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Atmospheric Attunement: A Conversation with Alberto Pérez-Gómez

ROBERT KIRKBRIDE: Thank you, Alberto, for this opportunity to discuss phenomenon and architecture. To begin, let's touch on a recent interview between Kenneth Frampton and André Patrão, included in the previous issue of *Khōrein*,[1] in which they revisit Kenneth's 1983 essay, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance." That essay begins with an extended quote from Paul Ricœur, asserting that the phenomenon of global universalization constitutes both an "advancement of mankind" and "a sort of subtle destruction, not only of traditional cultures, which might not be an irreparable wrong, but also of [...] the ethical and mythical nucleus of humankind."[2]

Frampton's subsequent argument for phenomenology in architecture sought "the reinstitution of meaningfulness in design" by promoting a "critical regionalism," whereby tectonics would be tuned to localized specificities of climate, topography, and culture, "retrieving history from the modernist *tabula rasa*, learning from the neglected teachings of tradition, and refocusing design strategies from global homogeneity to regional circumstances."[3] While critical regionalism encouraged site-specific explorations to counter the placelessness and lack of identity generated by modernism and the international style, it also rejected as superficial the "scenographic" historical allusions of architectural postmodernism. What are your current thoughts on phenomenon and architecture, and what are we to make of the recent reemergence of architectural postmodernism?

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[1] A. Patrão, "On Conversations about Architecture and Philosophy, with Kenneth Frampton," *Khōrein*, II, 1, 2024, pp. 135–150.
[2] K. Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Port Townsend, 1983, p. 16.
[3] A. Patrão, "On Conversations about Architecture and Philosophy, with Kenneth Frampton," p. 143.

ALBERTO PÉREZ-GÓMEZ: Well, let me first say a few things about Kenneth Frampton's position, if I may. Not long ago, I wrote a short essay for Kenneth's *Festschrift*,[4] which connects his ideas about critical regionalism to my recent thoughts about atmosphere. Kenneth, as is well known, is citing a very early book by Paul Ricœur, which worked perfectly to buttress his position—what he thought was the necessary articulation, or conversation, if you like, between world civilization and regional cultures. Ricoeur had put his finger on how destructive global universalization is for traditional cultures, but in my opinion, he is not radical enough.

From my own writing about this crisis, also in 1983,[5] I point to how global universalization's values emerged from a technological mentality that is fundamentally instrumental, and not at all "subtle." Its central and driving value is efficiency, excluding or marginalizing all others, so it has been quite deliberate and unapologetic in its destruction of traditional cultures. This is not something that is easily repaired. And if you would ask me today, with our prevalent concerns about enduring colonialism, I would say that technological instrumentality is its vehicle. So, while I am very sympathetic to Kenneth's argument, I believe one has to be much more critical of the inherent values of technology in order to aspire to a contemporary architecture that not only respects but foregrounds and celebrates the traditional and very diverse values of cultures worldwide.

Cultural gestures, sedimented as habits that manifest in traditional cities and their architecture, are precious. They enrich our built environment, and contemporary architecture should treasure and enhance such continuities. In other words, while I share Kenneth's aim, believing that the tradition of modernism has much to offer, I have necessarily differed from the formulations and paradigms of his critical regionalism—particularly on the question of how architectural tectonics may avoid its reduction to technical utility. While I may agree that tectonics can be distinguished from technical utility, unfortunately the technical efficacy of

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[4] A. Pérez-Gómez, "Engaging the Lifeworld in Architectural Design: Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in K. C. Britton and R. McCarter (eds.), *Modern Architecture and the Lifeworld: Essays in Honor of Kenneth Frampton*,Thames & Hudson, London, 2020, pp. 94–102.

[5] A. Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA / London, 1983.

globalization—its compulsion to homogenize, if not eliminate, local contexts and conditions, undermines the poetic values that Kenneth would like to save through the tectonic. That's one side of it.

RK: So, although it may be true that "utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness," as Hannah Arendt asserted (and Frampton cites),[6] such a realization is not enough in itself to change the behaviors of those who embrace the instrumentalization of global capitalism and are unconcerned about "meaning." Perhaps that is also why, at least in part, phenomenology has been criticized in the past as being too "nostalgic"—its urge to return to an "unrecoverable past," a world centered on "meaningfulness."[7] What about the other side?

