Learning by embodied absorption

When the poet David Shapiro interviewed John Hejduk, the legendary Dean of the Cooper Union School of Architecture and one of the finest and most influential teachers of architecture in the past decades, and asked him about his teaching method, Hejduk answered: “I teach osmosiologically, by osmosis.” With this surprising answer Hejduk reveals the most essential manner of learning. And, that is an unconscious, embodied, and existential absorption rather than an intellectual and verbal recording of facts. This immersion is the manner in which each one of us learned our mother tongue. The very essence of learning also in any creative field is embodied more in the student’s sense of self and his/her image of the world than in information and facts. The promoters of a pedagogical education seem to entirely dismiss this essential mental and existential perspective. This area of learning can appropriately be called personal growth. Education and learning in any creative field is the result of an inner and unique self, and the content of education is bound to be more existential than factual, related more with experiences and values than information. This process of learning is the gradual construction of an inner sense of goal, responsibility, ethical stance, and a combined sense of humility and pride. In my view, this polar attitude is most difficult to acquire. Paradoxically, the essence of learning is essentially “un-learning”, or forgetting the learned facts. One must be able to forget them when they are many and one must have the great patience and humility to wait till they come again.

KEY WORDS: architecture; education; knowledge; wisdom; learning.

‘Thinking is more interesting than knowing, but less interesting than seeing.’

J.W. Goethe

‘Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings – always darker, emptier and simpler.’

Friedrich Nietzsche

ABSTRACT

The sheer complexity of any architectural task calls for an embodied manner of working and a total introjection – to use a psychoanalytical notion – of the hierarchical scale information – knowledge – wisdom, is not always understood in pedagogic thinking, and as a consequence information is given too much value. Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests: “Work on philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really work on oneself. On one’s own condition. On how one sees things. (What one expects of them).” We have to make ourselves and construct our world before we are capable of building anything else. Or how people to dwell or contemplate in. In educating creative capacities, information has to turn into knowledge, knowledge into existential understanding and understanding into internalized wisdom. And, what is wisdom? Isn’t wisdom the finest and deepest quality of being human? As TS Eliot, one of the greatest of the modern poets, writes:

Where is the life we lost in living? Where is the wisdom we lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we lost in information? The poet’s lines make me think of the most severe threat to humanistic and creative education today: the loss of the book. Books, whether books on poetry, novels, arts, or the sciences, develop fundamental narratives of causality, and they open up epic views into the continuum of the human life. Regardless of their numerous advantages, digital media break narratives, causality and logic into fragmented bits of information. They also strip away inherent human meaning and thereby destroy the sensuality and sensibility of things. It is not information in a book that is of primary value, it is the book itself, the logic of the story and its ethical causality that possesses the highest educational value. Great novels provide the most profound theater of the logic and illogic, the ecstasies and frustrations of life. Literature permits us to view and experience life and its mysteries and dramas through the minds and hearts of some of the finest and most talented individuals of the Humankind. Through art, we can see with the eyes of Piero della Francesca or Vermeer, and we can feel with heart of Rilke or Eliot. This is the great gift, the great mercy of profound art and poetry. Great architects lend us the sensitivity of their skin to feel “how the world touches us”, to use a beautiful notion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. We can feel the touch of the world and culture through the skin of Luis Barragan or Louis Kahn, and experience the mysteries as well as truths of existence. It is not information in a book that is of primary value; it is the book itself, the logic of the story and its ethical causality that possesses the highest educational value. Great novels provide the most profound theater of learning about the logic and illogic, the ecstasies and frustrations of life. Literature permits us to view and experience life and its mysteries and dramas through the minds and hearts of some of the finest and most talented individuals of the Humankind. Through art, we can see with the eyes of Piero della Francesca or Vermeer, and we can feel with heart of Rilke or Eliot. This is the great gift, the great mercy of profound art and poetry. Great architects lend us the sensitivity of their skin to feel “how the world touches us”, to use a beautiful notion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. We can feel the touch of the world and culture through the skin of Luis Barragan or Louis Kahn, and experience the mysteries as well as truths of existence.

