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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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*The many ways of doing philosophy of architecture
(and what they tell us about contemporary philosophy and the place
of aesthetics in it)*

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ABSTRACT. In this article I first consider why there are such different ways of doing philosophy of architecture, resorting to philosophical sources as diverse as Heidegger and cognitive theory (Heidegger 2008, Pallasmää 1996, Arbib 2021). I discuss what this shows about contemporary philosophy and the place of aesthetics in it (Miguens 2022, Cavell 1969, 1979, 2005), ending with comments on a film of architects at the drafting table (and not just there), doing their work of conceiving, sketching and designing (Borges de Araújo and Amorim 2023).

There are many ways of doing philosophy of architecture. They range from Heidegger-inspired approaches, focusing on issues of culture and civilization, and on human dwelling on the earth (suffice it to think of the 1951 lecture *Bauen, Wohnen, Denken* (Heidegger, 2008), cherished by many architects and often part of readings in schools of architecture around the world), to neuroscience and phenomenology inspired approaches, exemplified e.g., by the work of American neuroscientist Michael Arbib (see e.g. *When Brains Meet Buildings*, 2021) or the Finnish architect and longtime professor of architecture in Helsinki, Juhani Pallasmää (see e.g., *The Eyes of the Skin*, 1996, which has also become a classic of architectural theory). Both Arbib and Pallasmää focus on the specifics of human perception and action, and their connections to one another, in terms of brain science and phenomenology, respectively. One also finds,

³⁰⁶ E-mail: smiguens@letras.up.pt This article follows closely my contribution to the 2023 Budapest panel on philosophy of architecture, with Borbála Jász, Pedro Borges de Araújo and Sérgio Amorim. I thank them all for the challenge of thinking together about the issues discussed here. For a general introduction to the question what architecture is, see Shepherd, 1994.

naturally, approaches to architecture done in terms of aesthetic appreciation, including aesthetic judgment – this is in fact perhaps the most expected approach within e.g., analytic aesthetics. Some of these ways of doing philosophy of architecture center on the objects, the buildings. Some center on the act of doing architecture, in other words, on the conceiving, sketching, and designing done by architects themselves, not necessarily always culminating in a physical object, a building (in fact, more often than not, such conceiving, sketching, and designing does not result in actual buildings). Some other approaches concentrate on aesthetic appreciation and engagement, whether of laypeople or architects. My question is why there can be so many such ways, resorting to such diverse philosophical sources. More specifically, I am interested in what this says about contemporary philosophy and the place of aesthetics within it.

1. Architecture and the Socratic question “How should one live?” The question is who one is.

I want to start by suggesting, following Australian philosopher David Macarthur (2014), that, as philosophy, architecture begins with the question “How should one live?”. In the words of Macarthur “Architecture, perhaps more than other arts, presents an invitation to philosophical reflection. Like philosophy, it begins with, and continually returns back to, the Socratic question ‘How should one live?’” (Macarthur, 2014, 88). This question, the Socratic question, as Bernard Williams once called it³⁰⁷, is common to architecture and philosophy and it can be approached quite diversely. In the case of architecture, the issue of shelter is at stake and thus the question becomes how *one* wishes to live and take shelter. But once we take the question to be how *one* wishes to live and take shelter, immediately we must ask: who is *one*? Or: Who are *we*? Humans? Physical agents? Beings with a specific body and sensorial organs and ways of navigating space? Cultural beings? Taken individually? Taken collectively? Should we read ‘*one*’ in ‘one should live’ as meaning the person for whom an architect designs a particular building? Or the architects themselves, those who do the designing, what they themselves think? Should we read ‘one’ as a culture? But which culture then? That of an Amazonian tribe barely leaving traces of its dwelling on the planet, or the urban culture(s) of as complex a place

³⁰⁷ See Williams, 1985, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Chapter 1.

as the one depicted in, say, Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas, 1978)? The local culture? The global culture, if there could be such a thing? What are we to take 'one' in *How should one live?* to mean?

