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How Not to Get the Word on Architecture

The Effect of Heidegger's Prose on Norberg-Schulz's Theories

Timothy Gould

In the last fifteen years, several notable architectural critics and historians have turned to the work of Martin Heidegger, especially to his essay, "Building Dwelling Thinking". Those interested in architecture may or may not find anything to think about in such remarks as, that for a human being "dwelling is always to be learned" or that "we can only build, if we are capable of dwelling."¹ But whether or not it is possible to conceive of Heidegger as one of the greatest thinkers of our time, he is beyond question a phenomenon of modern culture. As such, he is the source of controversy, obscurity, deep-sounding chatter, headaches for translators, and a great deal of irritation both spurious and genuine. In the case of writers like Kenneth Frampton and Karsten Harries, I believe that their encounter with Heidegger led to more than all that, and indeed led them to some interesting lines of thought about architecture. I recommend Harries' work on the Rococo church and his remarks on the problem of arbitrariness and the authentic in modern (and "post"-modern) architecture and architectural theory. And Frampton seems to me to be responding to Heidegger when he thinks about the "placelessness" of our cities and uncovers actual resistance to place.²

When Christian Norberg-Schulz encountered Heidegger's work, the results were far less fortunate.³ He

muffles Heidegger's position to the point of inaudibility, and then provides him with views and arguments on subjects about which Heidegger is, for once, silent. The encounter was also a misfortune for those who are interested in Norberg-Schulz's own work. For he is often a perceptive observer and commentator, and he is capable of evoking the architectural life of buildings and cities. In looking for inspiration and confirmation in Heidegger's work, Norberg-Schulz is in danger of choking on words he doesn't need for the sake of ideas whose consequences he evidently doesn't understand.

I note two themes of Norberg-Schulz's, which are central to his work and which I assume to be of interest to students of architecture: 1) the idea of "visualization" and 2) the idea of expression and its companion ideas of intention and meaning. I leave for another occasion the idea of the "genius loci"—the spirit of the place—which is perhaps the gaudiest of Norberg-Schulz's ideas and certainly among the most difficult to present with any coherence. "Visualization" in Norberg-Schulz terminology means something different from what it means when we say, for instance, "Visualize the accident in detail" or "Whenever I try to visualize the side door of the house I grew up in, I see my mother standing in it." For Norberg-Schulz, visualization is not so much a matter of forming a visual image in your mind as it is a matter of



Carpenter Center, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

the visual aspects projected by a given building. These are big-sounding words but I can think of issues in modern architecture for which they are appropriate. The expressiveness of buildings is also familiar enough, though not necessarily in Norberg-Schulz's terms.

Consider for a moment an example which might help us illustrate the terms of his discussion. Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center has nothing which looks perspicuously like a front door or for that matter like a side door. It has an elegant, arching path which rises from one street, runs through the center of the building and back down to the street "behind" the building. If you try to enter the building from that

path—which is what the building invites you to do—you will find yourself entering at what turns out to be manifestly the second floor. There is, you will discover later, a "front" entrance. But the front entrance is located on the "side" of the building—or rather it is located on what would be the side if the building were oriented like the other buildings on Quincy Street (most especially, like the Faculty Club and the Fogg Museum, which flank it.)

Whether my account of this is especially perceptive, does not for the moment matter. The point is that we could use Norberg-Schulz's terms to respond, elucidate, and criticize such descriptions. Suppose we ap-

prehend the arching path as elegant and witty. To say that this is appropriate, or to say that this is part of the building's intention, is not to say that Le Corbusier was feeling witty or elegant (or, for that matter, contemptuous of Harvard) when he designed it. It is to say something about *this* building—and also about the way in which a building can “comment” on the buildings around it. As for the idea of “visualization”, I can easily conceive of Norberg-Schulz using that idea to theorize about the way in which Carpenter Center *refuses to be visualized* as having a front and a back. I would want to hear a lot more about this theorizing, but it does not seem to me to be intrinsically incoherent.

But what are we to make of these themes of visualization and expression or meaning when Norberg-Schulz encounters Heidegger? Visualization now becomes “the visualization of the earth.”⁴ And despite Heidegger's strenuous efforts to keep distinct the idea of the world (which, so to speak, we live *in*) from the idea of the earth (which, so to speak, we live *on*), Norberg-Schulz goes on precisely to conflate them. “The primary purpose of architecture,” he writes, “is to make a world visible.”⁵ Incorporating Heideggerian phrases has so distended Norberg-Schulz's prose that he is pushed to describe the architect in terms more appropriate to God or at the very least to some Platonic Sun, which causes the visibility of the visible (along, no doubt, with the intelligibility of the intelligible.)

