

Intuition and experience

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In my youth I imagined poetry as a kind of coloured cloud made up of more or less diffuse metaphors and allusions which, although they might be enjoyable, were difficult to associate with a reliable view of the world. As an architect, I have learned to understand that the opposite of this youthful definition of poetry is probably closer to the truth.

—Peter Zumthor, *A Way of Looking at Things*.

If words become disassociated from experience, and subjectivity is not encouraged towards communication, then the architectural imagination becomes disembodied and open to picturesque interpretations. Without words, we cannot think; if we do not draw we cannot see. Can *‘thinking and seeing as an architect’*¹ manifest without insight and intuition? Can intuition be trained? Is insight wholly clairvoyance, or is it a form of very fast reasoning? I interviewed Peter Zumthor for *The Architects Journal* in London recently, and he spoke about the paradox of working at speed and of trusting to instinct.

It is a myth that I am slow; I’m just honest. I am incredibly fast and I get nervous if people are not so fast in understanding and seeing. I cut my collaborators off. I say, ‘Don’t explain, I see it.’ From the universities the young guys learn that they have to explain everything, but I say to them: ‘Just give me a hint. You’re working in an imaginative architect’s office, so just assume that I will see everything. Just go on.’ But if you do things too quickly, sometimes you don’t know if something is right, if something is good.

His essay *A Way of Looking at Things* begins with a chapter entitled ‘In Search of a Lost Architecture.’ It starts like this: ‘When I think of architecture, images come into my

mind.... (M)emories...contain the deepest architectural experience that I know. They are the reservoirs of the architectural atmospheres and images that I explore in my work as an architect.’² In a lecture at the Royal Institute of British Architects in March this year Zumthor spoke about his grandfather’s house, about how the shallow steps between spaces acted as an inspiration for the levels of his St Kolomba Museum at Cologne; how they were “not like those flat supermarket floors everywhere.” When asked if these memories are simply personal, or are they part of the phenomenal world of images. Zumthor replied:

Basically I’ve come to think that I work like an author. There was a time when I thought that all architects work like authors, but when I looked around I saw that they were implementers and service providers. This is not my world. So I work like a composer writes his music, a writer writes his book and a painter... and so on. I try to do buildings and spaces. And what I have to do for the plans and the function, and what I can try to do is the basic stuff that I can deal with. In your case and in any other case it is a matter of what we know and what is inside us. Most things that are inside us we don’t know! So, we have all these many sayings of artists, like Picasso, who said that art is not about inventing, art is about discovering.... It does not come from following ideologies. It is great if you become part of the church (of) Modernism or whatever, then of course it consoles you and it supports you and makes part of a group. This is human. But in order to create something this is not a good thing. Better to be yourself.

It is no surprise that philosophers use images of houses and bodily orientation to illustrate the location of thinking as a situated event. The paradox of phenomenology is that

while our bodies sense the world, these sensations are experienced through a world of languages and of images. Language is not a system that is immune to our bodily world, just as perception cannot escape the influence of memories and of consciousness.

This paradox illuminates the essential character of the architectural task as imagination. Imagination is at once forgetting and remembering. Architecture is an imagined order, a felt and intuited wholeness that is revealed to us in fragments. Imagination orients us, and is fundamentally architectural in this regard. This is true also for poetic and philosophical thinking, since both operate between logos and image, language and memory. The major development in modern philosophy was the acceptance that questions of being could not be separated from common language, or from the deep context of human experience.

Phenomenology is oriented towards ontology rather than epistemology. In place of technical questions concerning an ideal language, the phenomenologist asks questions that involve knowledge of the world, knowledge that is garnered whilst being in it. They reject the idea that this heuristic knowledge is simply personal experience, believing rather that the world is structured in such a way that it reveals itself to perception rather than through logic, experimentation or any other oxymoronic notions such as personal languages.

If we believe that architecture is a common language, then we are led to reconsider the philosophical terms and

questions Martin Heidegger applied to ontology. For Heidegger spatiality is descriptive and prepositional, we measure it with our bodies whilst doing things. It is equipmental and temporal, situational and material. Whilst it is unfashionable today in American schools of architecture to refer to Heidegger, his legacy is clear in the work of Zumthor.³ ‘The house has its sunny side and its shady side,’ Heidegger reminds us, and he notes that, ‘the way it is divided up into “rooms” (*Räume*) is oriented towards these, and so is the “arrangement” (*Einrichtung*) within them, according to their character as equipment.’⁴ This chimes with Zumthor’s assertion that while ‘the real thing remains hidden... real things do exist, however endangered they may be. There are earth and water, the light of the sun, landscape and vegetation; and there are objects, made by man, such as machines, tools or musical instruments, which are what they are, which are not vehicles for an artistic message, whose presence is self-evident.’ Both philosopher and architect agree that things in the world exhibit characteristics that orient us there.

