**The Phenomenology of Architecture: A short Introduction of Juhani Pallasmaa**

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**Abstract:**

This piece focuses on the work of Juhani Pallasmaa who introduces phenomenological aspects of kinesthetic and multisensory perception of the human body into architecture theory. He argues that hand-drawing is a vital spatial and haptic exercise in facilitating architectural design.Through this process, architecture can emerge as the very ‘material’ existence of human embodied ‘immaterial’ emotion, feelings and wisdom. Hence, for Pallasmaa, architecture can be seen as an artistic practice, which entails multisensory and embodied thought in order to establish the sense of being in the world.

**Keywords**: architecture, phenomenology, senses, kinesthetic, embodiment, Juhani Pallasmaa

Juhani Pallasmaa (1936~) has written extensively on art, architecture theory, cultural philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience. In one of his widely acclaimed books, *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses* (1996),[[1]](#endnote-1) he attempts to introduce phenomenological aspects of kinesthetic, haptic and the multi-sensory perception of the human body into architecture theory. The key question he addresses is why has ocularcentrism become so dominant in both architectural culture and in everyday life. He critically argues that living with modern technology flattens our multisensory capacities. More precisely, digital or computer rendered images tend to weaken our main sensory modes (except for sight) which together are vital for our capacity to develop the imagination and creativity.

The human implications of the development of modern technology have been discussed for a long time. McLuhan (1996:39) claimed ‘[T]he effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance’ (1967: 27 cited in Baudrillard 1998: 123). This suggests that technologies have been integrated into the human perception of the world so that they have contributed to our knowledge system and influenced our imagination. Hence, technologies, such as computer imaging can be seen as a beneficial tool for expanding creativity; but Pallasmaa argues that the computer creates a gap between the designer and the object, because the computing design process is often passively manipulated by the retinal model of vision. Whereas drawing by hand ‘put the designer in skin-contact with the object’ (2009: 97) and ‘ultimately the object becomes an extension and part of the designer’s body’ (2009:97).

In this way, drawing by hand can be seen as a vital process for maintaining in a haptic contact with objects and their environments. The complex relationship between spatial perception and haptic sensation is also investigated by Mark Paterson, in his article, ‘Architecture of Sensation: Affect, Motility and the Oculomotor’ (forthcoming *Body & Society* 2016), where he build on Pallasmaa’s work to critically point out some limitation of phenomenological approaches to contemporary architectural theory. Instead of focusing on ‘hands’, he deliberately set them aside to focus on ‘feet’. For Paterson, it is impossible to fully comprehend a multisensory architecture experience without considering not only the coulomotor subject with rapid eye saccades, but also the vestibular system in the ears and the ‘pedestrian sensation through the feet’ (Paterson 2016). These ways of understanding the body’s irreducibility resonates well with Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945=2003) which emphasizes ‘[t]he body is our general medium for having a world’ (2003:169), something we can grasp not through our intellect, but through the mediation of bodily experience.

For Pallasmaa, as an thinker, an artist and an architect, sketching and drawing by hand are spatial and haptic exercise which allow him to ‘fuse the external reality of space and matter, and the internal reality of perception, thought and mental imagery into singular and dialectic entities’ (Pallasmaa, 2009: 89). He suggests that there are three different sets of images in the process of sketching and drawing: ‘the drawing that appears on the paper, the visual image recorded in my cerebral memory, and a muscular memory of the act of drawing itself’ (2009: 90). In this process, ‘the draughtsman forgets both hand and the pencil, and the image emerges as if it were an automatic projection of the imaging mind’ (2016). This is ‘the ecstasy of work’ (2016).

Barbra Maria Stafford refers to a similar feeling of the ecstasy of work in creative processes in terms of biological activities in her paper, ‘Thoughts Not Our Own, Whatever Happened to Selective Attention?’ (2009). Taking in neuroscience and cognitive research, she argues ‘what is significant from both the artistic and the scientific standpoint is how equivocal imagery or ambiguous forms (belonging to two or more different categories or susceptible to several interpretations depending on the viewer’s perspective) elicits perceptual, cognitive and even bodily motion in the observer’ (see Stafford 2007: 282). She explains, ‘[w]hen activated, the limbic system’s non-topographic color and motion maps bind wavelengths coming from geographically separated features in our field of vision. This temporary conjunction of distant points elicits*a pleasurable kinesthetic sensation*’ (2007:282 emphasize added). The important point we should be aware here is that *a process of binding wavelengths* provokes affective pleasure which simultaneously occurs in physical and mental processes of recognition. Stafford further claims that in biological activities ‘the associative jump toconnect resembling, not identical, formal features is enabled, because of the deep neurophysiological correspondence between the phenomenal and noumenal systems’ (Stafford 2009: 282).

Both Pallasmaa’s ‘the ecstasy of work’ and Stafford’s ‘pleasurable kinesthetic sensation’ are evoked by a process of making sense of the world, in other words, a knowledge-embodied process. The knowledge-embodied process always engages with filtering, disconnecting and reconnecting information though multi-sensory reflections in order to establish the sense of being-in-the-world.

Such ‘embodied modes of thinking’ are vital factors in artistic and creative work. According to Pallasmaa, architecture as an art form and artistic practice, entails multi-sensory and embodied thought. ‘These modes of thinking are images of the hand and the body, and they exemplify essential existential knowledge’ (2009:19). Hence, architecture can be seen as a product of ‘existential and metaphysical philosophizing through the means of space, structure, matter, gravity and light’ (2009:19). For Pallasmaa then, architecture can emerge as the very ‘material’ existence of human ‘immaterial’ emotion, feelings and wisdom. If we need to understand how we humans function, we should recall our capacities as multi-sensory neuropsychological beings. Hence Pallasmaa proposes that rediscovering the thinking hands is a crucial process to restore a fuller understanding of the potential to realize ‘a dignified life’ (Pallasmaa 2016).

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1. Pallasmaa is the author/editor of numerous articles and books, including, *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009) and *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)