Architecture - an impure discipline

The complexity of the phenomenon of architecture results from its ‘impure’ conceptual essence as a field of human endeavour. Architecture is a practical and metaphysical act. It is a utopia of poetic, technological and artistic, economic and existential, collective and individual manifestation, all at the same time. I cannot, in its name, name a clearavour or discipline, which would have a more complex, and essentially more conflicting, grounding in the lived reality, and human interaction. Architecture would respond to existing demands, fears, wishes and desires, at the same time that it creates its own reality, dreams and criteria. If the past, present and future, it is both the end and the means. Besides, in its aspiration towards an ideal, authentic architecture always surpasses all consciously set aims and, consequently, is always a gift. How does one possibly teach such an impossible entanglement of requirements and contradictions?

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task. In creative work, the artist and the architect alike are directly engaged with their bodies and existential experiences rather than focusing on an external and objectified body. An architect goes about designing a new building for himself rather than the instrument, and a masterful soccer player plays the entity of himself, the other players and the spectators as a whole to generate the field. The player understands the goal is a way in which, a fixed rather than known. The mind does not inhabit the playing field, but the field is inhabited by a “knowing body”, writes Richard Lang when commenting on Merkau-Ponty’s views on the skill of soccer player.

The wise architect works likewise, I believe, through his/her entire personality, instead of manipulating pieces of cold and rationalistic solution, visual expression. An architectural or artistic task is encountered rather than resolved. In fact, in genuine creative work, knowledge about aesthetic and technical issues is not the main ingredient. Brodsky, the Nobel Laureate poet, puts it bluntly: “In reality (in art and, I would think, science) experience and the individual consciousness, the birth of the first personal psychic experiences, recognize the existence of the polyvalent, synthetic and unconscious image. As Alvar Aalto once wrote: “In every case (of creative work) one must achieve the simultaneous solution of opposites. Nearly every design task involves tens, often hundreds, sometimes thousands of different contradictory elements which are forced into a functional harmony only by man’s will. This harmony cannot be achieved by any other means than those of art.” We could speak of a poetic rationality, or a ‘poetic chemistry’, to use a notion of Bachelard.

Architecture in other art forms

In the past years, I have written quite a lot about the architecture of painting and cinema, and I have also studied how architectural settings and situations are commonly identified and celebrated. Marilyn Chang’s book Dwelling in the Text is a study of architectural imagery in American comic. As she explains herself, she explores the way in which the writers of comic strips have appropriated houses as structural, psychological, metaphysical, and literary metaphors, constructing complex analogies between house and house-as-a-building, the house and social environment, house and text. American writers have generally portrayed the structures as an individual inhabiting as bearing a direct relationship or resemblance to the structure of his or her psyche and inner life and as constituting a concrete manifestation of specific values.

Considerable amount has also been written on the architectural essence of music and vice versa, not to speak of direct cross-connections between these two arts. The Pythagorean harmonics, in fact the oldest western theory of music, inspired ideas about the harmony of human body and the fundamental existential essence. Besides, all artistic expression is seamed through the human senses, memory and imagination. “All poets and painters are bohemian philosophers”, as the Dutch philosopher Johannes J. van den Berg writes, “and say the same of all other artists as well as profound architects, Semir Zeki, the neurologist has made another interesting proposition: ‘Artists are in some sense neurologists, studying the brain with techniques that are unique to them, but studying unknowingly the brain and its organisation nevertheless.’ This view opens up a bottomless well for architecture, since the project isabout to go through the study of other art forms. Because of its severe logical complexities and layers of practical requirements, architecture tends to lose sight of its fundamental existential essences and meanings and to turn into pure rationality or mere aesthetics. An encounter with other arts certainly enhances the architect’s sensitivity of the artistic essence of his/her own art form.

