

JUHANI PALLASMAA

THE
EYES
OF
THE
SKIN

ARCHITECTURE
AND THE SENSES
FOURTH EDITION



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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 towards 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 joins 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.

