Architecture and Chiasmus. The resonance of landscape.

Abstract

Focusing on the presence of Nature, regardless of scale or dimension (a park, a small garden, or a tree), and regarding the individual inhabiting a house or a room, his dwelling, we intend to discuss how landscape implies in architecture the assumption of space as simultaneously 'outside' and 'inside'.

The theoretical framework we rely upon in this issue is Phenomenology, namely based on Merleau-Ponty's approach to perception (Phénoménologie de la Perception [The Phenomenology of Perception], L'Oeil et l'Esprit [Eye and Mind], Le Visible et l'Invisible [The Visible and the Invisible]), and the phenomenological understanding of architecture (through Steven Holl, Peter Zumthor, Juhani Pallasmaa, David Seamon).

Within this scope, we debate to what extent Merleau-Ponty's *L'Entre-deux* (In-Between), and subsequent ontology of the sensible, deals with *landscape* as a category towards the constitution of a subjective experience of space and time. The 'outside' is not the world exercising the ego possibilities, but the primordial experience involving the individual and the world.

Iconic examples as the Fallingwater House (Frank Lloyd Wright), the Glass House (Lina Bo Bardi), and the Farnsworth House (Mies van der Rohe) are employed to interpret landscape's contribution towards the understanding of a descriptive ontology of the visible-invisible, and to unfold the meaning of Chiasmus.

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In-Between

Steven Holl, researching the experiences of perception concerning architectonic decisions in the scope of 'phenomenology of architecture' (2008: 45), recollects from Maurice Merleau-Ponty the concept of 'in-between' reality (*l'entre-deux*), the "ground on which it is universally possible to bring things together". Holl envisions an experience in which the individual architectonic elements (space, light, detail, material, volume, shape, proportion...) merge with the architectonic whole in a comprehensive perception. The 'in-between' reality is a concept expressing perceptive reality with no confines or boundaries.

In La Structure du Comportement (1942) [The Structure of Behavior] Merleau-Ponty is critical of the *la pensée de survol* [overview thinking], regarding consciousness and body as separate universes. In *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (1945) [Phenomenology of Perception] Merleau-Ponty explains the primordial experience, the perceptive evidence as fundament linking body and world, presenting the arguments for an integral human experience. This philosopher seeks an order of reality that does not presuppose duality: logic/perception, consciousness/body, body/world. Such order of reality, in *Phénoménologie de la Perception* is named *l'entre-deux* (in-between). The individual is enmeshed in the physical world, developing in relation to it: existence is neither a thing, nor pure consciousness. Thought is not separate from its sensing bodily roots. In fact, space is defined according to the movements of the body. The body awards significance to the world, transforming it into a lived, experienced meaning.

Accordingly, Steven Holl states that "Architecture holds the power to inspire and transform our day-to-day existence. The everyday act of pressing a door handle and opening into a light-washed room can become profound when experienced through sensitized consciousness. To see, to feel these physicalities is to become the subject of the senses" (2008: 40). Peter Zumthor expresses similar

Regarding the experience of exterior and interior according to the user's/observer's standpoint, the ninth principle states the preponderance of light upon things, "When the sun comes up in the morning - which I always find so marvelous, absolutely fantastic the way it comes back every morning - and casts its light on things, it doesn't feel as if it quite belongs in this world! I don't understand light. It gives me the feeling there's something beyond me, something beyond all understanding. And I am glad, very grateful that there is such a thing" (Zumthor, 2006a: 61). This 'outside' Zumthor refers to is everything that exists beyond the individual.

Therefore, landscape is also an outside. Architecture may not ignore landscape, but there are different ways to acknowledge landscape. Some of them regard landscape as an element, as decisive as materials, light, proportion, shape, detail, or temperature. Such architecture ranks landscape as a constructive element to be taken into account in design decisions.



Figure 1. 'Casa de Vidro' [the Glass House]1, Lina Bo Bardi, 1951, Morumbi, S. Paulo, Brazil.

¹ That's the house of the no less famous couple Lina Bo and Pietro Maria Bardi.