Architecture of painting

The evolution of the research modern architecture, Alvar Aalto said: “It is about painting.” In 1947 he wrote: ‘… [A]bstract forms of art have brought impulses to the architecture of our time, although indirectly, but this fact cannot be ignored. I mean, to the other hand, architecture, has provided sources for abstract art. These two art forms have alternately influenced each other. There we are – the arts do have a common root even in our time’ [1].

Painting is close to the realm of architecture, particularly because architectural issues are so often or – I should say, unavoidably – part of the subject matter of painting, regardless of whether we are looking at representational or abstract painting. In this category, it is highly questionable altogether, as all meaningful art is bound to be representative of some existential sense: if a work of art does not evoke an existential encounter, it simply remains meaningless.

Late medieval and early Renaissance paintings are particularly inspiring for architects, because of the constant presence of abstract forms in these paintings, buildings, and paintings are almost always human figures. The smallest details suffice to create the experience of architectural space, a feature that is one of the edges of a wall provides an architectural setting. The innocence and humanity of this painterly architecture, the equality of the human and architectural figure is most comforting, touching and inspiring: this is a truly therapeutic architecture. The best lessons in domesticity and the essence of home are the 17th century Dutch paintings, in which house interiors reflect a happy bourgeois life style.

The interactions between modern art and modern architecture are well known and acknowledged, but I have not yet written enough about the one-way flow of influence, which has been inspired by the painterly world of J.M.W. Claude Monet or Mark Rothko, for instance. These inviting and enveloping views of space project a radiant vision of space, whereas Bonnard’s paintings of bathing women express a delicate sensitivity and happiness, which are both shared by architects. Bonnard’s paintings fuse the interior and the outdoors near and distant, the constructed and the live I want to argue, that painting and other art forms have surveyed dimensions of human emotion and spirit, which have remained untouched too often by architects, whose art in todays terms tends to respond to normalized normality and remain one-dimensional in its existential scope. The work of numerous artists of our time is closely related with essential issues of architecture, such as Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria, Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Peter Louise, Wolfgang Laib, Ann Hamilton and James Turrell, just to mention a few of the most obvious cases. These are all artists whose works have inspired architects and will continue to do so.

We can also study principles of artistic thinking and making in the impressive writings of today’s artists, such as Henry Moore, Roberto Serra, Donald Judd, James Turrell and Agnes Martin, all of whom also write perceptively on their own art. To say that artists tend to write more directly and sincerely of their work than architects, who frequently cast an intellectualized screen over their writings.

Architecture of cinema

A number of notable architects of our time have explicitly acknowledged the importance of the cinematic world in their work, such as Jean Nouvel, Bernard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas and Hani Rashid. This is what Jean Nouvel has to say about the interaction of architecture and cinema: “Architecture exists, like cinema, in the dimension of time and movement. One conceives and reads a building in terms of sequences. To erect a building is to predict and bring about effect of contrast and linkage through which one passes … In the continuous shot/sequence that a building is, the architect works with cuts and edits, framing and opening.”

In its inherent abstractness, music has historically been regarded as the art form, which is closest to architecture. In my view, however, cinema is even closer to architecture than music, not solely because of its temporal and spatial structure, but fundamentally because both architecture and cinema articulate lived space. These two arts create and mediate comprehensive images of life, present and future. The fact that buildings and cities create and preserve images of culture and particular ways of life, cinema projects the cultural archaeology of both the time of the making and the era that it depicts. Both forms of art define dimensions and essences of existential space; they both create experiential scenes for life situations.

Film directors create pure poetic architecture, which arises directly from our shared mental images of dwelling and domesticity as well as the eroticism and anxieties of space. Directors like Andrey Tarkovsky and Michelangelo Antonioni have created a moving architecture of memory, longing and melancholy, which assures us that also the art form of architecture is capable of addressing the entire human emotional range ranging from grief to ecstasy.