1.1. A clash of conceptions of the human

Different answers to the question about who we are inevitably led to different ways of resorting to philosophy. This is one main reason why there are so many ways of doing philosophy of architecture. There is a philosophical conception of who we are at work in each of the answers and contemporary philosophy in fact has many different (in fact divergent, even clashing) answers on offer to the question regarding who we, humans, are. I will go back to my initial examples by way of illustration. The text by Heidegger I mentioned at the beginning delves into the nature of human dwelling on the earth, its poetic nature, its contingency, its rootedness or unrootedness, its historicity. Asking what it is to dwell, Heidegger reflects on what inhabiting space is: he proposes that dwelling 'animates' space, and infuses it with humanity. Architecture is for and about human experience in space and time; it is the historical and contingent molding of it. As Heidegger puts it in another of his famous writings, 'Der Mensch wohnt an Dichter', or, as in the French translation, *l'homme habite en poète*. Man's dwelling, as a form of being in the world, is a form of poeticizing, in other words, of creating a reality. This then marks how Heidegger speaks in *Bauen, Wohnen, Denken* of e.g., rivers and bridges as setting the note for the dwelling of human beings upon the earth, what is to be the journeying and the settling, the whole process the letting-be of the *Heimat*, the home, the country-nation eventually. There are of course political undertones to all of this. Heidegger's particular approach to dwelling does not inspire democratic or universalistic political sensibilities. Some would see here a mythology of *Blut und Boden* and a romanticizing of a (relatively) rural and low-tech life, against dominating technocratic and cosmopolitan views of society. If we are critical of Heidegger's philosophy, we will see mysticism and nostalgia here, a foothold for political fascist rhetoric and the seeds for a discourse against science and technology. If we are not critical of Heidegger and, on the contrary, refer plenty of other questions in philosophy to his work, we will see here a welcome and profound critique of contemporary society. The text belongs anyway, in Heidegger's work, to the period after the *Kehre*, the turn, and to a view of thinking centered on Being and its historicity, and thus to a very particular way of answering

the question regarding who we are, which relates humans to Being, and to expectancy towards the givenness of Being. It is that that marks what dwelling is, what being human is. Even within phenomenology itself, if we do regard Heidegger as a phenomenologist, which is in itself controversial, the answer to the question Who are we? can be very different from all this. Suffice it to think of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *La phénoménologie de la perception*, another favorite of architects, which explores not Being and history but rather the body proper and the role of our body proper and our senses in our being in the world and giving meaning to space³⁰⁸. Merleau-Ponty's line, bringing human body proper into the picture is in fact the line that is pursued in my initial examples of the works in philosophy of architecture of Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa (*The Eyes of the Skin*³⁰⁹) and American neuroscientist Michael Arbib (*When Brains Meet Buildings*³¹⁰). All of them, anyway, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Arbib and Pallasmaa, are thinking about who we are. Each one is looking differently into what, or who, we are, though. I want to suggest that here it becomes important to ask another question: are we or are we not going to find something common to all humans, qua human animals, as it were, perhaps, when we ask the Socratic question, the question 'How should one live' for architecture? Is there something universal, something common to all humans, which is of concern to architecture? Perhaps something to do with cognition, brain, action, something to do with the body proper and the senses, since this is characteristic of the specific physical beings we are?³¹¹ Or is it that there simply is no commonality between human cultures as contingent historic forms of inhabiting space and giving it human shape and that is precisely what matters most, that historic specificity of being and its contingency? Is the way to go, in philosophy of architecture, a search for a more cultural-historical (ontological, if you will)

³⁰⁸ Notice, by the way, that the body proper is conspicuously absent in Heidegger's philosophy – he speaks of us, humans, directly in terms of either *Dasein* (in *Sein und Zeit*) or language and Being (after the *Kehre*).

