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**The Importance of Place in Architecture**

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# Introduction

Place is an important concept in architecture. It is my contention that the grounding afforded by time and location profoundly affects the interpretation and meaning of architecture. This grounding in the world is a vital component for the resonance and importance of architecture for human beings. This is contrasted to those concepts that place the universal or absolute as a central element of their architectural philosophy.

Different cultures through time have shown different interpretations of place, and this is reflected in their built environment. Two aspects of this are of particular interest. First, man is constructing a physical environment in order to give himself a place in the world. This ranges from the archetypal primitive hut (fig 4) through to the pyramids (fig 1). Both examples show, in very different degrees, a spiritual foothold that man is making in an otherwise anonymous and rootless world.

The other interesting aspect reflected in the built environment is the concretisation of a way of looking at the world. The pyramids, the Acropolis, and the roman temples (figs 1-3) show a range of interpretations regarding man's permanence on earth, the afterlife, social relationships to other men, and the relationship to the spiritual. Change these interpretations, and the resulting built environment will change. The concentration of power within a society will obviously affect what is built, but regardless of this, the messages and meanings contained within this built environment must be intelligible to the majority of that particular society.

While man's world view will strongly affect the physical construction of a place, the reverse is not necessarily true. For example, a society that does not believe in the afterlife will not derive the same meaning from the pyramids as those who built them. If they had a Platonic world view, they might look at these pyramids as 'perfect' forms, and derive an aesthetic pleasure from a perception that, in and of themselves, a beauty emanates from the geometric perfection of the form. The sense of grounding and place-making afforded by the pyramids would therefore be different.

On the other hand, there will be elements of places that are common to all men, irrespective of time or society. These will be elements that respond to elemental



Fig 1 - Saqqara pyramid



Fig 2 - Temple of Vesta, Rome

physical or psychic components of man himself. Direction, gravity, horizon, light, warmth, security, fear, and sex are but some of these shared human components.

Before looking further at these concepts, it would be useful to look at the concept of the universal. In the words of Plato:

*I do not mean by beauty of form such beauty as that of animals or pictures, which the many would suppose to be my meaning; but, says the argument, understand me to mean straight lines and circles, and the plane or solid figures . . . for these I affirm to be not only relatively beautiful, like other things, but they are eternally or absolutely beautiful . . .<sup>1</sup>*

While the subject discussed is beauty, a position of man relative to the world is inferred. That is that there is, outside and independent of man, a fixed and absolute. Whether this is perceived by man or not, does not change the nature of this absolute.

In the 1750s Marc-Antoine Laugier in his treatise on architecture stated that 'absolute beauty is inherent in architecture independent of mental habit and human prejudice.'<sup>2</sup> In more modern times Le Corbusier wrote that:

*Architecture is a thing of art, a phenomenon of the emotions, lying outside questions of construction and beyond them. The purpose of construction is to make things hold together; of architecture to move us. Architectural emotion exists when the work rings within us in tune with a universe whose laws we obey, recognize and respect. When certain harmonies have been attained, the work captures us. Architecture is a matter of "harmonies," it is a "pure creation of the spirit."<sup>3</sup>*

Taken together, the above concepts argue that the meanings derived either from or through architecture are universal in nature, not rooted in time, and are not dependent upon place to derive its meaning.

Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* makes an argument for a place-centric approach. He discusses the concept of Dasein, which he describes as 'being in