Jean Vigo’s L’Atalante, Jean Renoir’s The Rules of the Game, Orson Welles’ Citizen Kane and many other classics of cinema should be made compulsory ingredients of educational architecture.

In fact, I have listed fifty books of fiction and poetry, fifty books of non-fiction, and fifty films as my personal recommendation to my architecture students.

Due to its extension, this article will continue in the next issue of Palimpsesto, that will be launched in December 2021.

1 Source of the quote unidentified. The writer received it from Slaven Holm in the early 1950s.
5 Edward Clarke’s private comment to the author, Helsinki 1987.
MEMORIA

Paulo Mendes da Rocha

Entrevista para Palimpsesto 03, agosto de 2011

Paulo Mendes da Rocha no creía en vocaciones predeterminadas. Nos lo explicó una firme mantra de su ensayo sobre el diseño en su estudio de Sao Paulo, un local austero y descriptivo de cualquier elemento esencialmente ornamental. Con la misma sencillez, teria de un carismático insólito, nos desvió el origen de su armoniosa facilidad para la construcción en su sentido más amplio: “yo no soy ningún ingeniero, yo me educué siempre en esa visión de que las cosas pueden ser construidas.”

En 1956, con 29 años, Mendes da Rocha ganó el concurso para el Centro Atlético Paulistano. Se presentó “sólo para tener una primera experiencia, con absoluta libertad y sin ninguna esperanza de ganarlo”. Lo ganó, con una estructura inventada junto al ingeniero Julio Stutchi (colega de promoción de Vilanova Artigas, quien pocos años antes había invitado a Mendes da Rocha a ser su asistente en la Universidad de Sao Paulo), y con un jurado compuesto, entre otros, por Lino Levi y Plínio Croce. Tres años más tarde, el proyecto recibiría el Gran Premio Internacional en la IV Bienal de Arte y Arquitectura de Sao Paulo, cuyo jurado estaba presidido por Eduardo Reddy. Con poco más de 30 años, Mendes da Rocha se rodeó, estrechamente y como si darse cuenta, de un buen número de maestros brasileños.

Con esa misma edad, Joan Margarit alcanzaba en 1968 el grado de Doctor Arquitecto y se convertía en catedrático de cálculo de estructuras de la UPL. Era un momento de crecimiento de la Escuela de Arquitectura de Barcelona, y la necesidad de nuevos catedráticos aceleró el nacimiento de Un grupo de jóvenes que insularan aire fresco y, entre otras muchas cosas, aportaron una mayor presencia en las aulas más allá de la arquitectura. En gran medida, esta proximidad con los alumnos catalizó la formación de una corriente, muy propia de la escuela de Barcelona, de arquitectos dedicados al diseño y cálculo de las estructuras de edificación.

Un disciplina que en la mayoría del territorio nacional -y más aún en el internacional- estaba consagrando principalmente a los ingenieros. Joan Margarit y su socio, amigo y también catedrático Carles Buadé tuvieron mucho que ver con este cambio de paradigma y, paralelamente, construyeron una carrera profesional plagada de reconocimientos.

Pero Margarit, que sí creía en vocaciones predeterminadas, se entregó a la suya: la poesía. “La vocación tiene muchos grados. En última instancia es el artista. Esa es una vocación, si no la hacemos, mueres. Ese es el omique de la vocación, que se da en territorios específicos. Sólo se puede ver si el artista se otorga más energía para pasar de un lado a otro. Cosechaste una trayectoria brillante en lo docente y en lo profesional, y una jubilación, se decía muy agradecido a la arquitectura, tanto o más que a la poesía, y consideraba su relación con ella sentimentalmente impecable. Y hasta cierto punto apagada.

La poesía, en cambio, fue haciéndose cada vez más necesaria. La tradición de la su hija Joana- le enfrentaron a la intemperie moral, contra...