



Heidegger and Sartre

Phenomenological Conceptions of the “Self” and the Ontology of Architecture

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Abstract: This paper aims to answer the question: Which conception of the self should we be informed by, if we want to understand the true essence of the self as well as architecture? To this end, I criticize the architectural theories that have been dominantly inspired by Heidegger’s phenomenological approach, suggesting that those who regard architecture as a morphological concept that has been defined and determined by the context in which it appears overlook the significance of the negation process, active agency and consciousness of being. Those scholars who overly focus on human relation to space also underestimate the human relation to self. These aspects of self are respectively discussed in reference to the modernist, post-modernist and biological architecture. The paper concludes in agreement with Susan Herrington that “an explanation of its materials, mode of production and representations cannot account for an ontology of [architecture]” (2008:62). If we want to understand the true essence of the self and architecture we have to be informed by Sartre’s philosophical approach that conceptualizes the self as an active agent whose existence cannot be preceded by essence.

I. INTRODUCTION

The nexus between issues of meaning in architecture, the analogies between functions of architecture, and the projection or formation of identity have long dominated the literature in philosophy of architecture. Anatol Rapaport’s (1968) *The Personal Element in Housing*, John Turner’s (1976) *Housing by People*, David Appleyard’s (1979) *Home*, Yi-Fu Tuan’s (1977) *Space and Place*, and Christian Norberg Schulz’s (1980) *Genius Loci* are some of the works

that have focused on the depiction of architecture as a way of identity expression or self realization. All these writings have dealt with either the ways that architecture has been a reflection of the cultural-physical environment into which we were born or the ways architecture has been an opportunity to express our own conception of the self, which might be shaped with reference to the multiplicity of sources that cannot be bounded by the cultural or historical context. This is the question this paper aims to answer: Which conception of the self should we be informed by, if we want to

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understand the true essence of the self as well as architecture? This discussion has been informed by different theoretical approaches to the concept of the self. Here I am going to elaborate on the usage of two distinct conceptions of the self in the process of defining the relationship between architecture and the self.

The first one comes from the phenomenological paradigm, which is here to be represented by Heidegger who argued in his *Being and Time* that we have no genuine essence other than that which comes with our existence.¹ We have no timeless part of us, no universal common with other individual beings that came into existence in different times and places. All we have is the submissive determinism that comes from the culmination of the history into which we are born, and the every day life in which we exist. Heidegger asserted that phenomenology must be mindful of the historicity and temporality of the limited set of human experiences (*Dasein*). How the communication with the context determines the nature of subject can only be comprehended with reference to its temporality and historicity. Moreover, for Heidegger, the cultural context in which communication with the world takes place is highly important because the individual's understanding of anything including the self varies depending on the cultural paradigm that informs the subject in his/her interpretations. As Graeme Nicholson stated "Since Heidegger has linked our existence so tightly to projective, anticipatory character of *Verstehen* (Understanding), he must recognize that existence itself incorporates the 'as-structure' of interpretation. To exist means to exist as a woman or as a man, as a clown or as a sage, as an American or as an Italian."²

The second conception of the self

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

comes from Sartre's existentialist paradigm arguing that the "existence precedes the essence."³ Although this existentialist view was influenced by the first phenomenologist paradigm that focused on indispensable relation between the space and the subject, it attributes a more active role to the subject in shaping both the meaning of his/her acts and the space into which he or she was born.⁴ According to this view

What is essential to a human being—what makes her *who* she is—is not fixed by her type but by what she makes of herself, who she becomes. The fundamental contribution of existential thought lies in the idea that one's identity is constituted neither by nature nor by culture, since to "exist" is precisely to constitute such an identity.⁵

In other words the self is an entity which chooses, acts, decides and defines itself through the identification with options that cross the cultural boundaries and layers of the past. Self-identity is a knee-jerk development. In Anthony Giddens' words "We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves.... Self-identity is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual."⁶ To make the point more precise, Stephan Wang, drawing on Sartre's understanding

² Graeme Nicholson, "The Constitution of Our Being," in *Heidegger's Being and Time: Critical Essays*, eds. Richard Polt (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2005), 55.

³ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁴ Robert Bernasconi, *How to Read Sartre* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

⁵ S. Crowell, "Existentialism," Last accessed April 10, 2010, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>.

⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 76.

of human actions and self-identity, states:

Instead of saying 'He runs away because he is a coward' we should say 'He is a coward because he runs away. Instead of saying 'I get out of bed because I have to be at the office in an hour' we should say 'it is by getting out of bed that I turn the possibility of going to work into an obligation.... He [Sartre] wants to show that our freely chosen actions establish our identity and give force to certain demands.'⁷

Based on these two conceptions of the self, I suggest that the meaning of architecture can be understood and depicted best as a by-product of the reciprocal relationship between humankind and the space surrounding it. While supporting this view I will be in opposition to the purely cultural-context-based deterministic conception of the self as Heidegger argued for. It should be clarified, however, that this is not to say the self is an entity that must be imagined independently from the cultural context with which the subject interacts. Here there is no insinuation that identity exists in isolation from a world of reasons and influence. Rather in my argument I will support the view that the self is a relatively autonomous entity who is actively selective in retrieving the characteristics of historical and cultural discourse that in turn inform the decisions of the self.

Therefore I will argue that the identity of the self, thus of architecture, is neither a passive way of being nor a simple reflection of what we are given as such. It is not a human effort to adapt to its environment; it is rather how humankind shapes its own environment, how it defines its own

⁷ Stephan Wang, *Aquinas and Sartre on Freedom, Personal Identity and the Possibility of Happiness*. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of American Press), 24.

essence.

II. AN ONTOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF HEIDEGGER'S CONCEPTION OF SELF

Christian Norberg-Schulz, drawing on Martin Heidegger's views, often uses the concept of phenomenology in his studies of architecture. According to him

We only recognize the fact that man is an integral part of the environment, and that it can only lead to human alienation and environmental disruption if he forgets that. To belong to a place means to have an existential foothold in a concrete everyday sense.⁸

From this perspective, creation of architecture is a process that is directly and primarily facilitated by qualities of space. The architecture has a particular meaning, the authentic comprehension of which basically relies on the correct detection of the discourse and practice of the field. For the phenomenologist, as discussed above, the practice of the field, namely the essence of the subjects, would be bounded by the cultural discourse, temporality and the historicity of being. While sticking up for this phenomenologist approach Schulz supports his argument with reference to the colonial architecture which characterizes the cultural imagination of colonizers in a strange geography. Therefore the subject, consequently the architecture, in a colonized region is characterized by novel intervention of colonizer's culture.

Chris Abel is another scholar who points out this relationship between self-expression and the function or essence of the architecture in colonized regions. For him, "colonial architecture is the outcome

⁸ Christian Norberg-Schulz. *Genius Loci* (Michigan: Rizoli, 1980), 23.

of a process whereby a people quite literally recreate familiar environments in alien locations, thus retaining that part of their identity which is their architecture.”⁹ Moreover, the colonial style that differs from the original style to some extent is also explained by transformation and cultural exchange that colonizers experienced in the process of adaptation to the new environment. Hereby the temporality and the historicity of being is emphasized once again to stress that human actions are driven by mostly the cultural discourse amounting to the moment within which the subject exists.

I find this argument insufficient for three reasons.

First, I disagree with Heidegger’s phenomenologist view, because in it, the subjective interpretation that is essential to *Dasein* “being there” is too limited to what our cultural accumulation allows us to imagine and understand. According to Stephen Wang, “If everything were imminent there would be no way of accounting for the numerous ways in which we judge something to be absent, relate something to what it is not, question something about what it could be, and act for a future that does not yet exist.”¹⁰ The Dadaist movement, which challenged the foregoing historical and cultural discourse, was indeed a living proof of that the “self” could be the opposite of everything that preceded it. Another proof of the same instance can be found within the modernist architecture, which is characterized by original forms that were a-cultural or a-historical. I.M. Pei’s Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University¹¹ and Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye in Poissy,

⁹ Chris Abel, *Architecture and Identity: Towards a global eco culture* (Pourtsmouth: Architectural Press, an imprint of Butterworth – Heinemann, 1997), 153.

