallasmaa and I first began to share thoughts about the phenomenology of architecture during my first visit to Finland for the 5th Alvar Aalto Symposium in Jyväskylä in August 1991.

In October 1992, we met again in Helsinki when I was there to work on the competition for the Museum of Contemporary Art. I remember a conversation about Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings as they might be interpreted or directed toward spatial sequence, texture, material and light, experienced in architecture. I recall this conversation took place over lunch below decks in a huge wooden boat anchored in the Helsinki harbour. The steam rose in curls above the vegetable soup as the boat rocked slightly in the partially frozen harbour. I have experienced the architecture of Juhani Pallasmaa, from his wonderful museum additions at Rovaniemi to his wooden summerhouse on a remarkable little stone island in the Turku Archipelago, in southwestern Finland. The way spaces feel, the sound and smell of these places, has equal weight to the way things look. Pallasmaa is not just a theoretician;

he is a brilliant architect of phenomenological insight. He practises the unanalysable architecture of the senses whose phenomenal properties concretise his writings towards a philosophy of architecture.

In 1993, following an invitation from Toshio Nakamura, we worked together with Alberto Pérez-Gómez to produce the book *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*.¹ Several years later the publishers, A+U, chose to republish this little book, finding its arguments proved important to other architects.

Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin*, which grew out of *Questions of Perception*, is a tighter, clearer argument for the crucial phenomenological dimensions of human experience in architecture. Not since the Danish architect Steen Eiler Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture* (1959) has there been such a succinct and clear text which could serve students and architects at this critical time in the development of 21st-century architecture.²

Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, the book he was writing when he died, contains an astonishing chapter: 'The Intertwining - The Chiasm'. (It was, in fact, the source of the name I gave my 1992 competition entry for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki - Chiasm was changed to Kiasma, there being no 'C' in Finnish.) In the chapter's text on the 'Horizon of Things', Merleau-Ponty wrote: 'No more than are the sky or the earth is the horizon a collection of things held together, or a class name, or a logical possibility of conception, or a system of "potentiality of consciousness": it is a new type of being, a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality ...'.³

In the second decade of the 21st century these thoughts go beyond the horizon and 'beneath the skin'. Throughout our world, consumer goods propelled by hyperbolic advertising techniques serve to supplant our consciousness and diffuse our reflective capacity. In architecture the

application of new, digitally supercharged techniques currently join the hyperbole. With this noisy background, the work of Pallasmaa evokes reflective solitude and resolve – what he has once called ‘The Architecture of Silence’. I will urge my students to read this work and reflect on ‘background noise’. Today the ‘depth of our being’ stands on thin ice.

Notes

- [1.](#) Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa and Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*, Special Edition, A+U Publishing (Tokyo), July 1994.
- [2.](#) Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 1959.
- [3.](#) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press (Evanston, IL), 1968, pp 148–9.

TOUCHING THE WORLD *JUHANI* *PALLASMAA*

Introduction to the Third Edition

My little book *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* was first published in 1996 in the 'Polemics' series of Academy Editions, London. The editors of the series invited me to write an extended essay of 32 pages on a subject matter that I found pertinent in the architectural discourse of the time.

The second part of the manuscript took its basic ideas from an essay entitled 'An Architecture of the Seven Senses', published in the July 1994 special edition of *A+U* entitled *Questions of Perception*, a publication on Steven Holl's architectural work, which also included essays by Holl himself and Alberto Pérez-Gómez. A somewhat later lecture of mine given in a seminar on architectural phenomenology at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen in June 1995, where the three writers of *Questions of Perception* presented lectures, provided the basic arguments and references for the first part of this book.

Somewhat to my surprise, the humble book was received very positively, and it became required reading in architectural theory courses in numerous schools of architecture around the world.

The polemical essay was initially based on my personal experiences, views and speculations. I had simply become increasingly concerned about the dominance of vision and the suppression of other senses in the way architecture was taught, conceived and critiqued, and the consequent disappearance of sensory and sensual qualities from architecture.