Sensing danger, perhaps, Norberg-Schulz backs off quickly. Of course, he cautions us, “it isn't the ‘total world’ that the work of architecture makes visible,” but only “certain aspects”, namely, the ones “comprised in the concept of spatiality.”⁶ But the damage is surely done. What world, or what earth, is it whose “spatial” aspects become visible in

Carpenter Center? Is there a good reason for preferring as an answer, say, the “world” of Cambridge as opposed to the “earth” of Vermont from which the stone was taken?

This empty idea of the “spatial” aspect of a world (let alone *the* world or *the* earth) is also central to the way in which Norberg-Schulz inflates the idea of the expressiveness and intentionality of buildings. After encountering Heidegger, this becomes the idea that “Architecture” is a language. And the “spatial aspects” of this language are all over the map:

In general, the language of architecture expresses the existential structure called “spatiality” (Raumlichkeit) . . . Together these (spatial) structures form the existential basis for the language of architecture or in short Architecture . . . As the “house” or that aspect of Being which Heidegger calls spatiality, Architecture discloses the existential structures just mentioned. As a language, Architecture “speaks” or rather “shows”.⁷

It is worth saying that this sort of talk is not Heidegger's thought but something like what Heidegger is criticizing. For Heidegger only a human being can disclose or express “existential structures”, a phrase which is designed to mean the concepts of human existence. To think that a building can do that for us is either a piece of psychosis, a piece of totalitarian politics, or a piece of metaphysics. Let us suppose it is a piece of metaphysics. Let us suppose further that Norberg-Schulz means all this talk about Architecture “with a capital A” and intends thereby to designate the essence of what we know as architecture, apart from all its messy accidents. Suppose we ignore for the moment such questions as whether the essence of architecture changes when the first Gothic cathedral or the first skyscraper was built. (Note, however, what the stakes are in such a question. If the essence

is unchanged then the idea of essence is not very useful to a historian—which is what Norberg-Schulz sometimes is. And if the essence changes then it is not very much of an essence.) Look rather at the idea of language that he introduces under cover of some putatively Heideggerian terms. 1)The language of architecture “expresses” spatiality. 2)The language of architecture is “based” on (indeed, “existentiality” based on) spatiality.

Now it is very far from clear what we are to think of as the basis of our language, for instance, the basis of English. You might opt for its words, or its sound system (the phonetics), its grammar, or perhaps the logical categories (such as subject and object) that are expressed in its grammar. But whatever you take to be “the basis of language,” it is very hard to see how you can coherently think of the basis as at the time the stuff that gets expressed *in that language*. You might, for instance, express resentment or fear or hilarity or relief, but you are very unlikely to express nouns and verbs, subjects and objects, or the sound “fffff”. What you say, and the basis of what you say are not the same thing. To think so runs the risk of saying nothing at all or everything at once.

On the basis of such ideas about language, Norberg-Schulz manages to conclude both 1)“In general, the language of architecture possesses the capacity to translate lived reality into built form” and also 2)“...the building gathers the properties of the landscape and makes the landscape speak.”⁸ But since, on his account it is only the “spatial” aspect of lived experience which architecture translates into the spatial aspect of built form, perhaps he means no more by the first claim than that architecture translates space into space. This is true enough but not very helpful. (You can say, if you like, that being lost in a

crowd has a “spatial” aspect—there are, after all, no crowds that exist without some space in which to exist. If you translate that “lived reality” into a “built form” would it look more like Versailles or more like Houston?) The second conclusion is even more troubling, especially if you share as I believe he does concerns such as those of region, and its inhabitants. For how are we to know when the language of architecture has successfully allowed the landscape to speak? If an architect—or for that matter a city planner—makes the landscape say “trailer-park” instead of “park”, it will not be enough for him to plead that something was lost in the translation or perhaps that the landscape was mumbling. When we ask that an architect learn how to listen to a neighborhood or a region, we are not asking him or her to divine what the earth is saying. We would do better to ask for some perceptiveness and tact in humanizing the locales of nature. Neither a god's eye, nor a god's ear, is likely to be of much use.

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking”, translated by Albert Hofstadter in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971).
2. Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), especially 243-258. See also his essay in *Perspecta* 20, 1984. Kenneth Frampton, “On Reading Heidegger”, *Oppositions* 4 (Cambridge, 1974). See also Frampton's essay in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, edited by Hal Foster (Bay Press, 1984).
3. Christian Norberg-Schulz, “Kahn, Heidegger, and the Language of Architecture”, *Oppositions* 18, (New York, 1979). Also, Norberg-Schulz, “Heidegger's Thinking on Architecture”, *Perspecta* 20, (New Haven, 1980).
4. Norberg-Schulz, “Heidegger's Thinking on Architecture”, 63.
5. *Ibid.*, 67.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Norberg-Schulz, “Kahn, Heidegger, and the Language of Architecture”, 42.
8. *Ibid.*, 44.