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The Space of Time

Juhani Pallasmaa

We do not live in an objective material world. We live in mental worlds in which the experienced, remembered and dreamed, as well as the present, past and future, constantly fuse into one another. We transform time and space through imagination and dreaming, into the specific human mode of existence—the world of possibilities. The self and the world mutually define one another in a perpetually intertwining process.

Contemporary architectural settings are usually experienced as having their origin in singular moments of time. They evoke an experience of flattened or rejected temporality. Yet, the existential task of architecture is to relate us to time as much as to space. “Architecture is not only about domesticating space,” writes Karsten Harries, “it is also a deep defense against the terror of time. The language of beauty is essentially the language of timeless reality.”¹ We are equally frightened of being left outside the progression of time as being lost in the anonymity and meaninglessness of space. The mental roles of these two fundamental existential dimensions are curiously reversed. In terms of space, we yearn for specificity, whereas in our temporal experience we desire a sense of continuity. Consequently, architecture has to create a specificity of space and place, and at the same time, evoke the experience of a temporal continuum.

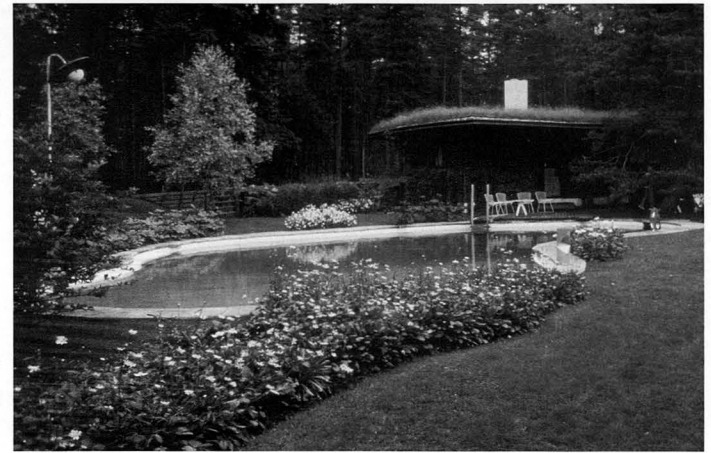
Time is the dimension of experience that is most frightening to us in its seemingly absolute power over us. We feel helpless in relation to time, and we find ourselves at its mercy. As human’s understanding of time lost its primordial cyclical nature, time became linear with an irrevocable beginning and end. We can shape matter and order space, but we cannot throw time off its predestined course. Human’s greatest desire, therefore, is to halt, suspend and reverse the flow of time.

Architecture’s fundamental task, to provide us with our domicile in space, is recognized by most architects. However, the second task of architecture, to mediate human’s relation with the fleeting element of time, is usually disregarded.

The materials and surfaces used by the main stream of the Modern Movement have an effect of flatness and immaterial abstractness. The inevitable processes of aging and wear were not considered to be positive elements of design. Through the evocation of a constant present tense, modernist architects aspired to evoke an air of ageless youthfulness. The forces of time have attacked modernist buildings destructively, instead of offering the positive qualities of vintage and an authority of age, the forces of time attack modernist buildings destructively.



Distantly biomorphic imagery of the roof trusses of the Council Chamber, Town Hall, Saynatsalo. Photo Courtesy of the Museum of Finnish Architecture.



The sauna and swimming pool evoke an idyllic and archetypal Finnish image, Villa Mairea, Noormarkku. Photo by author.

The immaterial surfaces of modernism remain mute, as shape and volume are given priority. The modernist architectural surface is an abstracted boundary of the volume; surfaces have a conceptual rather than sensory essence. The aspiration for pure geometry and reductive aesthetic weakens the presence of matter and surface, in the same way that a strong figure and contour diminish interaction of color in the art of painting.

Modernist architectural theory frequently refers to the notion of a 'space-time continuum,' but the concept seems to be grounded in theories of physics rather than human existential reality. In Modernist writings, the notion of time refers most often to the experience of virtual movement within the perceptual field rather than to the human existential fear of death and the unconscious yearning for immortality.