The 'Casa de Vidro' [Glass House] by Lina Bo Bardi was built in 1951 and is "hidden in a portion of the Atlantic Forest on one of the highest hills in the suburb of Morumbi [...] it is a sober, rational design, one might almost say it is 'Miesanic' (deriving from the architect of the Bauhaus, Mies van der Rohe), but already rendered Brazilian by the Nature that embraces it, more organic and more feminine. Feminine in the delicacy of its details, in the sky blue vitrotil of the flooring, in the curtains replacing walls, in the subtle curve of the roof and in the care for comfort. It is a house to welcome people. 'It is an open house', said Lina countless times" (Bo Bardi & Carvalho, 1999).

The 'Miesanic' reference probably derives from the Farnsworth House. In fact, both houses are glass structures with large windows allowing an overview of the surrounding landscape. But the two houses are quite dissimilar concerning the 'in-between' reality, considering dwelling and landscape.



Figure 2. The Farnsworth House, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1951 near Plano, Illinois, USA.

The Farnsworth House, unfortunately to the owner, Edith Farnsworth, did not provide the peaceful encounter with Nature she intended when she commissioned this country house, far from the cosmopolitan Chicago where she lived. The worldwide famous house designed by Mies van der Rohe attracted the curiosity of unwanted visitors: "A less than happy Edith Farnsworth moved into her now famous house. In the morning she would come out of the bathroom in her robe

to find uninvited Japanese tourists looking in not at her but at the house. Students would rent boats and row over to her house. Devoted students and professionals would hop over the gates when they thought she wasn't there. It was known that the site chosen, next to the river, flooded. The floor was built six feet above the ground or two feet above the highest known flooding. The house flooded a few times ruining the silk curtains and furnishing. Except for planting wild-flowers, almost no landscaping was done. The road used for construction was left and not moved to a more appropriate location" (Von Fennig, 2009).

In the article 'Domestic Differences: Edith Farnsworth, Mies van der Rohe, and the General Body' (Reed, 1996) Alice T. Friedman acknowledges the Farnsworth House creation process, since the first meeting between Edith Farnsworth and the architect, as well as the change of feelings since the praised blueprint until the project's conclusion. The beauty of Nature, "the immediacy of Nature at the riverbank site would permit an unprecedented closeness with the work of architecture and the interpenetration of the two" (Friedman: 184). Mies van der Rohe was indeed touched and moved by the view from the inside of the house onto the exterior, but did not consider the privacy of the inhabitant, also allowing views inside: "The truth is that in this house with its four walls of glass I feel like a prowling animal, always on the alert. I am always restless. Even in the evening I feel like a sentinel on guard day and night" (Friedman: 188).

The Glass House breathes life through surroundings objects and through the relationship with the neighbouring landscape: "The years of a life lived by this house are represented by the art works, by the objects with or without artistic or commercial value scattered everywhere. The 'junk', as Lina would point out, should mingle with 'high culture'. A cheap glass bottle in the form of the Jules Rimet football cup rubs shoulders with a baroque angel: a little peasant's bench keeps company with a Chaise Longue by Le Corbusier, a little plastic car, a child's birthday present, rests at the feet of a sculpture by Ernesto de Fiori, and so on.

Objects collected throughout more than 50 years inhabit this moving space of exceptional modern architecture that in a relationship of respect shows up the beauty of the Atlantic Forest and the necessity for its preservation" (Bo Bardi & Carvalho).

Bo Bardi's House is finely tuned in with phenomenological perspectives from architects and philosophers regarding the interior and exterior space and the way it resonates on emotion and reason² "The design process is based on a constant interplay of feelings and reason. The feelings, preferences, longings, and desires that emerge and demand to be given a form must be controlled by critical powers of reasoning, but it is our feelings that tell us whether abstract considerations really ring true. To a large degree, designing is based on understanding and establishing systems of order. Yet I believe that the essential substance of the architecture we seek proceeds from feeling and insight. Precious moments of intuition result from patient work" (Zumthor, 20010b).