³⁰⁹ One note of Pallasmaa's book is a diagnosis of the dominance of one particular sense, sight, the 'noblest of senses', in Western tradition and an exploration of the role and importance for architecture, of other senses (the sense of touch very particularly). The proposal is that in its task of bringing a sense of measure and order into the measureless and meaningless of natural space, life-enhancing architecture should address all senses simultaneously (Pallasmaa, Introduction to the 3rd edition).

³¹⁰ Arbib's book aims to be a conversation between architecture and neuroscience (written by a neuroscientist and thus with much discussion of the brain) around how we experience buildings and how they could serve us better.

³¹¹ One further question is whether (and how) such view of who we are in terms of cognition and the senses relates to the approach to acquaintance, and its role in judgement. This was pursued by both Borbála Jász and Pedro Borges de Araújo in the Budapest roundtable.

notion of who we are, as in Heidegger's investigation of poetic dwelling? If we take the alternative route and search for commonality in cognition and the brain, we end up closer to what we may call our animality. We end up thinking that it is human animals who build buildings, buildings of many shapes, thus extending into the environment the kind of animal human animals are. In fact, this extension of body and its functions to space is something many other animals do. One thing to notice then perhaps, is that what is at stake in architecture does not have its best examples in e.g., the works of star architects (around whom many discussions take place)³¹², but in this very basic occupation of physical space by acting and perceiving beings, whether human or not. There is such thing as architecture as something we have in common with other animals. It concerns molding the environment to ourselves, to the kind of being we are, extending our kind of body and mind, and our kind of action, extending it into space and thus giving space shape, a human shape. If we take this to be an important subject matter for architecture, then one small step leads us to pay attention to animal architecture³¹³. The topic of animal architectures has naturally not gone unattended by those thinking about architecture. One of the thinkers of architecture I am using as an example, Juhani Pallasmaa, organized in 1995 in Helsinki an exhibition on constructions made by animals, 'from beehives to bird's nests and beavers' dams'. Another way of departing from taking works of star architects to be paradigmatic of what architecture is and does, is to pay attention to folk forms of building, such as, say, Brazil's favelas, or the popular architecture that the Porto school architects (Álvaro Siza's school³¹⁴) carefully studied, and was important for conceiving its way of approaching architecture³¹⁵. Again, such approaches to architecture do not center only, or even especially, on buildings with a claim to art, or high art (think Zaha Hadid in our time, or other examples in the history of architecture – although the question whether architecture

³¹² In fact, Wittgenstein's expression 'architecture as gesture', so well analyzed by Macarthur (2014) is perhaps more useful to think about architecture as high art and not about architecture as a common extension of body and animality into space. About the connection between the idea of extension of body and animality into space, more humble and material views of architecture and the star system of international architecture, see Pallasmaa ((Pallasmaa and Borges de Araújo). In Juhani Pallasmaa's words, in his lecture on Alvar Aalto, published in Portugal (Pallasmaa and Borges de Araújo): "Considering the current orientation of architecture, dominated by eccentric spaces and shapes, new materials and technologies, digital and algorithmic imageries, and international star architects orbiting around the world, a lecture of Alvar Aalto's life's work might appear outdated" See also Aureli, 2013, *Less is more*, for a discussion of minimalism and austerity in architecture.

³¹³ For a lecture by Pallasmaa on this topic, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tIAW61Uzcs>

³¹⁴ See <https://www.alvarosizavieira.com/>.

³¹⁵ The concept of critical regionalism, as developed by Kenneth Frampton, should be considered here (again I thank Pedro Borges de Araújo for the references).

indeed is an *art* is, naturally, a question). Anyway, the question of what is and what is not high art is there for architecture, as it is there for other arts (for music, for painting, for cinema...). Notice also that as we chose to go different ways here, the question of the relation of architecture to technology changes shape. To go back to my examples, for many Heidegger comes out as a critic of technological civilization, known for approaching the ‘spirit of Technik in its relation to Western metaphysics’, whereas e.g. Arbib or Pallasmää open a way for thinking of technology as, simply and above all, a matter of extension of the human body, senses and action.