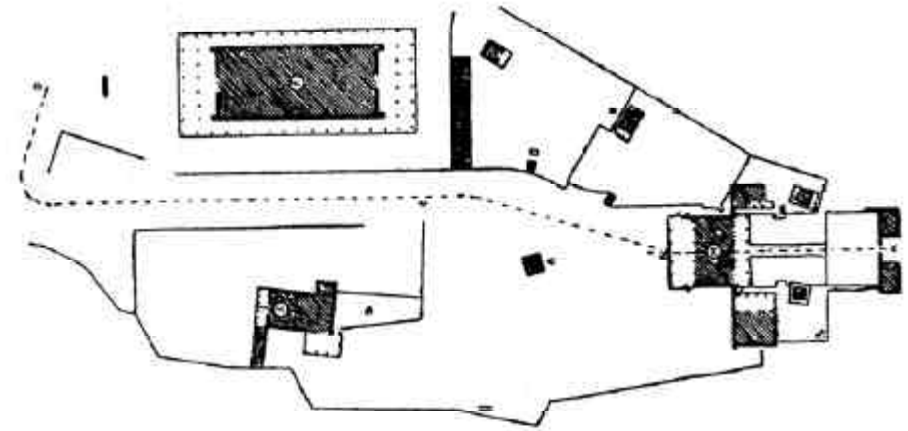


Fig 3 - Acropolis, plan



Fig 4 - Architypal primitive hut from Laugier's *Essay on Architecture*

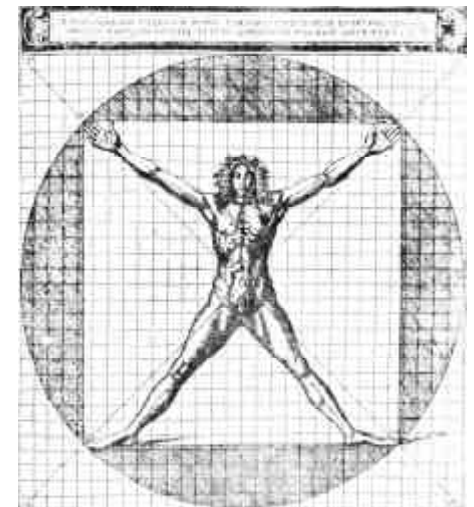


Fig 5 - Vitruvian man

space'. The world is experienced through our bodies, and we can not separate our selves from this world. In other words, the physical world is an integral part of our existence and the basis of our perceptions. For Heidegger, regions, whether a room or a city, assign a place where man can dwell in the world. These regions carry meanings.

Heidegger further discusses an orientation to space such as up and down, left and right. This orientation is relative to the body and the world. It is not an 'absolute' in the sense of Plato. Man is situated in the world, and dwells between earth and sky. Man is part of a fourfold continuum of earth, sky, mortals and divinities.

In a more architectural essay, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, Heidegger argues that building /dwelling is the means by which man places himself in this fourfold. Buildings give a form to this dwelling and its presencing. He refers to the Greek word *techne* which means to make something appear. While not specifically referenced, the Greek theatre and temple at Delphi (fig 6) seems to be a good example of the fourfold presencing in the world – there is made to appear a place where man and the cosmos are joined together, on the earth beneath the sky.

The philosophies of Heidegger, have been adapted by several architectural theorists including Christian Norberg-Shulz and Kenneth Frampton. In particular, the ideas of dwelling in the world and the *techne* of making something appear have special resonance. Both theorists acknowledge Heidegger's influence, but their interpretations and theories are different, not least because their theories are architecturally specific, while Heidegger's theories were more general.

Frampton discusses a theory of critical regionalism. He feels that particular aspects of a place are expressed through a tectonic expression of the building/ space. The tactile is important in the perception of this built form. In a later work, *Studies in Tectonic Culture*, a quote of Louis Kahn describes much of Frampton's views: "*Space is architectural when the evidence of how it is made is seen and comprehended.*"<sup>4</sup>

Christian Norberg-Shulz invokes the concept of 'Genius Loci'. He speaks of



Fig 6 - Theatre and temple of Apollo at Delphi



Fig 7 - Sea Ranch from Norberg-Shulz's *Meaning and Place*



Fig 8 - Musée des Travaux (A Perret, arch) from Frampton's *Studies in Tectonic Culture*



Fig 9 - Bagesvard Church

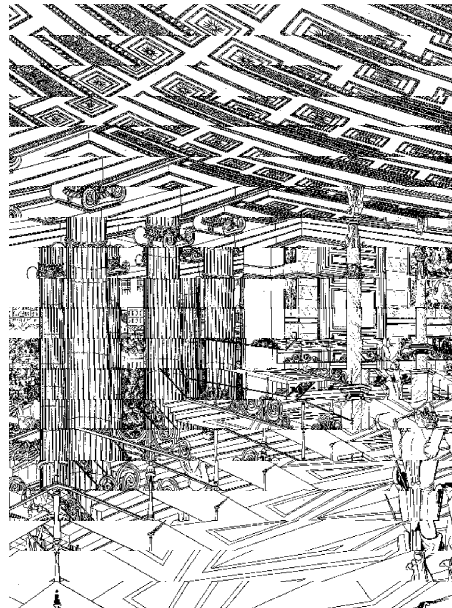


Fig 10 - Altes Museum, Berlin (KF Schinkel, arch) from *Studies in Tectonic Culture*

