

**DESIGN AS TRANSLATION AND TYPICALITY:  
ON AUTONOMY & CONTINGENCY IN ARCHITECTURE**  
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*'Built upon love, architecture engages the inhabitant as true participant, unlike the remote spectator of the modernist work of art or the consumer of fashionable buildings-cum-images. If this engagement is not obvious, it is partly because architectural meaning has been "explained" through a deceptively simple assumption that confuses our human quest for happiness with hedonism. Love, in its multiple incarnations as desire, is as open-ended as life itself and remains the ground of meaning even in times of obsessive materialism.'*

Alberto Pérez-Gómez

I want to discuss the vexed notions of participation and community in a way that addresses the central questions that these terms disguise and corrupt, viz. the problem of creativity in architecture, and the difficulty of communicating meaning in what we do. Since I am writing as a half-educated enthusiast, paddling in the foreign waters of philosophy and poetry, these thoughts are framed in two rather strict and didactic oppositions. Part of the energy that drives this essay is the desire to clarify and to unify the identity and difference of things; much like the effort of drawing and working on a design, exaggerated parameters and hubristic rhetorical rules are employed in order to structure an enquiry.

**AUTONOMY**

*'No block of marble but it does not hide  
The concept living in the artists' mind –  
Pursuing it inside that form, he'll guide  
His hand to shape what reason has defined.'*

*'Only fire forges iron'*

Michelangelo (trans. Patrick. Lynch)

Traditional theories of architectural practice, from Vitruvius to Alberti, situate knowledge of techniques of construction within the tradition of cultural representation. In other words, architecture is an art precisely because it is the transformation of technique into a form of ethical practice. As we all know, this doesn't sound easy and it's not. The possibility of the transformative power of design is the capacity of an architect to translate the desires and wishes of others into a personal vision of change. Although not immediately available to language, architectural ideas are similar to other artistic constructions in that each is striving to communicate something. This may be more or less abstract or grounded in what is common.

John Sallis claims that 'still, even today, if one would know what stone is, the most propitious way would be to recall the temple, to bring oneself before its ancient stones, to let their silence resound' (*Stone*). The autonomous aspects of architecture relate proportion, size, shape, and form together in harmonious expression of the potential of fabrication to reveal the latent beauty within things. Architecture is the articulation of mute matter, not just as metaphor, but as fact. Matter of fact qualities are such that wood will bend, concrete can be poured, glass is floated, bricks combine, steel is stiffened, stone is heavy but brittle, plastics thin but strong; and that materials can inspire form. Architects have specialist knowledge of the properties of things as well as the capacity to locate this information in the space of culture. Locating ideas in a place reveals the universal aspects of human experience, e.g. global knowledge of bodily orientation, solar orientation, topographic conditions, weather, the seasons, etc. Conversely knowledge of particular properties of a material for example, intimates the latent expressive quality of this material. The autonomy of an architect is specialist knowledge of what is common, a particular sense of appropriateness (*decorum*). In which case, the seemingly autonomous aspects of construction – the quantities of things – cannot be divorced from the qualitative associations from which we derive pleasure. Just as vernacular construction is at once local and representational, shelter and ornament, identity and habit, architectural autonomy is dependent upon the efficacy of someone's imagination and their ability to communicate this in words and images.

Myths of the architect as objective and/or subjective ignore the creative process of design, the inevitably dialogical structure of drawing out ideas from our memory and revising preconceptions in light of new insights. Designing tunes training, temperament, insight and inspiration. These diverse human attributes can be fused in architectural thinking in drawing and model making. Architects are involved in the making of things and in predicting how these artifacts will be used. This is not a precise art and a certain amount of guesswork is combined with reflection and experience of other people, and self-knowledge based upon experience as much as heuristic knowledge. Perhaps this is why it takes so long to do architecture? Seeking to overcome the difficulty of learning to speak architecture by working through theories that are autonomous from human situations, is as foolish as asking someone else to undertake the design process for you. There is nothing artificial about intelligence.

As a situated and cultural construct, architectural autonomy might be recast as typicality. Since something typical is dependent upon situations that reoccur in various places, it involves at once local and global knowledge, and is more like a language than a theory. We say that you can speak in “the vernacular” for good reasons. Typicality in architecture suggests that creativity resides less in striving for originality or uniqueness, and rather, in the capacity to interpret the appetites and needs of others in a way that does not limit the life of a building to its inhabitants. It implies the ability to speak in tongues, possession of a musical ear along with the ability to say something well. Architecture has always been considered more closely related to rhetoric than logic. Perhaps it is the structural nature of languages that most closely resembles the construction of architectural images, and which enable us to talk about the power of memory to structure our spaces. This embodied and temporal art makes discussions in the abstract about the structure of language – and especially architectural language, so tedious and ultimately pointless. Like language, architecture enables us to say the same the same thing in endless variations.