My first point is made. I wanted to remind us of how different the philosophical sources are that architects, when thinking about architecture, resort to, and consider why it is so. I suggested that the answer to the Socratic question How should one live brings out clashing conceptions of the human. Philosophy of architecture thus helps itself with the whole spectrum of contemporary philosophy, where such clashing conceptions may certainly be found. This poses a challenge: what makes us choose here? Architects recruit utterly diverse elements from philosophy to think about what they do: from Heidegger to cognitive theory, through Kant, to the many discussions going on in analytic aesthetics on aesthetics properties, aesthetic appreciation, or aesthetic engagement. What makes an architect choose a particular philosophy of architecture, or for architecture? We cannot have it all. Or can we? Is such pluralism tenable? Is it good? It is at least illuminating of how high the stakes in the philosophy of architecture can become. The whole clash of conceptions of the human, of who we are, of human thought and action and how to think about them, is imported into architecture and philosophy of architecture.

1.2. A matter of claim. What we are is not there yet.

As I said at the beginning, there are also approaches to philosophy of architecture that simply center on aesthetic appreciation, in particular on aesthetic judgment. I will thus now look closer into the issue of judgment. If we concentrate efforts on aesthetic judgment, as Borbála Jász and Pedro Borges de Araújo did³¹⁶, whether it be the judgment of a general audience appreciating buildings in public space (with or without mediators as Borbála Jász put it), or of architects

³¹⁶ I am referring to the Budapest panel contributions.

themselves, when involved in their conceiving and designing process (as Pedro Borges de Araújo prefers to think of it), then we find ourselves when doing philosophy of architecture, somehow closer to the philosophy of other arts and the issues discussed therein. One aspect under which to consider aesthetic judgment, whether it regards architectural objects or other objects, is the aspect *acquaintance*. Still, here I want to focus on another aspect of judgment, the aspect *claim*. For that I will bring in a philosopher, Stanley Cavell (Cavell, 1969, 1979), who although he wrote much on aesthetics, did not work on architecture particularly³¹⁷. Still, something he had to say about the nature of aesthetic judgment matters here. In “Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy” Stanley Cavell asks about aesthetic judgments: Who is the ‘we’ of aesthetic judgment? Where does its universality lie? Whereon does its claim rest? (Cavell, 1969a, Miguens, 2022). I want to suggest that yet another way of approaching the question of who we are can be found here. In asking such questions, Cavell is trying to articulate the connection between the *we* of ordinary language philosophy, the search for What do we say when? as a touchstone for a philosophical investigation, with Kant’s attention to the universal voice, as it is expressed in aesthetic judgment. He is proposing to see the claim of aesthetic judgment as such universal voice, or, in Cavell’s own terms, as a claim to community. The ‘we’ therein, then, is a middle position between oneself (myself, here and now, judging) and humans considered collectively, as it were. So, Cavell’s answer to the question Who are we? When considering judgment as claim is that we are not there yet. *What we are* is a striving: we are a striving for a community, a community that is not there yet. Cavell’s whole project for philosophy centers precisely on this notion claim (as the title of his opus magnum, *The Claim of Reason*, shows). Another aspect is important here for my purposes. For Cavell, the importance of the notion claim, and the work it does in our thinking about thinking, is reflected in the importance of aesthetics for philosophy. Elsewhere I tried to spell out the nature of Cavellian questions for philosophy, which arise from this view of judgment. They mark his characteristic view of aesthetics as fundamental for philosophy. What is at stake is not restricted to artistic objects, or a separate realm of human lives having to do with art and aesthetics only, or isolatedly. Some such questions are: “What is speaking for oneself? (..) How can an