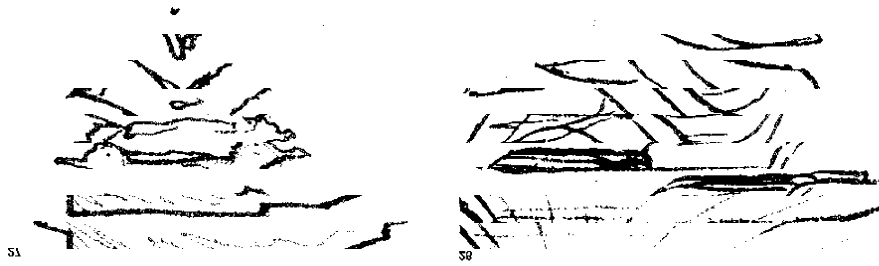


Fig 11 - Sydney Opera House; conceptual sketches

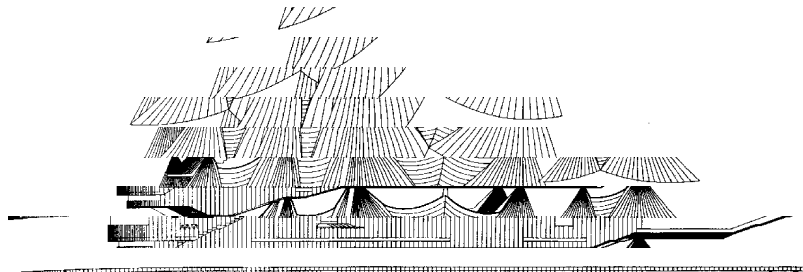


Fig 12 - Sydney Opera House, cross section



Fig 13 - Bibliotheque Nationale (H Labrouste, arch) from *Studies in Tectonic Culture*

architecture as concretizing the nature of a place. He uses varied examples such as the Saqqara pyramid and the Sea Ranch complex in California (figs 1, 7) to demonstrate architecturally what he feels is the nature of the site.

He speaks of man-made places relating to nature in three evolutionary ways: first, that man visualises his understanding of nature; second, that man symbolises his understanding of nature; and finally, that man creates a 'micro-cosmos' from his understanding of the world.

Both Frampton and Norberg-Shulz use examples of Jorn Utzon's work to demonstrate their arguments.

There is in modern times a certain 'cult of the individual', e.g., referring to 'Utzon's Sydney Opera House' or 'Scharoun's Philharmonic Hall'. Unfortunately this way of analysing is unsatisfactory when it comes to issues of place. It is unsatisfactory because many social and historical issues are ignored – issues that have much to do with defining what a place is. The subject of history and memory relative to place is vast, and can only be touched on in an essay of this length.

The philosophies noted above show a range in approach from a view of the absolute to a phenomenological place-centred approach. In support of the latter view, there are a number of further points to consider.

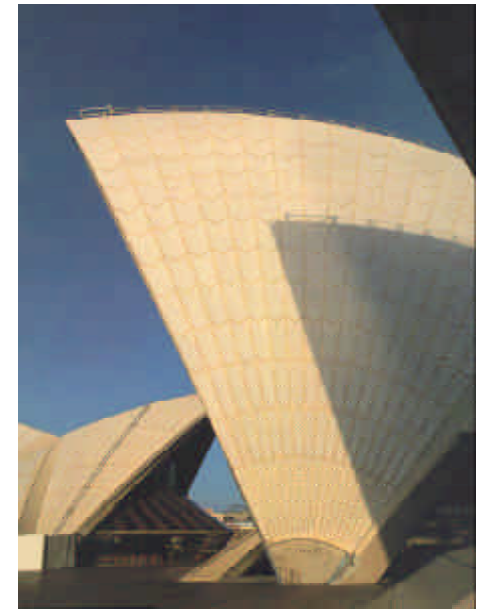


Fig 13 – Sydney Opera House



Fig 14 – Sydney Opera House



# An Argument for the Importance of Place

Architecture is grounded in the physical world. The place and situation of a building is intimately related to the interpretation of the building.

Consider Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye. Wright was preoccupied with rooting his buildings to the earth, and he used architectural devices such as horizontal planes, sheltering roofs, and masonry fireplaces to achieve these ends. Le Corbusier, on the other hand, sought to emphasise the rational and ordered aspects of the Villa Savoye by structuring and framing one's perception of the natural environment in a very deliberate fashion. The important point however is that neither building, despite their very different underlying ideologies, can escape the grounding and reference given to them by the physical environment in which they are in. The architecture mediates between the person and the physical environment in different ways in both buildings, but either way, the physical environment is an element to which the buildings must respond to in some fashion.

The grounding of the physical world will influence the development of a place. The towns of Clisson in France and Anticoli Corrado in Italy are examples of densely developed towns that have grown out of a natural setting. The physical setting materially contributes to the identity and growth of the town. An internal order in harmony with the physical surroundings is developed that then influences growth and evolution. Important also is that these towns developed 'organically' over the course of time, and are not the designed work of lone individuals. By developing in this fashion, there is a collective consciousness and memory that is developed and physically recorded. This then influences further growth and development.

The concept of place is multi-faceted. The above passages have discussed the aspect of place and how it is situated in the world. Other aspects of place have to do with society, culture, and values.