If, as Heidegger suggests, we are already aware of spaces in relation to time and location relative to orientation, we may begin to think about architecture without actually knowing much about a place *in situ*. Perhaps the typical characteristics of a situation can be contrasted with the local and topographical conditions of a place; both of which, typicality and *topos*, oscillate between specific

and general conditions of universality and contingency. Quite quickly, the importance of the horizon becomes clear in offering possibilities not only for orientation in space, but also as a check and balance to the potential of architectural form to make literary references as well as enabling sculptural judgments regarding scale, rhythm, etc. This horizon is the background against which hermeneutic and phenomenological propositions, historical allusions and the pleasures of plastic and material surfaces, haptic, structural and visual thinking, etc., can be projected and proportions measured. For example, to avoid getting lost in a forest, we know that moss grows on one side of a tree not another and that water flows downhill. Might it be possible to navigate a simple trajectory of thinking about the ground conditions, considering at the same time the sun and wind as influences upon the formal questions of architectural decorum that enable us to discuss front and back? Is architectural thinking a mode of orientation that enables us to recognize and to know where we are in time as well as location? Architecture, like poetry, restates the obvious and the ordinary extraordinariness of life for us. By describing something precisely



its uniqueness becomes common and yet it loses its ubiquity, becoming not simply anything, but something in particular.

It may not be possible to directly teach anyone to appreciate this background or how to sense if it is rich and true to life's complexities and poetic disjunction. How does one learn to appreciate the bittersweet paradox that buildings and places recede and come into focus, yet are always there, solid and autonomous? Like people, architecture offers ruthless surprises. Buildings can exhibit constancy and contrariness; spaces can be tragic and

forms can be imbued with comedy; places can appear to express silliness and pomposity, monumental impulses and fantastic needs. Buildings manifest basic desires and hard-won ideals—longings for homecoming and abandonment can be reconciled. We crave directions and choice, nuances and clarity; seek conviviality and secrecy and find gregarious defense and extravagant incompleteness; we encounter complex personae and enjoy mutable characters. Architecture teaches us something about ourselves that is there despite buildings and maybe sometimes because of them.

This isn't something one can simply teach, because it cannot be known theoretically; but it can be learned nonetheless.

This hubristic and vague assertion can be illustrated with a project that we have been working on for the past decade, and which takes the themes of *topos* and typicality to mean intuition and experience, ground and language. Marsh View is located in what English Heritage designates 'an area of outstanding natural beauty' on the coast of the North Sea amongst fresh and saltwater marshlands, 50 miles north of Norfolk. It sits at the end of a lane beside four 1950s bungalows in a small hamlet close to fashionable Burnham Market. The project comprised the demolition of a bungalow and the reconstruction of parts of this building within a new composition.

The bungalow had been built from a pattern book of designs, applied by a builder to a regularly divided plot of land, and took no account of the setting. The primary sensation of North Norfolk is the extensivity of the horizon. The ground is often moist and subject to tidal fluctuations which blur an obvious distinction between coast and hinterland. Rare birds draw your attention across the broad sky, whilst human figures and buildings enable you to gain a sense of scale in the vastness of wind and watery light. Our design seeks to explore the building's relationship with the landscape and the view of the marsh to elaborate upon Christian Norberg-