Landscape, however, regardless of scale or dimension (a park, a tiny garden, a tree), interacts with dwellers, with the individual inhabiting a place he calls home, relating more deeply and closer to a category corresponding to the concept of Chiasmus by Merleau-Ponty.

Chiasmus

Steven Holl advocates that "When we sit at a desk in a room by a window, the distant view, light from the window, floor material, wood of the desk, and eraser in hand begin to merge perceptually. This overlap of foreground, middle ground, and distant view is a critical issue in the creation of architectural spa-

² Among the aforementioned Merleau-Ponty, Steven Holl and Peter Zumthor, we recall written works by Christian Norberg-Schulz [Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture] Juhani Pallasmaa [The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses], David Seamon [The Breaking Wave: New Organic Architecture], Adam Caruso [The Feeling of Things], Gaston Bachelard [La Poétique de l'Espace], and Heidegger [Bauen Wohnen Denken].

ce. We must consider space, light, colour, geometry, detail, and material as an experiential continuum. Though we can disassemble these elements and study them individually during the design process, they merge in the final condition, and ultimately we cannot readily break perception into a simple collection of geometries, activities and sensations" (2008: 45), addressing merging elements in the architectural space.

However, he remains within the theoretical framework of phenomenology of perception³, combining the 'in-between' reality with intentionality, as Holl states, "Questions of architectural perception underlie questions of intention. This 'intentionality' sets architecture apart from a pure phenomenology that is manifest for the natural sciences. Whatever the perception of a built work – whether it be troubling, intriguing, or banal – the mental energy which produced it is ultimately deficient unless intent is articulated" (2008: 41). Steven Holl does not address Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the sensible in Le Visible et l'Invisible [The Visible and the Invisible for the reason that duality remains, even if closely intertwining the subjective and the objective, emotional and rational. "Mental phenomena have real, as well as intentional, existence. Empirically we might be satisfied with a structure as a purely physical-spatial entity but, intellectually and spiritually, we need to understand the motivations behind it. This duality of intention and phenomena is like the interplay between objective and subjective or, more simply, thought and feeling. The challenge for architecture is to stimulate both inner and outer perception; to heighten phenomenal experience while simultaneously expressing meaning; and to develop this duality in response to the particularities of site and circumstance" (2008:42).

Merleau-Ponty recognizes the difficulty to thematize the latent background, prereflexive instance, while he considers it a priority for reflection, stating that "the

³ However, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, Finland, was baptized Kiasm by influence from Merleau-Ponty's 'Quiasme'. This is not so surprising since the main architects in this Project were the studio Steven Holl Architects and the studio Juhani Pallasmaa Architects.

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problems posed by Phénoménologie de la Perception are insoluble, because I depart from the distinction between consciousness and object" (1988: 253)⁴, and "there is still the problem of passing from the perceptive sense onto the language sense, from behaviour to thematization" (1988: 229-230).

The philosopher will seek another way to explain the phenomenon that is not phenomenological. He developed the concept of the 'body-subject' to reach the ultimate ontological instance - *la chair* (the flesh). 'Flesh' is the term Merleu-Ponty employs in order to say 'being' (être). Flesh is not matter, is not spirit, and is not a substance. Flesh is an element that does not belong to one precise place, it is everywhere as part of the texture (*la même étoffe*) of all beings. In *Le Visible et l'Invisible* the philosopher proposes a new way of thinking, exploring the concept of 'flesh', "We mean [...] that the flesh, being as a being from the depths, with multiple layers or multiple faces, is a being of latency and presentation of a certain absence, a prototype of the Being that our body [...] is a quite remarkable variation" (1988: 179).