A society develops in a place. Without the grounding of place, a society is not rooted. A society that can exist in all places is a society that exists in no place. Without this grounding, a sense of alienation can exist. Arguably, there are elements of western society that are becoming similar across countries due to the influence of mass culture, however, there is a greater part of society that is



Fig 16 - Villa Savoye, Poissy, France



Fig 17 - Robie House, Chicago



Fig 18 - Clisson, France

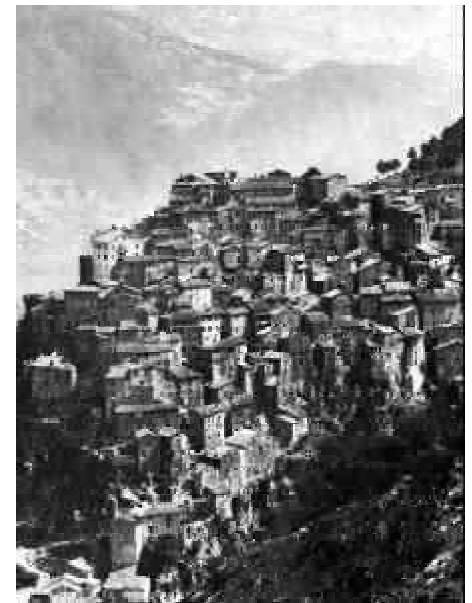


Fig 19 - Anticoli Corrado, near Rome

unique in its identity. This uniqueness is part of the society's memory. Without the grounding of place, this memory would not exist.

This societal memory will strongly influence the man-made environment. Some aspects of this memory will relate to the physical characteristics of the place. For example, light is a precious resource in the Scandinavian countries, and there are similarities in approaches between Scandinavian architects. Alvar Aalto's Seinajoki library is characteristic of many of these attributes. Light is a precious resource whose presence is of fundamental importance in the experience of the building (figs 22, 23). Contrast this to buildings in the Latin countries, where the colour temperature and amount of light are very different than in the Scandinavian countries. Mexican architects such as Luis Barragan (figs 19, 20) and others have built a number of projects where strong and vivid colours are integral aspects of the design. In these places, light is strong and plentiful. The appearance and feel between the Mexican and Scandinavian buildings is readily apparent.

Another aspect of place is the manner in which buildings are constructed. This includes the materials, their arrangement and composition, and the amount of craftsmanship. Through time, these buildings form the norm against which new buildings are conceived, constructed, and evaluated by that society. Several aspects make up the manner of construction, including relative wealth of a society, the amount of industrialisation, and social stratification. The norm is formed partially by habit, but also by virtue that buildings constructed in that manner are more readily achievable in that society, due to the social and technological infrastructure. Each in turn then reinforces the other.

The materials used in construction have often materials that were readily available. These materials then form part of the tradition, and can be seen in vernacular and 'designed' architecture. A desert fortress in Morocco (fig 29) is built with indigenous masonry. The western United States is plentiful with timber, and buildings constructed of wood frame are common (fig 26). Much of England has a strong tradition of stone and masonry construction (fig 27). These materials, being in common use will become a norm used by people in considering a place. However, the materials of a place go beyond strict supply and demand equations. More importantly is the acceptance of a norm of the mate-



Fig 20 - Macchu Picchu



Fig 21 - Amphi-theaters of Muyu-uray. Peru





Fig 22 - Seinajoki library, Finland (A. Aalto arch)



Fig 23 - Glacier Museum, Norway (S. Fehn, arch)



Fig 24 - Fuente de los Amantes, Mexico (L. Barragan, arch)



Fig 25 - House, Mexico (L. Barragan, arch)

rials. These then begin to have associations and references that are common among the society, e.g., that a stone house represents 'home' and 'solidity', or that glass and steel are 'free, modern and open'. To the extent that the materials are indigenous, this is one element of many that begins to contribute to a uniqueness of place.

The psychological component of a house has been explored in depth by Gaston Bachelard. He argues that our first houses, when we are young, form a psychological base that we use later in life when we evaluate not only our homes, but our place in the world. Without going further into these arguments, the point I wish to extract is that the feel of a place, whether it be in materials, style of construction, etc forms a part of the collective subconscious of that society. While these materials or style of construction may exist for very practical reasons, e.g., availability of materials, climate, etc., these practical reasons are then further reinforced by psychological reasons as the society builds new spaces for itself. These psychological reasons are often more powerful than strictly practical reasons, as demonstrated by the example (later in this paper) of the urban siting of the Berlin Philharmonic Hall.

The concept of place includes private, public and urban spaces. As the concept of what is meant by private, public, and urban changes through time, so will change the nature of the resulting places. Figs 32 and 33 show the Piazza del Campo in Sienna, and mid-town Manhattan. The way that people interact is different. In Sienna, the piazza is a communal space where people can gather, and it is a focus of the community. New York urban spaces are less communal, by which I mean that in public life there is less direct interaction between people. The streets are more of a means of getting from one place to another. Sienna is integrated into the natural environs whereas Manhattan is a man-made construct whose references are not oriented in nature. While the physical environment will influence people's actions, it was rather people's actions that influenced the design of these public spaces.