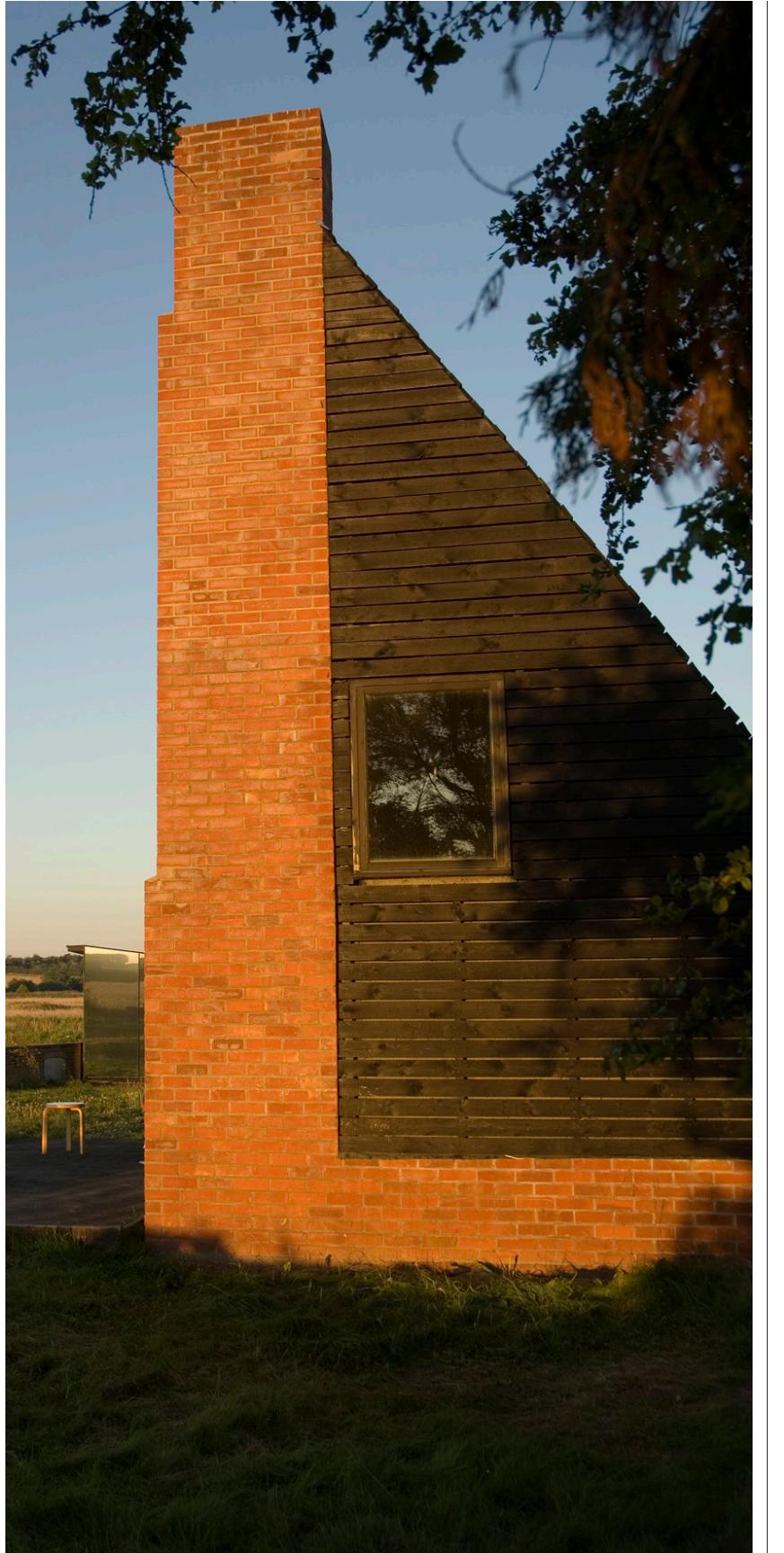
Schulz observation that 'As nature is not man made it keeps us at a certain distance and offers great but relatively undifferentiated experiences.' Marsh View is a house for inspiration for our clients and their friends who are fellow artists, filmmakers and writers. North Norfolk has a peripatetic community of artistic weekend dwellers who make up an itinerant community sharing cinema nights and conversation.

We retained two walls of the old bungalow in which new windows modify the existing openings. The windows are set forward in the walls to emphasize the continuity of the surface and to reflect the surrounding landscape into the garden. This at once reinforces the coherence of the form as one single folding surface, and seeks to dematerialize the windows, as they become huge mirrors. The use of black paint to unify the fragments of old and new walls seeks to repress distinctions between original and recent construction, in order to create a coherent formal expression of a single building whose external spaces are powerfully volumetric.

Orientation to the village and the marsh as front and back conditions combines with the orientation of the sun to suggest the location of typical situations: breakfasting in the east; lunch on the patio; evening fires in the west; sun and moon above; a water garden below and a horizon of shadows inbetween. Morning sunlight reflects off of the east pond through the white glass of the bathroom windows, illuminating the bath. At evening, the setting sun projects through the high west window and anticipates the red light of the fireplace.

