

Laudatio für Juhani Pallasmaa

Juhani Pallasmaa is a highly distinguished Finnish architect and architectural thinker who has held various positions in important state institutions, a variety of professorships in Europe and the States, and has duly received numerous prestigious awards. Pallasmaa's career – now spanning over nearly six decades – encompasses the full spectrum of building, teaching, writing, editing, lecturing and curating. The true fruit of Pallasmaa's prodigious life-work lies patently in his thinking about architecture: that is, in his prolific and continuously evolving writing, as well as in his teaching of the discipline.

In my architectural education in the Anglo Saxon context of the late 70s, I was lucky enough to be virtually spoon-fed the thoughts of Steen Eiler Rasmussen, Christopher Alexander, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Gaston Bachelard, Italo Calvino and Adrian Stokes. In parallel we read Joseph Rykwert and became aware of the work of Dalibor Vesely and Peter Carl. What good fortune it was to discover ten years later the work of Juhani Pallasmaa – who by then was devoting his research towards existentialist and phenomenological views.

It was in 1996 with his small book „The Eyes of the Skin“ that Pallasmaa shaped his coherent and convincing argument for the application of all of our senses – and not just that of sight – in our imagination, in our production and, of course, in our experience of architecture. The message contained in this modestly sized publication is so utterly convincing that it immediately became a classic text for students and practitioners alike, establishing Pallasmaa as a standard-bearer of the phenomenological approach in architecture. Later, driven by insight into the existential essence of architecture, Pallasmaa describes how the direct and authentic 'pure looking' – as he calls it - of a child's way of experiencing the world is echoed in the way that architecture is presented in the other arts such as cinema, painting, poetry and literature.

For Pallasmaa the true quality of architecture lies in its capacity for awakening our empathetic imagination. However, the impulse for this awakening is generally not to be found within the discipline itself, but in our empathetic perception of architecture in the other arts.

In *The Architecture of Image* Pallasmaa proposes that the architectural imagery of painters, writers and film-directors be employed to help us read the latent poetics of architecture. The reader is asked: 'The mental task of buildings and cities is to structure our being-in-the-world and to articulate the surface between the experiencing self and the world. But doesn't the film director do exactly the same with his projected images ?

A collection of essays entitled „Encounters“ continues this line of thinking. Pallasmaa observes that if the definition of place is the fundamental task of architecture, it is in fact the artist who creates phenomenologically genuine architecture with, I quote, 'an art of building that is defined by the artist's emotion rather than by the professional rules of the art of architecture'.

Recently I came across a book by Klaske Havik called *Urban Literacy. Reading and Writing Architecture*. Juhani Pallasmaa's forward with the seductive title *Domicile in Words*. The scriptive approach to architecture provides a cogently argued plaidoyer for the exploration of architecture through literary text. Words evoke an awareness of specific architectural phenomena, reaching directly the realm of the senses outside vision. He writes: 'The fusion of various settings, situations and human characters into a convincing singular entity is the very essence of literary art. But isn't this the ultimate task of architecture, too ? '

Not surprisingly, Pallasmaa takes a clear stance with regard to moral imperatives in our discipline, considering the responsible rôle that architecture plays in its conditioning of lives. I quote: For me, the current course of Western culture – towards a surreal cult of materialism and consumption, temporary fashion and image - poses another moral imperative. The task of the architect is to resist these forces, to prevent the erosion of value and meaning. As Italo Calvino saw the task of literature, so too I see the task of architecture: as the defense of the authenticity of the human experience.

The urgency of such a defense colours Pallasmaa's writings. His inter-connected themes include the image and the rôle of the imag-ination, bodily sensing and embodied wisdom, peripheral vision and atmosphere as the 'sixth sense', ambiguity, imperfection, intuition as opposed to the cognitive sense, time, signs of wear and aging. Taken either singly or together, Pallasmaa's handling of these counter the reductionism, the obsession with form and the cold 'perfection' found in both the canonical strand of Modernism and its contemporary adherents as well as in the messages that pervade today's highly technological, mediated and consumer-oriented world.

However, in spite of his critique of the dominance of the sense of vision and of retinally biased architecture, Pallasmaa's writings are anything but a lament. The consistent quality, lucidity and co-gency of his texts elicit empathetic reading. Touching us directly, they recharge our capacity to appreciate delight in architecture.

The generosity of Pallasmaa is revealed throughout his work in his references to Ludwig Wittgenstein, to Ezra Pound, to Adrian Stokes, to Rainer Maria Rilke, to Joseph Brodsky and Martin Heidegger; he records his indebtedness to existential and phenomenal viewpoints such as those of Gaston Bachelard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Pallasmaa notes his friendships over the years with those who have influenced his thinking – these include Buckminster Fuller, Colin St John Wilson, and, indeed, Kenneth Frampton – who, of course, was the recipient of this same prize two years ago ...

To summarize, the jury has selected Juhani Pallasmaa this year for the Schelling Architecture Theory Award because:

1 - The work of Pallasmaa is as unusual as it is outstanding. While most other architectural thinkers expend their energy in furthering, revising or ousting theories that already exist, Juhani Pallasmaa stands out as one who, while building on the work of others, discovers new ideas through his exploration of tangential realms of thought, that he then reigns back into the spheres of architectural and aesthetic enquiry.

2 – Through this tapping into philosophies and ideas from many different artistic fields as well as from neuroscience, Pallasmaa has significantly extended both the reach and the relevance of the phenomenological approach in architecture.

3 – Pallasmaa's approach is atypical as his writings convey no stylistic bias that promotes one kind of architecture over another.

4 – Pallasmaa has robustly challenged the hegemony of vision and the dominance of image in our current consumer culture with its seemingly boundless acceleration of information exchange, and has resisted these conditions with a reminder of our multi-sensory and embodied experience of architecture. In doing so he has firmly established a polemical stand against the flux, immateriality and anonymity of our digital world.

And 5, in Pallasmaa's own words: Paradoxically I have grown increasingly sceptical about architectural theory. I have come to understand that artistic and architectural quality derives from unique and poetic encounters rather than from theories. The phenomenological approach appeals to me because of its intellectual innocence and its essence as an anti-theory. I wish I had been drawn to this line of thought decades earlier, although I probably would not have been ready for it. At a younger age, one seems to need rationalized explanations almost as intellectual crutches, whereas age and experience prepare one to accept uncertainty and undefineability. I have grown increasingly suspicious of persons who are sure of themselves and their work: in my own thinking, the area of uncertainty constantly expands.

Please join me in wishing Juhani Pallasmaa continued intellectual rigour, curiosity and self-doubt in combination with corporeal vivacity, and – of course – congratulating him on his much deserved Schelling Architecture Theory Award 2014.

Louisa Hutton, 12. November 2014