The built environment will concretise the values held by that society. Cultural institutions such as courts, museums, hospitals, schools, libraries, etc exist because they are in accordance with the value systems of those elements of society that have the power to see their implementation, either directly or



Fig 26 - Fitzpatrick House, Los Angeles (RM Schindler, arch)



Fig 27 - English country manor, Wiltshire, England

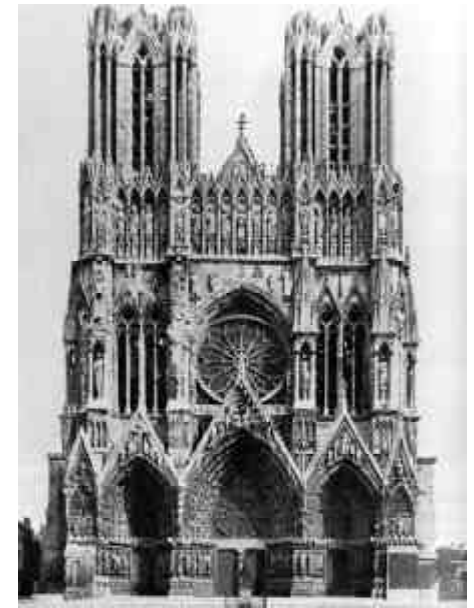


Fig 28 - Rheims Cathedral



Fig 29 - Desert fortress in southern Morocco



indirectly. The design of each institution, in turn, is influenced by these values. The role of the afterlife, and the concept of a ruler as a god strongly define Egyptian monuments such as Queen Hatshepsut's temple and the temple of Abu Simbel (figs 30 and 31).

An important function of places and buildings is to provide a psychological anchor between the individual and the world. Without this connection, the individual is rootless and feels 'out of place'. These concretised spaces provide a tactile link to the outside world. Together with social relations with other humans beings, this forms the mediating link between the individual and the outside world.



Fig 32 - Piazza del Campo, Sienna



Fig 30 - Funerary temple of Queen Hatshepsut



Fig 31 - Painting of Abu Simbel



Fig 33 - New York City

# The Expression of Place Through Architecture

## Berlin Philharmonic Hall

1956 - 1963 (H. Scharoun, arch)

At the time of design, Berlin was a divided city, and the building site was located as close as possible to what would have been the centre of a unified Berlin. The choice of is significant in terms of place as it represents a deep-felt aspiration of the society for re-unification of their war-torn country. This aspiration helps explain the masterplan of the site (fig 36) in what could otherwise be argued to a poor urbanistic solution – i.e., a cultural complex that is set as an island amidst a sea of major roads. This is reflected in the exterior form of the building (fig 30) in what is arguably a poor urban form – i.e., does not acknowledge or respond to the built/remembered context of Berlin.

What is particularly striking to me about this building is the conception of the music hall (figs 34, 40). There is a synthesis of man and music that one feels viscerally when in the hall. In plan and section (figs 35, 38) one can clearly see that the music is the psychological centre of the hall. The arrangement of the seats envelopes this centre on all sides, and cascades up from the podium. From the podium, one could walk, within the confines of the hall, to any seat. This is important as it contributes to an intimate connection between musician and audience. The cascading and tilting of the seating rows is done to avoid the boundaries of separation one normally finds in concert halls between separate tiers of seats.

The building creates a micro-cosmos by defining a particular relationship between man and music. If one were to interpret music as symbolising the spiritual side of man, then the building could be viewed as a very successful design that brought the physical and ethereal together in a unified whole.

The foyer and entrance (fig 37) is effective in reinforcing the conceptual strength of the concert hall. The ramps and gangways make a dramatic composition, but more importantly, underscore the separation between the profane world at pavement level to the micro-cosmos inside the concert hall. The hall would still be successful without this transition, but the comprehension and appreciation of the hall is significantly improved with this mediation.