Phenomenology will develop as ontology of the sensible, once the primordial element is no longer the body but a reality he denominates 'Chiasmus'. Chiasmus is simultaneity and does not include duality. Chiasmus is the new formulation of *l'entre deux*, increasingly emphasizing that the being is enmeshed in the world. Chiasmus recalls, according to our interpretation, what Deleuze refers to with the term *milieu* [middle/amidst/surroundings/medium]. "What is important in a path, what is important in a line is always the middle, not the beginning or the end. We are always in the middle of a path, in the middle of something" (1996: 37). With the notion of *devenir* [becoming] Deleuze avoids the constraints of past, present and future. He is aware that this is difficult to explain clearly (1996: 37)⁵, hence he forwards: "the middle has nothing to do with an average; it is not a centre

⁴The posthumous publication of this work, left unfinished by its author, along with the immense "work notes" and an "annex" that seems to concern an earlier wording of the third sub-chapter in the chapter entitled 'Interrogation and Intuition', was undertook by Claude Lefort. The production of the philosopher is terribly interrupted by sudden death in May 1961.

point or moderation" (1996: 39). He convokes three metaphors to participate in the dialogue: I'herbe (herbs), la steppe (steppes), and les nomads (nomads), and quotes Henry Miller: "herbs exist only between large uncultivated areas. They fill in the gaps. They grow between - among other things" (1996:38). Regarding the nomads, Deleuze underlines they are becoming (devenir), they do not have a history and therefore remain in the middle (milieu). The steppes also appear between vast forests, growing amidst something, in the 'milieu', "The absolute speed is the speed of nomads, even when they displace slowly [...]. The steppes, herbs and nomads are the same thing" (1996: 39). This paradox is not possible to unfold through logical reasoning; however it makes sense in its ambiguity, bringing us closer to the concept of Chiasmus by Merleau-Ponty.

The ontology of the invisible-visible

In *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, through vision, the philosopher sets a new way of thinking about Being. Merleau-Ponty recognizes the reversibility of the visible and the voyant, as touching and being touched can be reversed. When my two hands touch they are being touched, everything can be touched, as with vision, everything can be seen. This overcoming of the dichotomization 'perception-thought' is what we intend to address, relating landscape to Chiasmus, to *milieu*, to becoming. The expressions 'flesh of the world', the 'flesh of things', the 'flesh of being' are not mere metaphors. The issue of the 'flesh' involves more than the place of the 'body-object'. It extends to the whole experience of sense reversibility. "It is through the flesh of the world that we can finally understand our own body" (Merleau-Ponty, 1988: 304).

To explain the 'transformation' of the 'In-Between' into Chiasmus, the philosopher recalls artistic creation and particularly painting. This form of art is the best mani-

⁵ 'Dans le devenir, il n'y a pas de passé ni d'avenir, ni même de présent, il n'y a pas d'histoire. Devenir, c'est devenir de plus en plus sobre, de plus en plus simple, devenir de plus en plus désert, et par là même peuplé. C'est cela qui est difficile à expliquer [...]'.

festation to clarify the 'visible-invisible' connection. Cézanne is the chosen artist to address the presence of the body in painting, obsessively searching that plus that may be the pure sensation, revealing all wisdom. In *Le Doute de Cézanne* [Cézanne's Doubt]⁶ the philosopher meditates about the relationship of Cézanne with painting, the relationship between Nature and his own existence. Cézanne is the paradigm of the painter 'inside' Nature, observing it slowly and carefully, looking for what is hiding in the visible world - "Nature and art are not different?" - asks Emile Bernard - "I would like to unify them." - Cézanne answers (Merleau-Ponty: 22). In the work *L'Oeil et l'Esprit* [Eye and Mind] (Merleau-Ponty, 1964)⁷ the philosopher constantly reinforces the fundamental importance of painting "that helps define our access to being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1989: 42).

The philosopher reformulates his metaphor of the body as être à deux feuillets, (a being of two leaves), i.e. a body with two faces: a thing among things and the one that touches and sees them. Therefore feuillets is juxtaposition, is overlapping according to a reflective insight and doesn't serve to express what coexists in the body and in the world. In effect the body and the world are flesh from the same flesh, they are contemporary, they are Chiasmus: what is said of the body extends to all reality and vice versa⁸. Definitely, painting, for the philosopher, is the human manifestation that is more able to make the world the privileged moment for the appearance of thought regarding the sensible. Cézanne's work resonate his relationship with the landscape. Cézanne leaves his studio and amidst the landscape becomes a contemplative man in search for himself while searching what he does not see. He stays for long outside the studio, in search

⁶ Essay published in "Fontaine", 47, 1945, but written 3 years before. Also published in Sens et Non-Sens, Paris, Nagel, 1948.