¹⁰ Stephan Wang *Aquinas and Sartre on Freedom, Personal Identity and the Possibility of Happiness*. (Washington D.C: The Catholic University of American Press, 2009), 47.

France¹² are good examples of how the traditional forms were replaced with unprecedented ones by modernist approach in the architecture. While explaining the development of the modernist architecture Charles Jencks emphasizes the role of the architects who could consciously alienate themselves from their cultural environment. In Charles Jencks’ own words,

[Modernist] Architects had to become ultramodern in transcending the status-quo and this meant convincing themselves that design could be like mathematics, a-cultural, a-historical. The result of this doctrine soon became apparent: an abstract architecture, shorn of location in place and time, an architecture of amnesia or what Norman Mailer called, in 1960s, ‘empty landscapes of psychosis.’¹³

As noted, the modern architecture supports Sartre’s view that at the heart of being lays the process of negation. This also supports Sartre’s depiction of consciousness as an inventive act that not only discloses the existing meaning, but also facilitates us to think of the world other than it is.¹⁴

Second, I think the argument that the cultural discourse and the practice of the field is the primary source of what can be

¹¹ or an image of the Johnson Museum of Art, see <http://architecture.about.com/od/periodsstyles/ig/Historic-Styles/Modernism-11g.htm>.

¹² For images of Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, see http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/Villa_Savoye.html.

¹³ Charles Jencks. “The Post Modern Architecture and Time Fusion,” in *International Post-modernism: Theory and Literary Practice* ed. Hans Bertens. (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1997), 123.

¹⁴ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1996), 480.

imagined architecturally underestimates the multiplicity of sources that have had an impact throughout the identity formation and self-realization process. Heidegger's phenomenologist view is not relevant to explain which element of the cultural discourse is going to be the one that the subject would choose to identify himself/herself with in adaptation to the current environment and time.

Particularly in the age of globalization, it becomes more difficult to conceptualize the self as an agent that passively reflects the subjectivity of cultural historical experience in a certain period of time.¹⁵ Technological development accompanying the globalization process, increasing mobilization and the flow of information, and the growing frequency and complexity of interactions have left us with a space that can be called timeless, contrary to what Heidegger assumed in his *Being and Time*. I accept that no matter how they became complex we are still the sum of our experiences, interactions and knowledge but what I am arguing here rather is that we should be informed by a philosophical perspective which sees the self as a conscious and active agent who has the ability to choose from these abundant and timeless experiences to construct an unforeseen future.

This second critique of Heidegger's phenomenologist approach can be supported through the patterns of postmodernist architecture. Postmodernist Charles Jencks claims "architecture is irreducibly plural... an unstable hybrid based partly on codes external to itself."¹⁶ The postmodern architecture, which characterizes the amalgamation of these external

codes, different cultural aspects and historical trends, requires us to focus on the role of the architect in deciding which culture, which understanding of aesthetic or whose past is incorporated in the architectural project. Examples of the postmodernist architecture, therefore, are inevitably characterized by a decision-making process in a conscious manner that Heidegger excluded from his definition of the self, that is, *Dasein*: 'being there.' 'There' means the space, time and the place. 'There' means this spatiality. And 'being' refers to the self that can be only a part of this spatiality and may try to accept and understand it rather than to recreate it.¹⁷ Postmodern architecture that characterizes this spatiality requires us to acknowledge temporality and historicity of the being. However, this historicism in postmodernism should not be understood in a way that would defuse the self-consciousness of the agent who deliberately retrieves particular elements of the past in the process of recreation. In the words of Steven Connor,

... the use of the past can take more critical and self-conscious forms, which are concerned with negotiating and even accentuating historical differences even when they are apparent in the same building. One famous example of this is Philip Johnson's AT&T Building in New York City, which gives the traditional skyscraper's glass and steel box the more humane shape and scale of a grandfather clock, topping it off cutely with a Chippendale broken pediment.¹⁸

¹⁵ Hwa Yol Jung, "Doing Philosophy in the Age of Globalization," *Human Studies*, Volume 24, Number 4 (2001).