Fig 34 - Berlin Philharmonic Hall (BPH); Concert hall interior

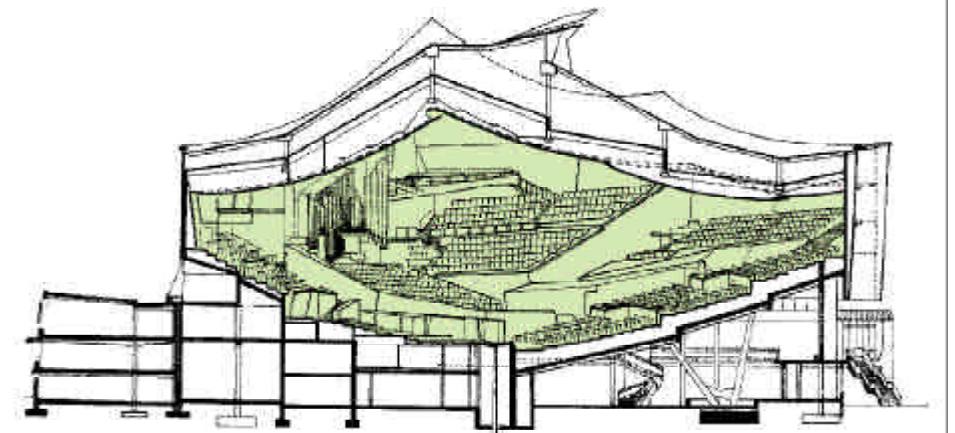


Fig 35 - BPH; Cross section



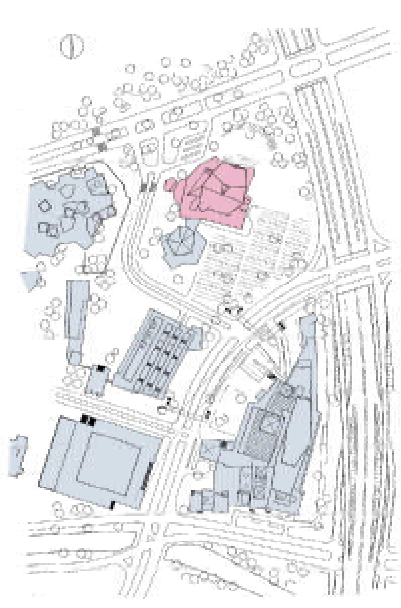


Fig 36 - BPH; Site plan



Fig 37- BPH; Foyer

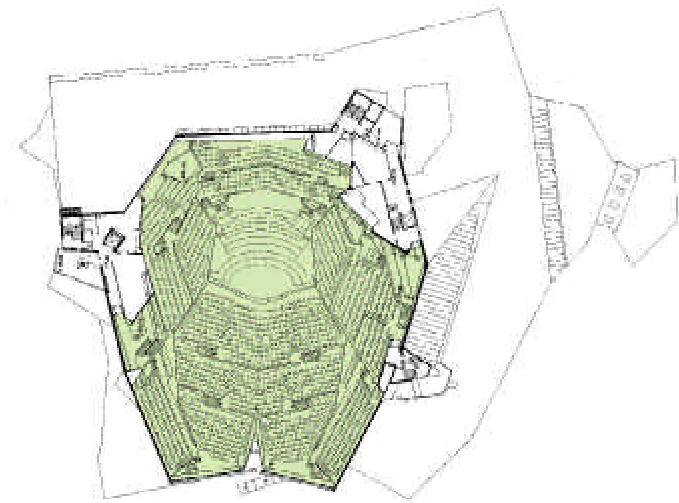


Fig 38 - BPH; Plan at concert hall level



Fig 39 - BPH; Exterior



Fig 40 - BPH; Concert hall



## Centraal Beheer Offices

1967, 1970-72 (H. Hertzberger arch)

The building is the headquarters for a major Dutch insurance company, and works in a very different way from a typical office building. There is a convincing integration of community and working life. This is seen in the open floor plan, the connecting voids through floor levels, the 'public' streets, and the many informal meeting spaces in the building.

In what is perhaps both a strength and a flaw, the building is inwardly focused and its form is generated by its internal ideas. The exterior is undifferentiated, and it is very difficult to find the entry. There is very little integration of the exterior environment into the interior of this office. In part this can be explained by the relatively monotonous surroundings, but more importantly I think it is due to the nature of the design idea. In this sense it is similar to Wright's Johnson Wax offices where the influence of the external world is shunned and the focus is spent on creating an internal environment.

This same idea however is very powerful, and goes a long way towards creating a micro-cosmos that roots man into the world. By this I mean the building provides a 'place' where the world of work is integrated into daily life in a meaningful and positive way. The success of building depends on the world view on the architect, and the rigorous application of these principles throughout the design.

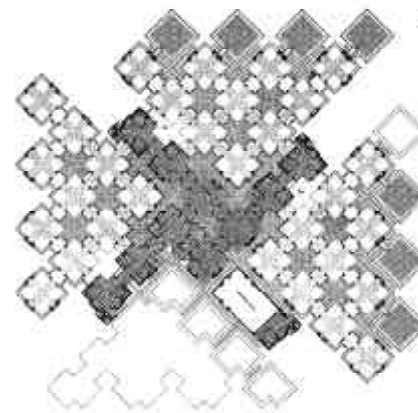


Fig 41 - Centraal Beheer (CB); Floor plan



Fig 42 - CB; 'Street'



Fig 43 - CB; Interior

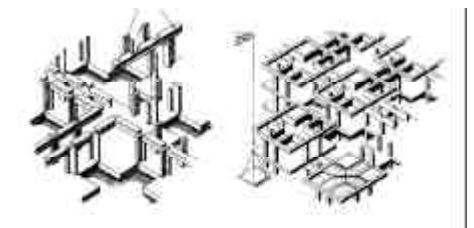


Fig 44 - CB; Assembly



Fig 45 - CB; Exterior

## Saynatsalo Town Hall

1950-52 (A. Aalto, arch)

The Saynatsalo Town Hall is a modest building in size and cost, but through some simple devices manages to underscore and amplify the institutional role of this building.

The entry into the town hall is one floor above grade level. An outdoor 'podium' is created that one reaches in a controlled, framed manner via a stair run of stairs. Physically, there is no reason to elevate the entry into the town hall. Psychologically however, the elevated platform literally and figuratively raises the building above the everyday profane world of the surrounding town. The character of the podium is further emphasized by the irregular cascading stairs which are not meant to be used, but rather visually reinforce the hilltop characteristic of the building.