During the years since I wrote the book, interest in the significance of the senses, both philosophically and in terms of experiencing, teaching and making architecture, has grown significantly. My assumptions about the role of the body as the locus of perception, thought and consciousness, as well as about the significance of the senses in articulating, storing and processing sensory responses and thoughts, have been strengthened and confirmed by other writers. In particular, philosophical investigations on human embodiment and recent neurological research have provided support for my assumptions.

With the choice of the title 'The Eyes of the Skin', I wished to express the significance of the tactile sense for our experience and understanding of the world, but I also intended to create a conceptual short circuit between the dominant sense of vision and the suppressed sense modality of touch. Later I learned that our skin is capable of distinguishing a number of colours; we actually do see by our skin.¹

The significance of the tactile sense in human life has become increasingly evident. The view of Ashley Montagu, the anthropologist, based on medical evidence, confirms the primacy of the haptic realm:

[The skin] is the oldest and the most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication, and our most efficient protector [...] Even the transparent cornea of the eye is overlain by a layer of modified skin [...] Touch is the parent of our eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. It is the sense which became differentiated into the others, a fact that seems to be recognized in the age-old evaluation of touch as 'the mother of the senses'.²

Touch is the sensory mode which integrates our experiences of the world and of ourselves. Even visual perceptions are fused and integrated into the haptic continuum of the self; my body remembers who I am and

how I am located in the world. My body is truly the navel of my world, not in the sense of the viewing point of the central perspective, but as the very locus of reference, memory, imagination and integration. All the senses, including vision, are extensions of the tactile sense; the senses are specialisations of skin tissue, and all sensory experiences are modes of touching, and thus related to tactility. Our contact with the world takes place at the boundary line of the self through specialised parts of our enveloping membrane.

It is evident that 'life-enhancing'³ architecture has to address all the senses simultaneously, and help to fuse our image of self with the experience of the world. The essential mental task of buildings is accommodation and integration. They project our human measures and sense of order into the measureless and meaningless natural space. Architecture does not make us inhabit worlds of mere fabrication and fantasy; it articulates the experience of our being-in-the-world and strengthens our sense of reality and self.

The sense of self, strengthened by art and architecture, also permits us to engage fully in the mental dimensions of dream, imagination and desire. Buildings and cities provide the horizon for the understanding and confronting of the human existential condition. Instead of creating mere objects of visual seduction, architecture relates, mediates and projects meanings. The ultimate meaning of any building is beyond architecture; it directs our consciousness back to the world and towards our own sense of self and being. Profound architecture makes us experience ourselves as complete embodied and spiritual beings. In fact, this is the great function of all meaningful art.

In the experience of art, a peculiar exchange takes place; I lend my emotions and associations to the space and the space lends me its atmosphere, which entices and

emancipates my perceptions and thoughts. An architectural work is not experienced as a series of isolated retinal pictures, but in its full and integrated material, embodied and spiritual essence. It offers pleasurable shapes and surfaces moulded for the touch of the eye and the other senses, but it also incorporates and integrates physical and mental structures, giving our existential experience a strengthened coherence and significance.

In creative work, both the artist and craftsman are directly engaged with their bodies and their existential experiences rather than focusing on an external and objectified problem. A wise architect works with his/her entire body and sense of self. While working on a building or an object, the architect is simultaneously engaged in a reverse perspective, his/her self-image, or more precisely, existential experience. In creative work, a powerful identification and projection takes place; the entire bodily and mental constitution of the maker becomes the site of the work. Ludwig Wittgenstein acknowledges the interaction of both philosophical and architectural work with the image of self: 'Working in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more a work on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On how one sees things [...].'⁴

The computer is usually seen as a solely beneficial invention, which liberates human fantasy and facilitates efficient design work. I wish to express my serious concern in this respect, at least considering the current role of the computer in education and the design process. Computer imaging tends to flatten our magnificent, multi-sensory, simultaneous and synchronic capacities of imagination by turning the design process into a passive visual manipulation, a retinal journey. The computer creates a distance between the maker and the object, whereas drawing by hand as well as working with models put the designer in a haptic contact with the object, or space. In our