¹⁶ Charles Jencks, "The Architectural Sign" in *Signs, Symbols and Architecture* ed. Broadbent G, Bunt R, and Jencks C (New York: John Wiley and Sons: 1980), 72-73.

¹⁷ Graeme Nicholson. "The Constitution of Our Being" in *Heidegger's Being and Time: Critical Essays* eds. Richard Polt (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2005).

¹⁸ Steven Connor: *Post Modernist Culture: An Introduction to the Theories of Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 82.

Third, I disagree with Heidegger's phenomenologist approach in architectural philosophy as it assumes that the construction of architecture is possible by an agent whose being is defined in relation to the time and space that surrounds it. I think the concept of self should be abstracted and imagined above all the context into which the subject was born. I suggest that architecture is an opportunity to represent ourselves and to reflect this active self-realizing process rather than being a reflection of things that are apart from us. I suggest that what can be imagined during this self-realizing and recreating process cannot be bounded by the distinct characteristics of the language we use, of the time and culture in which we live. Although the definition of self varies by context and subjective experiences, the human being has a universal essence that does not change depending on the context in which it is embodied. It does not mean that 'being' may not take different forms or may not have different reflections and meanings under different circumstances; what is meant here by universal essence of human being is the fact that any variations that may be of use in defining the self is ultimately reliant on the pure existence, which precedes the essence. It is this pure existence before any experience that remains intact in any time and space; and it is this universality of existence associated with human biology that is now translated into architectural forms. Our age witnessed the most numerous discoveries that humankind has made about its own being and architecture is now informed by humanity's relationship with itself not with space: neither time nor place. Evidence for this is the existence of genetic and biological architectures, which have been informed by human body's own genealogical design, and cells.¹⁹ They resemble the organisms whose universal shape or meaning is not reliant on any particular circumstances.²⁰ Leonardo' Glass Cube in Germany Bad

Driburg²¹ and Scape\ Omnium in Hannover are good examples of biological architecture.²²

III. CONCLUSION

In this essay I criticized the architectural theories that have been dominantly inspired by the Heidegger's phenomenological approach, Schulz's *Genius Loci* being one of them. I suggested that those who regard architecture as a morphological concept that has been defined and determined by the context in which it appears, overlook the significance of negation process, active agency and consciousness of being. Those people who overly focus on the human relation to space also underestimate the human relation to him/herself.

To make an analogy between identity and architecture, I suggested that these three qualities of being must be taken into account: 1. Ability to negate; 2. Active agency-consciousness; and 3. The human relation to him/herself. These three elements of the self were respectively discussed with reference to the modernist, postmodernist and biological architecture. All these approaches in architecture were made possible by historical and technical developments, experimental works, and invention of materials in particular times; and on these grounds Sartre's existentialist interpretation of phenomenology that recognizes the link between place, time and self in architecture can be supported. It

¹⁹ Various examples of human biology buildings can be found on the following URL: <http://www.trendhunter.com/trends/bone-scraper>.

²⁰ Philip Steadman. *The evolution of designs: biological analogy in architecture and the applied arts* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

²¹ For images of the Leonardo Glass Cube, see, <http://www.archicentral.com/leonardo-glass-cube-bad-driburg-germany-3deluxe-2124/>

²² For an image of the Scape\Omnium, see <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/5043912>.

should be reminded, however and once again, that what I reject is not this relationship between self and space but the role that Heidegger tailored to the self in this relationship.

If we want to understand the true essence of architecture we have to be informed by a philosophical approach that conceptualizes the self as an active agent whose existence cannot be preceded by essence. The question I asked in the beginning of this paper was not whether architecture could be thought of as being independent from the context in which it occurs. Rather, what I questioned was whether architecture is a reflection of the self that is dominantly defined by the context that informs its existence or it is also an opportunity for the self to epitomize its creative existence, one that cannot be explained merely as bounded by the contextual time and space.²³ My position happens to be in favor of the latter. In the words of Susan Herrington “an explanation of its materials, modes of production and representations cannot account for an ontology of [architecture].”

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²³ Susan Herrington, “You Are Not Here: Sartre’s Phenomenological Ontology and the Architecture of Absence” *Architecture and Phenomenology*, Autumn (2008): 62.