The council chamber is the heart of the design, and is given suitable expression in physical terms. Fig 46 shows the massing and high pitched roof that stand out. The procession, or architectural promenade, further reinforces the psychic importance given this chamber. The council chamber is one level again higher than the already elevated entry. The corridor leading to the chamber (fig 40) is processional and underscores the importance of the room being entered. The sequence from the street, to the entry, and up to the council chamber is, at the risk of an overblown metaphor, an ascension from the profane to the sacred.

Additionally, there is a tactile presence to the building that helps the individual physically connect and identify with the town hall. Fig 47 shows the handrail detail, to which significant attention has been given, crafting and proportioning it to the human hand. This attitude and emphasis is carried through in many of the details such as brick patterns, the council chamber ceiling, and the articulation of different materials. This tactile connection is important because it aids in integrating the individual into place created by the building.



Fig 46 - Saynatsalo Town Hall (STH); Exterior



Fig 49 - STH; Corridor to council chamber

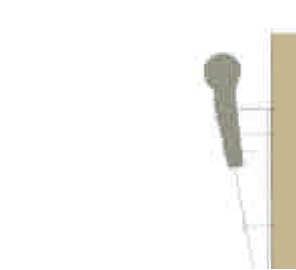


Fig 47 - STH; Handrail detail

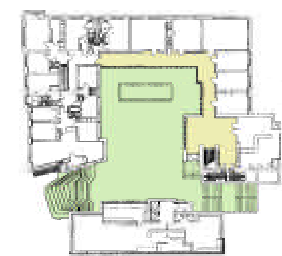


Fig 48 - STH; Main level floor plan

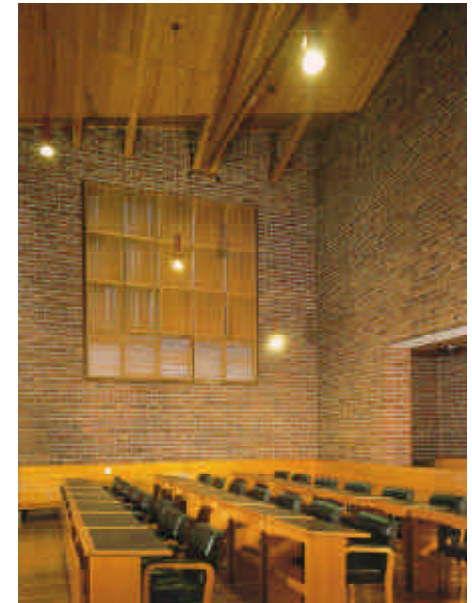


Fig 50 - STH; Council chamber



## Appendix A – House at Sylvan Hill

The importance of place in architecture is a concept that has been of interest to me for some time. Some of these thoughts can be seen in a project I designed while in private practice in New York. The project is a single family residence located on a 13 acre site in Connecticut about 2 hours from New York City. The site has a rural setting, but is not far from a number of small villages and larger towns.

One of the principal ideas was to create a sense of 'dynamic repose' where one was felt sheltered from the elements, but was in direct psychological contact with the surrounding natural environment. Projects of interest to me included the 'Church in the Rock' by Timo and Tuomo Suomalainen in Helsinki, and Louis Kahn's Unitarian church in Rochester, New York (figs 52, 53). Additionally, the sheltering roofs of John Lautner (fig 54) are also of significant interest to me.

The idea of place has several aspects. First, there is the physical site. In the case of this project, the natural elements of site were of prime concern. The seclusion of the site meant that a continuous open engagement could be made with the environment. In most projects, this would not be possible due to needs of privacy from neighbors, etc. A physical, tactile connection with the environment was the intention with this project.

Another aspect of place is the relationship of man to the environment. In this project there was a gradation of spaces from the public spaces of the nearby village and highway to the semi-public living and dining areas, to the private bedrooms. The transition between each is modulated and controlled.

The approach to the house is via a ½ mile road that winds its way up a hill. This terminates in a transitional courtyard. A trellis covered path leads from this courtyard to the main entrance. The sequence of entrance is deliberate. The front door is not immediately visible upon approaching the house, but the entry passage is clear. This entry passages rises gently, and the space becomes more compressed both vertically and horizontally as one approaches the main door. As one nears the main door, a view through the house is given onto the main view of a small ravine. The intention is that this sequence defines the man-made spaces, but integrates them into the natural environment.