As well as enabling a visual connection to the horizon, the project encourages movement from inside to out in a variety of ways. A heated black concrete floor extends throughout the ground level and unites the various external and internal spaces as a sequence of 'rooms in the landscape.' These spatial conditions are seen less in terms of fixed functions and more as





a fluid series of places for participation within the overall architectural setting. This includes the garden and the marsh.

Robin Evans writes of the Villa Madama by Raphael:

(A)s in virtually all domestic architecture prior to 1650, there is no qualitative distinction between the way through a house and the inhabited spaces within it... Once inside it is necessary to pass from one room to the next to traverse the building... the villa was, in terms of occupation, an open plan relatively permeable to the numerous members of the household, all of them - men women, children, servants and visitors - were obliged to pass through a matrix of connecting rooms where the day-to-day business of life was carried on...it was the rule of Italian palaces, villa and farms that hardly affected the style of architecture (which could equally well be gothic or vernacular), but which most certainly affected the style of life... The matrix of rooms is appropriate to a type of society which feeds on carnality, which recognizes the body as a person and in which gregariousness is habitual.⁵

Modern and post-modern architecture reduced the qualitative character of spaces to the expression of their use (typology as the signification of functionalism), resulting in the confusion of visual and haptic experience with signs. We are less interested in interpreting typology as signs, and are more curious about the power of an image to become a symbol. In Marsh View, the chimney seems to suggest that a much older mode of inhabitation has reestablished itself on the edge of the marsh beneath the wide sky and deep horizon, and curiously, it seems to have always been there. Rather than appearing ordinary, we want our work to seem mundane, worldly, rooted to a place with all of the strange complexities of ritualistic and everyday activity that dwelling implies.

When we remember (and also as we see), meanings and nuances slip back and forth from the actual to the suggestive. New art can have an archaic quality, and a new building can appear older than the one it replaces. Our loss of an intellectual centre, and its architectural analogue





in the hearth or temple, throws us outwards to the natural world and we fall back upon our own resources and the company of friends. In writing and reading, thinking and drawing, we experience this gap as an opportunity for pleasurable reflection, a release from the negotiations of daily life. A holiday might be the time when some serious work is done. Just as a hearth provides actual warmth, as important is the sense that it offers as an image to warm our imagination.⁶

The first phase of Marsh View was completed in 2003 and was published in many international journals and books. It was done very quickly and without much professional experience and with quite a lot of faith in and energy from the client. The new works are a response to a new brief from the house's younger and wealthier new owners. This called for a studio for painting, for a carport and for various revisions to the interior including an en-suite bathroom and separate shower room and a new kitchen. Our new clients cut down almost all of the old trees and our task was to reimagine the house in its new context. A strange commission that no amount of experience or practical knowledge can prepare you for, but some intellectual curiosity can open the way for intuition and luck; for the imagination to reassert the power of the project over its owners and over its creators.

Notes

¹A phrase used by John O'Tuomey in a thesis project crit at UCD in 2002. See John O'Tuomey, *Architecture Craft and Culture* (Cork: Gandon Editions, 2005).

²Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1998) 9.

³The Wikipedia entry (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Zumthor) has a chapter heading entitled 'Zumthor and Heidegger' and claims that: 'The Vals spa—famed among architects for evocative sequence of spaces and its exquisite construction details—presents intriguing correspondences between Heidegger's writing and Zumthor's architecture. Writing in his architectural manifesto, *Thinking Architecture*, Zumthor mirrors Heidegger's celebration of experience and emotion as measuring tools.' This point is not elaborated upon. I was alluding to Heidegger in my questions and whilst the "H" word wasn't mentioned exactly, Zumthor did respond with a Heideggerian claim that the basic fact that of phenomenology is that isn't simply 'experience' or subjectivity, suggesting familiarity with Heidegger's writing.

⁴Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford, 1993) 137.

⁵'Figures, Doors and Passages', in *Translations from Drawing to Building & Other Essays*, Robin Evans, AA Documents 2, 1997, 63.

⁶See *Architecture Today*, 140, July 2003; *Icon* 2, May 2003; *ARQ*, volume 9, number 2, 2005; *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 375, March-April 2005; *21st Century House*, Jonathan Bell, Laurence King, 2006, etc.