The incredible acceleration of speed in our age collapses time onto a flat screen of the present, upon which the simultaneity of the world is projected. Buildings, as well as objects, lose their temporal essence and turn into instantaneous commodities and objects

of fashionable image. "Modern commodities threaten the stability of the world," as Charles Taylor writes in his book *The Ethics of Authenticity*.² We increasingly live in landscapes of anxiety and fear.

Weakening of the experience of time in contemporary life has devastating mental effects. As time loses its depth and its echo in the primordial past, humans lost their sense of self as historical beings, and are threatened by the revenge of time. In the words of the American therapist Gotthard Booth, "The natural satisfaction of life lies in a vital participation in forms of life that extend beyond the boundaries of individual existence."³

Humans have devised an instrument for deceiving time and leading it astray; this magical invention is art. We can traverse time through imagination and dreams, and art also fixes these fleeting images to be grasped for future generations. The dimension of time is essential in all artistic manifestations; not as actual duration but as a psychic dimension. An encounter with an object of art leads us back to the world of the child and the savage, a world which is

not categorized and which reappears as an undifferentiated experience of existence. Art momentarily recreates the condition of the Paradise. "Literature is made of the borderline between the self and the world," writes Salman Rushdie, "and during the creative act, this boundary softens, becomes penetrable and allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist flow into the world."⁴

We expand our temporal boundaries through art. Art seeks to prolong life through metaphors of timeless existence. The persistence of artistic images is one of the great mysteries of culture. Why are stone-age images able to touch our emotions so forcefully? How does art communicate through the abyss of centuries, although we have no possibility of reconstructing the artist's feelings, intentions and meanings?

This miracle of annihilating the distancing and separating element of time is possible because objects of art confront us with our own existential experience; works of art are mirrors held against our own self-image. Works of art enable me to confront my own existence. I am not experiencing something distant in space and time; I am listening to

myself confronted with the timeless experience of being human. My own existential experience is intensified by the ancient image; art brings me to the threshold of my own being.

Architectural constructions are also a defense against the anxiety of death, disappearance, insignificance and non-existence. The imposing constructions of past cultures are instruments that overcome the anxiety of time and death. As a consequence of their consciousness, humans have become conscious of their own death, and began to aspire for eternal life. The human domicile turned from a protection against threats of the natural surroundings into a defense against metaphysical fears projected by the mind itself.

Architecture domesticates space, structures the lived world, and provides a horizon of behavior and understanding. It provides stability and a sense of continuity for existence, as well as the ground for symbolization and meaning. More than any other art form, architecture is also an instrument of slowing and halting time. Architecture builds dams to hold back the flow of time. Buildings of history form ponds

of stilled time that enable us to return back to the past. Architecture is fundamentally the art of permanence. “A house constitutes a body of images that give humankind proofs or illusions of stability...it is an instrument by which we confront cosmos,”⁵⁵ argues Gaston Bachelard. Buildings and cities are museums of time. They emancipate us from the hurried time of the present, and help us to experience the slow, healing time of the past. Architectural structures enable us to see and understand slow processes of history, and to participate in time cycles that surpass the scope of an individual life. The temple of Karnak takes us back to the time of the pharaohs, whereas the Medieval cathedral presents us the full color of life in the Middle Ages. In the same way, great works of modernity preserve the Utopian time of optimism and hope; even after decades of trying faith they radiate an air of spring and promise. The Paimio Sanatorium by Alvar Aalto is heartbreaking in its radiant belief in a humane future and in the societal mission of architecture. Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye makes us believe in the union of reason and beauty, ethics and aesthetic. These works do not symbolize optimism and faith; they actually awaken the sprout of hope within us.