## CONTINGENCY

‘My architecture does not have a pre-established language nor does it establish a language. It is a response to a concrete problem, a situation in transformation in which I participate...’  
Alvaro Siza

Interpretation succeeds in evoking a response, both to our experience of an artwork and to the situations of life; to ideas and the world. Martin Heidegger compared the creative act of thinking to a ‘*Holzweg*’, to walking in a forest, along a constantly appearing and disappearing and reappearing path – getting lost in order to re-cover old ground. The courage to pursue and to abandon false paths is the crucial aspect of the creative process, which makes architecture an art. Without this playful aspect we are merely seeking solutions or statements of personal intent. Whereas game playing like speech, requires and demonstrates trust.

Translation is the task of rendering anew what has already been said by another. Its etymology is from Latin and ‘*Translere*’ means to carry over, to support and to bear. Translation, as a metaphor for creativity, is completed by another. The move from one person’s singular experience to the potential community implied by communication requires a space of interpretation. This space is the realm of participation, which makes art available to us at different rates; not all pictures appear at the same rate, films can haunt us and poems require particular efforts of perception and imaginative interpretation. Architecture can be seen as the translation of one person’s desires into an explicit open field of possibilities. As a person enters a room they join in the task of creative construction of a place.

The impulse towards creativity in language and the plastic arts is a drive to make distinct and different each experience and one place from another, and so to enable repetition of events. Conversely, artistic ‘resonance’ evokes what is common within a singular expression of experience. Like translation, creativity is powerfully empathetic and an expression of a sympathetic drive towards encountering ‘the other’. Empathy is the basis of creativity understood as interpretation rather than originality. Empathy is fellow feeling and is the proto-form of friendship. For the ancients, the point of knowledge was to orient us within the public realm. Hans-Georg Gadamer tells us in ‘Truth and Method’ that much worry arose from the distinction made in modern German between experience understood as ‘*Erlebnis*’, personal, non-symbolic, non-redeemable-subjective; and ‘*Erfahrung*’, common knowledge, mature reflection,

common sense-evocative. Experience is a spontaneous ordering of events as a structure that reveals the personal to be common. Repetitive acts reveal a world of commonplace truths to us, and dwelling, like any creative act seeks balance through repetition. Repetition of care, repair and renewal of the things in the world that we tend makes architecture – as dwelling, an ongoing 'a matter of heroism' Siza declares. Posing the question, do we own a house or does it command us? And also, are we having experiences or are they happening to us?

In his essay 'Who am I and who are you?' Gadamer writes: 'one of the fundamental metaphors of the modern age is the poet's activity as a paradigm for human existence itself. The right word, immortalized by the poet, is not his special artistic achievement, but more generally, a symbol of the possibilities of human experience, one that permits the reader to be the I, that is, the poet... If the poets' verses make this commonality concrete, then each of us occupies precisely the position, which the poet claims as his own. Who am I and who are you? The poem provides its own answer to this question by keeping it open.' Reading is a form of translation of one person's words into those we share in common; paradoxically, as uniquely ours when we understand them and make them our own. As an example of the phenomena of translation Gadamer advises us:

'in every discussion about possible interpretations one must try out the opinion of others if one is ultimately to hear what is there in the text, the irrefutable witness.'

Perhaps for an architect the act of translating another's desires puts a particular burden upon us. We can only ever refer to an un-built thing, and do so at the risk of ridicule and the accusation of arrogance. Our imagination remains our irrefutable witness however, incomplete and partial nonetheless. In 'The Deptford Trilogy' by Roberston Davies an actor-director recounts how the Egotist thinks everything they do is right; they are almost autistic in their claims for the autonomy of their actions. An *egoist* on the other hand stands for the values of their art, believing their work to represent a continuity of traditions, which require careful re-presentation, reconstruction and renewal. In Davies' formulation, egoism, unlike *egotism*, is not autonomous – it is the animate passion of praxis. Similarly, the irrefutable witness lies within us, but it is located and can be found in certain places and in particular experiences, somewhere in the world.

*Deep  
in the time-cleft  
beside honeycomb  
bees-wax ice,  
waits your breath-crystal,  
the irrefutable  
witness.*

(from 'Atemkristall' 1967, by Paul Celan, trans. Patrick Lynch 2002)