Fig 51 – Sylvan Hill (SH); Exterior



Fig 52 – Unitarian Church, Rochester, NY (L. Kahn, arch)



Fig 53 – Church, Helsinki (T. Suomalainen, arch)



Fig 54 – Elrod Residence, Palm Springs (J. Lautner, arch)



Fig 55 - SH; Family room

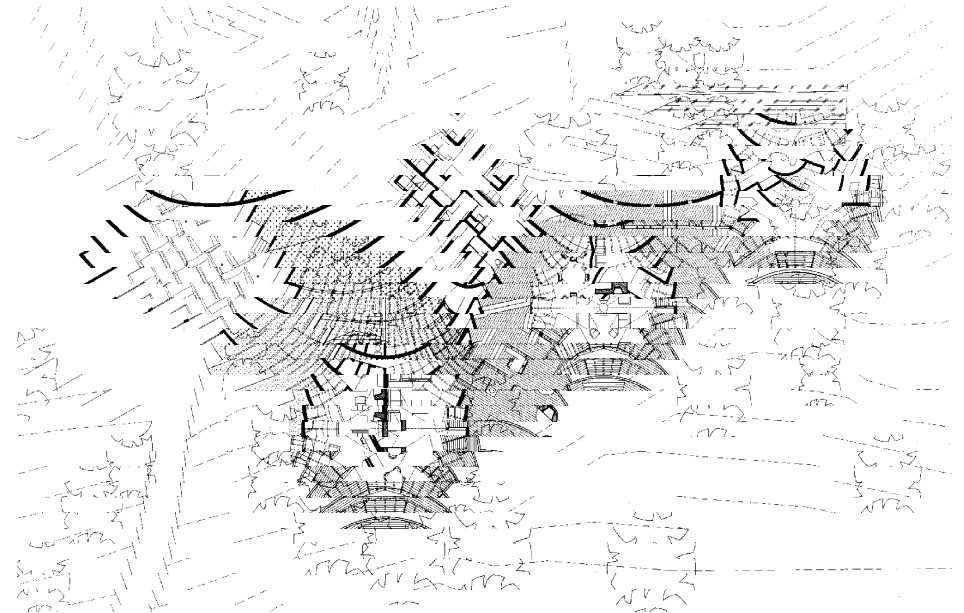


Fig 56 - SH; Floor plan



Fig 57 - SH; Foyer / gallery



The main living areas are contained in three 'pavilions'. One aspect of the pavilions was to maximise the setting and views in the natural landscape. The orientation of the pavilions and their glazing is such that one pavilion does not block the views of another. A perimeter trellis/skylight allows modulated light into the rear of the pavilions, and enhances the sheltered-yet-open atmosphere that was part of the design intent.

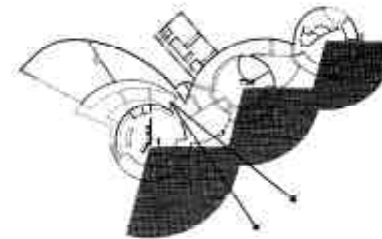


Fig 58 - SH; Views



Fig 59 - SH; Spatial hierarchy

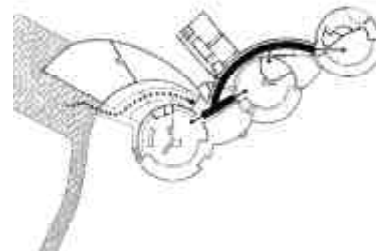


Fig 60 - SH; Circulation



Fig 61 - SH; Shelter / openness



Fig 62 - SH; Gallery





Fig 63 - SH; Master bathroom

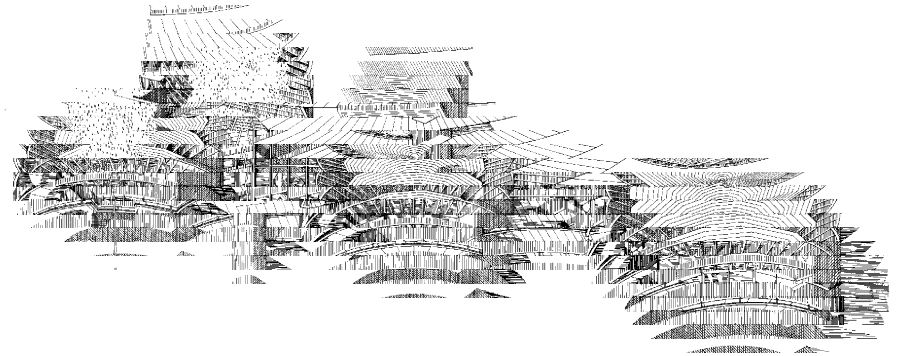


Fig 64- SH; Perspective



Fig 65 - SH; Main entry

# Notes and References

## Notes

- 1 Plato from the Philebus, quoted in Harries, K. The Ethical Function of Architecture. (MIT Press, 1998) p 229.
- 2 Laugier, M. An Essay on Architecture. (Hennessey & Ingalls, 1977) p 3
- 3 Le Corbusier (Jeanneret, Charles Edouard). Towards a New Architecture. (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960) p 23
- 4 Frampton, K. . Studies in Tectonic Culture. (MIT Press, 1995)

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