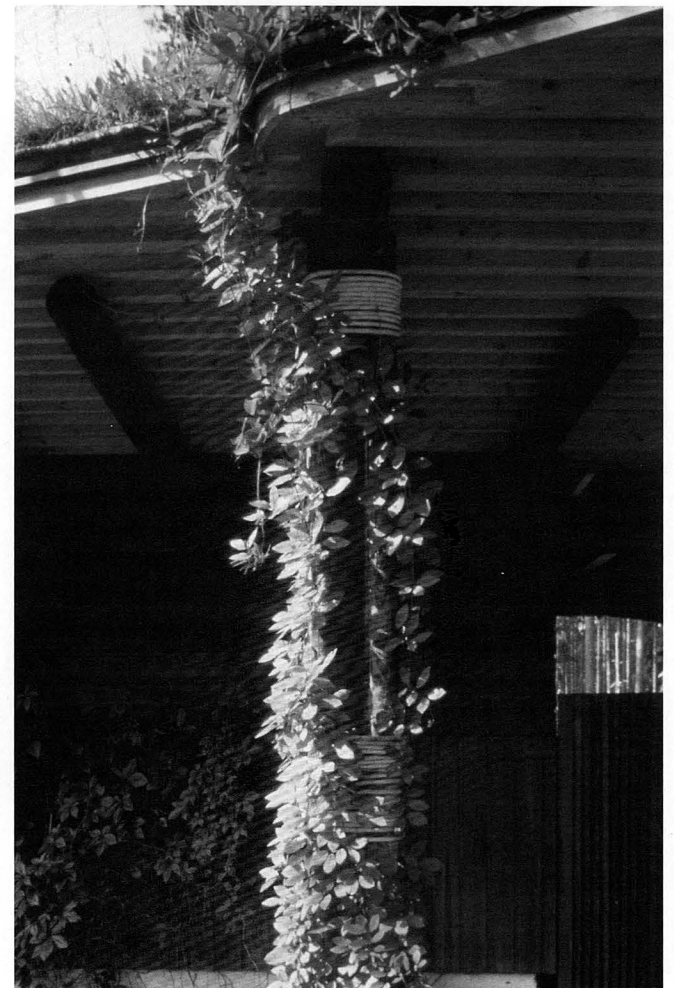
Contrary to the mainstream of the Modern Movement, Alvar Aalto identified the mental task of architecture in relation to the human terror of time, already early on in his career. “Form is nothing else but a concentrated wish for everlasting life on earth.”⁵⁶ After his passionate but short-lived phase of modernist orthodoxy, the mature works of Aalto engage the entire human sensory and emotional realm, and they aspire for a foothold in the flow of time. Aalto developed his emotionally charged architecture of natural materials—red brick, copper, stone and wood—which evokes a wealth of imageries, associations and recollections. While seeking to touch human experiential

reality, Aalto’s buildings express gravity and permanence, and they radiate a rare sense of authority.

The surfaces of Aalto’s buildings wrap around their volumes like a skin, enhancing an organic cohesion and an animistic feeling. Aalto’s buildings are a sort of architectural organism, not abstract compositions. Surfaces are richly textured and they exhibit a variety of tactile experiences. Instead of an abstracted gestalt, Aalto creates conglomerate images that evoke associations and recollections. The Villa Mairea, for instance, is suspended between imageries of contemporary modernity and ageless peasant traditions, between refinement and primitivism, the future and the past. The powerfully emotive image of the Saynatsalo Town Hall is a condensed image of a hill town, reminiscent of familiar childlike images in Medieval paintings. This minute civic building, conceived as the image of a miniaturized town, possesses an extraordinary suggestiveness, richness and sense of mystery; the image of a town projects a greater wealth of narratives and emotions than that of a single building.

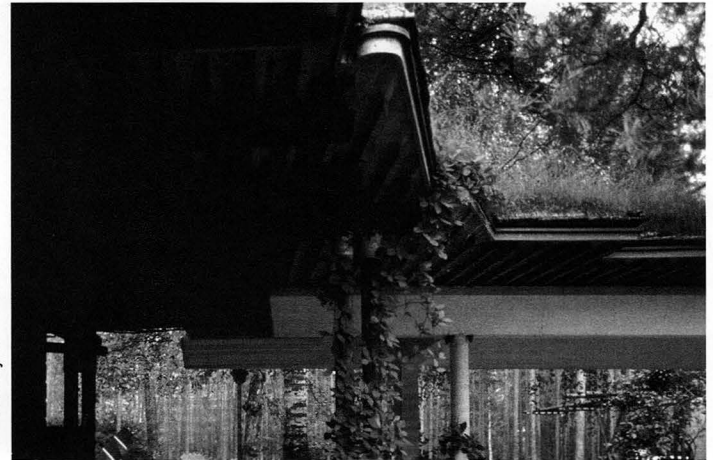
An explicit device of Aalto’s for capturing a sense of time is the image of a ruin. He utilizes explicit or subliminal images of ruins to evoke a melancholic experience of the past, and of the inevitability of erosion, decay, and death. Aalto juxtaposes images of permanence (stone, brick) with images of transitoriness and loss (erosion, climbing plants and the patina of mold). Even the changing of light concretizes the passing of time. Opposed to the mechanical imagery of a machine process, the materials that Aalto uses express a humanizing touch of a skilled hand. Aalto’s attitude reverses the modernist ideal, which sought to give a machine appearance even to components produced by hand.