⁷ This text was written in Tholonet, close to Aix-en-Provence (where Cézanne created his master-pieces), during the Summer of 1960, one year after Le Visible et l'Invisible.

⁸ To reflect is simultaneously to see and to say, which defines an intimate connection between vision and language. Reflection must search the world for the secret of our perceptive bond with the world, using words to state such pre-logical bond. In Le Visible et l'Invisible the philosopher coined the term surréflexion (hyper-reflection), naming the reflection tied to that movement, conceiving an intimate connection between words and silence. Language connects to reflection and is the means to describe the originating world, not being able to fully or permanently describe it.

In *Le Visible* et *l'Invisible* we witness how perception is *transfigured* into vision and the body is *transfigured* into flesh. The notion of reversibility replaces the notion of reflexivity.

In the work *The Eyes of the Skin*, Pallasmaa denounces in architecture the primacy of the sense of sight, which is not identical to the sense of 'vision' for Merleau-Ponty, which stands for an access to an inextinguishable bottom called world with a privileged relationship with painting. Pallasmaa has the same suspicions as Merleau-Ponty regarding the reflective thought that for the architect, vision is the paradigm. Pallasmaa invokes all senses in order to understand architecture.

The perception that Pallasmaa advocates integrates architecture in the ontology of the invisible-visible. In fact, Pallasmaa defends the absolute need for mental freedom in our so very rational, dry, visual times. He supports such freedom can be provided by an architecture that unfolds the authenticity of human emancipation, which requires the integration of the spiritual and the artistic when experiencing spaces. "The ultimate meaning of any building is beyond architecture; it directs our consciousness back to the world and towards our own sense of self and being. Significant architecture makes us experience ourselves as complete embodied and spiritual beings. In fact, this is the great function of all meaningful art" (Pallasmaa, 2005: 11).

The metaphor of the whole senses is a call for both an integrated perception of the individual's existential reality and the world in which architecture is a presence. "An architectural work is not experienced as a series of isolated retinal pictures,

but in its fully integrated material, embodied and spiritual essence. It offers pleasurable shapes and surfaces moulded for the touch of the eye and other senses, but it also incorporates and integrates physical and mental structures, giving our existential experience a strengthened coherence and significance" (Pallasmaa, 2005: 12). Defending the architecture of "the multitude of sensory experiences" (2005: 70) relying upon a complexity of impressions, an intertwining of senses and an encounter of emotions, therefore against 'the hegemony of the perspectival eye' (2005:35). Pallasmaa recalls "the kinaesthetic and textural architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, the muscular and tactile buildings of Alvar Aalto, and Louis Kahn's architecture of geometry and gravitas" (2005: 35). Accordingly, when commenting on cities and how to live and feel in an urban texture, Adam Caruso concludes that "the resulting complexity and never-ending potential of the city has little to do with novelty and theoretical abstraction but is held within the deeply moving world of things" (Caruso, 2008: 41) and that because "urban environment is a precise emotional condition. Being in the city feels a certain way"(2008: 37).

The mentioned architects and reflexions bring us to an understanding of architecture as an organism composed of many elements (*organs*) depending on each other in interaction with other living organisms (human beings) who react and interact with the architectonic space. Landscape is an element that influences the ensemble architecture-individual and contributes to display an understanding of a descriptive ontology of the visible-invisible. Landscape is that mute experience that unfolds the meaning of Chiasmus.



Figure 3. Fallingwater or Kaufmann Residence, Frank Lloyd Wright, 1935, Southwestern Pennsylvania, 50 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, USA.

This unique house about which almost everything has been said represents the fusion link between architecture and landscape, built partly over a waterfall in the woods⁹. We bring close to Fallingwater, Rilke and *Die Sonette an Orpheus* in which the song from the earth is the song of the pulsing of 'what is there' in a mixture of differences. Each life crosses another life and intertwines things. For Rilke, to see is simultaneous to being seen. To hear is simultaneous to being heard, being necessary to renounce notions such as 'acts of consciousness', 'matter', 'form', and 'perception', because there is a silent pact among the World's beings: the desire for life.