³¹⁷ Although in his last writings (Cavell, 2005) there is much on Heidegger on dwelling, namely contrasting Heidegger’s approach to dwelling and settling with Emerson and Thoreau (in the last case, especially in *Walden*). Cavell does not find any praise of rootedness in these authors, on the contrary.

individual voice ever be shared? How can I speak for others, or be in a situation where others speak for me? What is recognizing others, being recognized by them, or recognizing a community? How is it possible to escape from expressionlessness? What responsibility do I have for the way language means? What is consent and dissent? Is there such a thing as agreement with oneself, in the same way that there is agreement and disagreement with others? How do you come to have not only your own voice but a voice capable of articulating something new, for example, something artistically new? And how can this singular voice that articulates the artistic new ever be shared?” (Miguens, 2021, p. 91, my translation).

According to Cavell, these questions are questions at work in aesthetic judgment. They spell out the nature of aesthetic judgement as *claim*. This is thus yet another way of answering the question of who we are – what we are is not yet there, judging aesthetically is a striving at something new for a community of thinkers and appreciators. Naturally, it is not easy to articulate how this element of aesthetic judgment (the universal voice, the community, the hope of agreement), an element that involves language and conception, relates to the aspect of acquaintance. That is further work for those concentrating on judgement.

2. What is in a film – a conclusion.

The Budapest panel on Philosophy of Architecture ended with a film (Borges de Araújo and Amorim 2023, *Two Hands to Philosophize*)³¹⁸. The film intended to bring into the discussion some important aspects of architects’ thinking of themselves as architects, as they go about their day-to-day work. By ‘architects’ thinking of themselves as architects’ I do not mean now their reading Heidegger, or Merleau-Ponty, or Arbib, or Pallasmäa to reflect on what architecture is, or on what who we, humans, are, but rather their thinking about their act of doing architecture (the actual sketching, designing, conceiving of buildings to be). What the film shows is two architects working together on this, (much of the time) on their drafting table. Pedro Borges de Araújo called it ‘two-hand thinking’. With that expression, he means to bring out motor skills as ways of thinking. The two architects in the film are thinking with their hands while sketching. They are solving problems by doing. They are also thinking together without

³¹⁸ For those who want to view the film in its entirety, it can be accessed on the MLAG (Mind, Language and Action Group, Institute of Philosophy – University of Porto) webpage at <https://mlag.up.pt/> or requested by email to af.autofocusproject@gmail.com.

exchanging words. They are correlating their own motor faculties, motor skills, movements (we see in the film movements of hands, as they sketch, delete, correct, sketch again), with the ways we humans, as agents, move in the world. The point is that a project in architecture is a project by agents in the world, taking the constraints of the world into what is being projected—and that this is in fact something common to architects' work and to any agent exercising its agency in the world. So, the film shows hands doing the thinking. What does this mean? It means that articulations between the brain and whatever is there (the world, we usually call it) are taking place. It means that common ground is being found between the mind of one and the mind of the other of the two people working at the drafting table. It means that transit between subjective, objective and intersubjective dimensions of the situation is taking place. These are dimensions, as it were, of the thinking-which-is-action that is going on. Such thinking is being done to solve problems, the kind of problems architects solve doing their sketching and thinking. Architects, at least some architects, thus come to encounter, some problems for philosophy of architecture which are also problems of philosophy of action and philosophy of mind. Problems at stake in the philosophy of architecture are not just the problems going under the heading of 'aesthetics', as if there was such a thing as a self-contained domain called aesthetics, related to art and specific objects of art. What is at stake in the philosophy of architecture are not just these familiar problems in aesthetics and the philosophy of art. What is at stake are more general problems about the nature of thought and action, what it is to be human, and what it is to be in the world. But even these can be understood in quite different ways.

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Film:

Pedro Borges de Araújo and Sérgio Amorim, 2023, *Two Hands to Philosophize* (film presented at the ESA 2023 Conference, Budapest, and previously at FILARCH 2023, *Architecture in the Age of Digital Media*, Patras)