In his phenomenological investigation of artistic language, Gaston Bachelard makes a distinction between “formal imagination” and “material imag-



Time and nature take over. Photo by author.

Aalto's use of collage technique in the Villa Mairea: the unmediated collision of the Modernist steel and concrete structure of the Villa proper and the primordial wood structure of the Sauna. Photo by author.



ination.⁷ According to Bachelard's view, images arising from matter project deeper and more profound experiences. In his development away from the visual imagery of the Modern Movement, toward the idiosyncratically sensuous articulation of his mature works, Aalto makes a distinct step towards 'images of matter.' He also rejects the universalistic ideal in favor of a regionalist aspiration. Aalto's architecture also rejects the hegemony of the eye as it activates the muscular and tactile realms.

The culture of speed favors an architecture of the eye, aiming at an instantaneous image, whereas the haptic architecture of the touch is an architecture of slowness. It is appreciated and comprehended as images of the body and the skin, gradually, detail by detail. Through enhancing plasticity, tactility and intimacy of the architectural experience, the haptic sensibility suppresses the dominance of the visual image. An unconscious element of touch is unavoidably concealed in the sense of vision. As we regard, our eye touches the object unconsciously; before we can see, we have already touched the object. "Through vision, we touch the stars and the sun" as Maurice Merleau-Ponty

poetically writes.⁸ This hidden tactile experience determines the sensuous quality of the object as it mediates messages of invitation or rejection.

Alvar Aalto suppresses the singular visual image in his episodic architecture. Aalto's configurations and surfaces often appear as collages; the elements seem to be derived from different origins. As a consequence of their histories in unrelated realms, the ingredients mediate different associations and narratives. Altogether, Aalto exploits differences instead of forcing the ideal of unification. This is an architecture that is not dictated by a single conceptual idea expressed in every detail, but it grows upwards through separate architectural scenes, episodes, and detail inventions. The whole is held together by the consistency of an emotional atmosphere, instead of a structuring intellectual concept.

Western industrial culture is a culture of power and domination. Expressions of art also tend to seek instant and overpowering effects. In his book *The End of Modernity*, Gianni Vattimo introduces the notion of "weak ontology" and "fragile thought,"

referring to a way of philosophizing that does not aspire to totalize the multitude of human discourses in a single system.⁹ In the same manner, we can speak of a 'weak,' or 'fragile' architecture, or more precisely, of an 'architecture of weak image,' as opposed to an 'architecture of strong image.' Whereas the architecture of strong image desires to impress through an outstanding singular image, the architecture of weak image is contextual and responsive. It is concerned with real sensory interaction instead of idealized and conceptual manifestations. This is a humane architecture of reconciliation, that aspires to enroot Man in the metaphysical elements of time and space.

Notes

1. Karsten Harries, 'Building and the Terror of Time', *Perspecta, The Yale Architectural Journal* 19, New Haven, 1982, pp. 59-69.
2. Charles Taylor, *Autenttisuuden etiikka* (The ethics of Authenticity), Gaudeamus, Helsinki, 1995, p. 39. (Translation J. Pallasmaa)
3. Gotthard Booth, *The Shadow of the Conquest of Nature*, The Edwin Hellen Press, New York and Toronto, 1974. Page number unidentified.
4. Salmon Rushdie, 'Eiko mikaan ole pyhaa?' (Isn't Anything Sacred?), *Parnesso* 1:1996, Helsinki, 1996, p. 8. (Translation J. Pallasmaa)
5. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Deacon Press, Boston, 1969, p. 17.
6. Alvar Aalto, undated draft for a lecture, in Goran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Early years*, Rizzoli, New York, 1984, p. 192.
7. Gaston Bachelard, 'Introduction', *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas Institute, Dallas, 1983.
8. Quoted in David Michael Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993, p. 14.
9. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1991.