Rilke does not hide the thrill of being in the Nature and mingling in its density and thickness. A sort of mingling that allows the invisible to include the visible, such as the light includes darkness and a silhouette includes shadow. Rilke expresses with the images of the fountain (II-15, II-16), of the fruits (I-7, I-13, I-14, I-15, II-17), of the flowers (I-14, I-22, II-5, II-6, II-7), of the trees (II-17, II-21), and subsequently of the saps, juices, rumors, and perfumes, the real vitality in which Nature moves, continuously (re)completing the circle of return and farewell.

⁹ Lina Bo Bardi defines the structure of the house taking into account the natural profile of the ground and a full agreement with vegetation, forest, landscape. Other examples are the Californian houses by Richard Neutra or the Kaufmann Desert House in Palm Springs (1946-47).

The metaphor 'song of the earth' is correlative to the metaphor of hearing. The sounds of the song of the earth expose signs of life and splendor, resulting from Nature's cyclic pulsing. *Das Hören* [the audition] is the seed to the Sonnets evoking the enigma of the beginning and the end. Lina Bo Bardi, according to Joaquim Guedes, seems to regard poetry as a reference to her creations: "Cultivated, and therefore with no arrogance, seemed to have no doubts, yet questioned: her method for knowing and creating was moved by refutation and contradiction, to reach the core of poetry. Frequently completed a perfect scientific explanation by declaring the intention was merely to achieve 'something poetic' (Guedes, 1992).

Encounters with Nature as Conclusion

In the inspiring book *Conversations with Landscape* (Benediktsson & Lund, 2010), the authors highlight landscape through the metaphor of conversation, emphasizing that "we see conversation as enabling recognition of the more-than human character of all meaningful exchanges involving humans and landscape. [...] Moreover, we see such exchanges as involving much more than the visual sense on the part of humans" (2010: 1). In line with this text, we agree both with the convocation of all senses in the human-landscape relation, and with a "phenomenologically-based landscape analysis [...] through the notion of 'dwelling', where landscapes continuously unfold through how people move in and through them, going about their daily tasks" (2010: 5).

Therefore, landscape is much more than a place where the individuals create roots or visually appreciate natural forms, shapes and colours. Landscape is in constant movement, a never-ending transformation in which individuals participate while unfolding a close sensorial experience. Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir states that "one of the reasons that modern people seek refuge in Nature is precisely the fact that one can have experiences in Nature that, almost for a lack of better word, are termed as metaphysical" (Thorgeirsdottir, in Benediktsson & Lund, 2010: 13). Besides

these 'limit-experiences' we consider landscape as a partner for an embodied self who is not satisfied with logical explanations, as we previously referred. Indeed, alongside the sublime experience of "pristine natural environments and wild landscapes" (2010:13) or "wandering on one of the constantly moving glaciers tongues at the margins of Vatnajökull the largest glacier in Iceland (and Europe)" (2010:19), we focus the mutual interference of the 'natural outside' and the 'inside' of a building that may also constitute place to inhabit.

Obviously, in the individuals' daily life they encounter Nature. At least they may feel the breeze, a sunny day, an unexpected wind, the less convenient rain, or the possible crossing of a public garden or park. Individuals may also experience "the natural spectacle of the Aurora Borealis in Iceland. [...] The aurora are a diverse array of shards, veils, ribbons, curtains, cascades, flashes, beams and numerous other effusions that constitute an ever-shifting panoply of light in the Northern skies of the world. A widespread desire to witness them has given rise to an expanding tourist sector where visitors travel to an increasing number of destinations within or near to the Arctic Circle" (Edensor, in Benediktsson & Lund, 2010: 227).

However, the chiastic approach to landscape is more than this ineffable and ephemeral reality. The chiastic approach is the *Deleuzian devenir* of landscape and architecture is a privileged interlocutor to entwine with nature.

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