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Four faces of architechtural thinking. A brief note

Abstract:

The planning, the evaluation, or simply the experiencing of architectural works presuppose criteria, and those in turn presuppose certain authoritative principles, of which this note distinguishes four as particularly prominent: a technical, a social, an ethical, and an aesthetical principle. Their mutual relations are often conflictual.

1. On authority.

Humans do not depend on drawing and writing for conceptualizing or – on an even more elementary level of reflection – for cognizing[1] spaces, places, and habitats: in human perception, the neural processes of completion triggered by gestalt formation project extra figurative features – we could call them *mental graphics* – onto all physically perceived figures and configurations. The 'dotted lines' we add to existing configurations when we attend to the geometrical properties of what we see, e.g. in situations of planification, are part of perception as such, and constitute an active and *volitive*[2] ingredient of visual perception. We see both what is there and what we would like to see or to have seen, that is, what we optically see and what we imagine in the future or in the past, on top of the optically seen (and normally we are well aware of the difference, so vision is double); therefore we are able to show our practical and spatial, visual 'ideas' to each other by deictic gestures of pointing or contouring: "Here, we could do like this .../I would like to have something like this ...". Our basic perceptive relation to the surrounding experiential world is far from being just one of 'receiving' and is as well a matter of 'conceiving' and 'projecting' things, of expressing by diagrammatic gestures, signs of our 'ideas' and 'projects', what our visual and visionary minds find in the present: what the present offers us and invites us for doing with it. This volitive

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[1] By contrast, human cultures could not have developed calendar time and the vast cultural domain of *temporal* metrics related to it, without a written symbolization of number and proper names. This step, symbolization of time, is a major cognitive achievement, which must have affected *spatial* cognition directly, making it possible to formalize spatial proportions – from maps and territorial distributions to the scaling and proportioning of buildings and objects.

[2] Volition is wanting, wishing, intending, imagining-as-preferential, desiring some (here visible) state of affairs to be the case in situations where it is not or not entirely.

component in our immediate experience is immediately shared intersubjectively through our bodily signs, so what we seem to 'want', easily becomes what others either accept to want as well, to 'co-want', or else reject as 'unwantable'; the world of experience thus immediately becomes a communitary and political stage of creative planification, design, and architecture. For this reason, *perception leads_directly_to negotiation*. And negotiation gives rise to the manifestation of a fundamental intersubjective phenomenon and theoretical problem: authority. Since we are able to negotiate in such a way that a decision can in principle and often in practice be reached, this mental capacity and attitude shows that we naturally believe that some arguments about matters at hand are *eo ipso* better than others. The 'better' arguments enjoy some kind of authority, and so do the embodied human performers of such arguments. How is it that we manage to *decide* on issues of shaping the human habitat (whether in the scales of urbanization, constructional architecture proper, or object design)? We apparently do seek and find solutions to spatial 'problems' by intersubjectively accessible reference to spatially valid forms of *authority*, so it seems relevant to examine the possible consistency of these forms.

2. Four aspects of architectural thinking.

In the following section, I will present an outline of a theory of architectural thinking. In order to further explore this phenomenon of 'spatial authority', we need to distinguish[3] explicit thinking in terms of *knowledge*, based on categorization of specific things and their properties, on one hand, and implicit thinking in intuitive terms, attitudes and values of *feeling*, based on schematization of preferences, principles, rules, 'intuitions'. Additionally, we need to distinguish physical and social technicality: *physis* and *polis*, if you wish. The quaternary table resulting from the combination of these two binary distinctions can be filled by significant fields of empirically real experience (fig. 1):

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[3] The aspects I propose to distinguish are always empirically found in densely intertwined and interconnected forms, inextricable combinations and agglomerations. Nevertheless, theoretical distinctions like those I am proposing here may help isolate and reconceptualize problematic parts of such complex states of affairs.

	Physis	Polis
Knowledge	Technical engineering	Social function
Feeling	Ethics of Use (human Respect)	Aesthetics of presentation (Beauty)

Knowledge about space concerns *physical* conditions of stability in construction and possibilities of variation in the choice of materials and technical methods of assembly. It also concerns the more or less flexible *social* properties of related space configurations and the socio-institutional and cultural functions of the object: whether a site, a building, or an artefact (machine, designed tool, or work of art). Engineering and management, in other terms.

Feelings include attitudes to physical conditions of inter-human relations offered by a given construction: compatibility with human respect and bodily safety, that is, *ethical* considerations on vital and potentially critical situations that certain architectural dispositions could make its author responsible for; and, in the 'political' dimension, attitudes to the *aesthetic* presentation of the object, e. g. consideration of style and singularity, contributing to the sort of 'beauty'[4] that the author allows the construction to offer.

If we consider the interrelations between these aspects, we may immediately identify a series of well-known binary concerns and conflicts, such as the following.

Technical and ethical issues: the quality of engineering invested in the architectural object expresses the ethical commitment of the constructor. Bad engineering will harm the users.

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[4] Modern critics often feel uncomfortable when using the historical term of Beauty, and some even prefer to replace it by notions of Truth, Force, Intensity, or other metaphors for aesthetic value. But Beauty is not Truth, despite Keats.

Technical and aesthetical issues: engineering and artistic creation can reinforce or inhibit each other to a considerable extent.

Technical and social issues: specific categories of institutions have specific requirements as to engineering; and engineering affects the functional finality of the object.

Social and ethical issues: the functional finality of the architectural object is assumed and ethically validated by its construction.

Social and aesthetical issues: specific socio-institutional functions regularly correspond to specific aesthetic criteria, probably because the 'beauty' of an architectural object expresses its 'sacredness'. Some functions are culturally considered more 'sacred' than others.

Ethical and aesthetical issues: negatively put, how 'ugly' do we allow a construction to be? The aesthetic quality of architecture is also of importance to the mental life of its users. Since we *live* in architecture, its beauty acquires an existential importance in the dimension of people who are exposed to it.

3. The view from without.

Architecture may be one of the oldest cultural activities of our species, along with gastronomy and music. The first events of our symbolic evolution include 1) the constitution of dwellings as sheltered interior spaces, expressing status hierarchies; 2) the invention of interiors that are not meant for the living: temples, where ancestral beings are worshipped, narratives of origins and destinations, and calendaric time rituals are performed through music, and 3) finally the establishment of *agoras*, interiors or exteriors reserved for communal consumption, celebration, jurisdiction, libation and deliberation: eating – developing taste – and talking – developing discourse – being the basics of microsocial maintenance.

Architecture is an archaic and universally present passion in human civilisation. It is thus noticeable that the activity we call 'tourism', and travelling in general, reanimates a specifically spatial and architectural sensibility that everyday life most often suppresses, so that the 'tourist', the traveller who (for whatever reason) has left his 'home' land and its dwellings, temples, agoras, suddenly becomes a passionate

observer of *other people's* architecture and of its aesthetics, ethics, functions, and techniques.

The *view from without* that appears in this perspective may be crucial to the development of critical thinking – the ideational process based on the idea that things 'could have been otherwise'. Alternatives, possibilities, critical distance to actual life conditions, arise, I suggest, because or to the extent that we are capable of *finding architecture* in the unknown, instead of not finding anything. When we leave our habitats and travel through cultures unknown to us, the elementary *sense of architecture* enables us in principle to recognize civilization across the differences that otherwise could create absolute confusion and incomprehension. Architecture in this sense connects cultures into one human civilization, and thus prepares the ground for all 'spiritual' endeavors built on a universalist attitude, such as art, poetry, science, law, philosophy, diplomacy, communication, and love.