APG: The other side is the notion of the "scenographic," which in 1983 connected to the banal stylistic postmodernism of aarchitects such as Michael Graves, whose ornamentation was often two-dimensional and ironic. These people made sense as targets of Kenneth's critique. But when you think about scenography as it relates to the events and experiential dimensions of human life, I don't think it is something to simply throw away. There is something to be gained from saving the atmospheric qualities of architecture; yet, at that point, in 1983, anything to do with "atmosphere" was folded into scenography and received bad press from critics of postmodernism.

In my own recent work, and now that I see my career—my life—retrospectively, I realize I have always wanted to save the experiential dimension of architecture, understanding that its core is not necessarily buildings, but its situations and events. And that, of course, has a scenographic dimension because that's where habits manifest in culture. That's perhaps where one has a greater opportunity to save traditional cultures from the decimation of technological instrumentality, and the tools of global universalization. So, if what you mean by the "current re-emergence of postmodernism" is a valorization of the situational, experiential dimension of architecture—as opposed to the appliqué of historical stylistic quotations, per se—I would defend that position.

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[6] K. Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," p. 17.
[7] A. Patrão, "On Conversations about Architecture and Philosophy, with Kenneth Frampton," p. 144.

RK: That's an intriguing and nuanced distinction. On the first point, then, you're challenging Ricœur's characterization of global universalization as "a sort of subtle destruction" that "might not be an irreparable wrong" as a grave underestimation of the dilemma, correct? In hindsight, we see the consequences of enduring colonial behaviors—divide, conquer, extract, exploit—that have been instrumentalized through technology and embedded in the flows and mechanics of architectural production (and the built environment, more generally), causing ecological and cultural devastation at a magnitude that could not have been imagined forty years ago. And your urgency in *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* addressed the perils of instrumentalized colonialism and "misleading divisions" between reason (science) and intuition (art) in architecture,[8] while Kenneth dwells more on the paradox articulated by Ricœur: "how to become modern and return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization."[9]

APG: That's right.

RK: Regarding the second point, on the "recent re-emergence of postmodernism," I *was* indeed referencing its propensity for shallow historical glosses rather than the "situational, experiential dimension of architecture," as you put it. Yet I appreciate your interpretation of the "scenographic" as a revalorization of experiential situations and the atmospheric in architecture, and it reminds me that architectural ornament—despite its ancient significance—was also thrown under the bus by critics of postmodernism, alongside the scenographic and atmospheric dimensions of architecture.

For millennia, ornament in everyday life—in architecture, artifacts and clothing—had been understood as essential storytelling equipment for the varied settings of human life, from the dining table to the public forum. Not only did their aesthetic properties express and elicit sensorial delight, Vitruvius's *venustas*, they also informed the *ethos* of human behaviors and actions by establishing "atmosphere" and "mood," two terms you've plumbed. Yet, after modernism had all but stripped away architectural ornament as needless expense, it was further discredited in

[8] A. Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, p. 324.
[9] A. Patrão, "On Conversations about Architecture and Philosophy, with Kenneth Frampton," p. 147.

the excoriation of postmodernism and its superficial stylings. Here, your passage from *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* still resonates: "It should be remembered that ornament had never been perceived as superfluous by Renaissance or Baroque architects. Regardless of theoretical discussions about the specificity of structure and ornament, the latter was always understood as an integral part of a building's *meaning*."[10]

So, let's go deeper into your exploration of the "attunement" of a building to its setting and inhabitants. To what extent does architectural attunement *anticipate* inhabitant behaviors during design development, *pre*-occupancy, versus *accommodating* those behaviors through reflective adjustments, *post*-occupancy? In the mid-twentieth century, behavioral design emerged in reflective response to the notorious failures of modernist architecture to resonate with inhabitants,[11] yet it also quickly became deterministic and prescriptive, often generating insipid design solutions. Is it possible to revisit the initial reconciliatory aims of behavioral design in light of recent discoveries in neuroscience?

APG: Yes. I can speak a little bit to all these thoughts. First, to conclude with Kenneth. It is true what he says, that the tectonic foregrounds traditional values of making from within regional cultures, as in, for example, the architecture of Tadao Ando. Yet his examples are drawn from the implicit assumption that architecture, and its existential meanings, are encompassed in the building-as-object. To address the problem of meaninglessness created by a utilitarian approach to technology, I think one has to return to the possibilities of a building-as-experience, both in the quotidian sense of everyday life, and also in its experience as poetic discovery. Sometimes this discovery happens in discrete moments over time, inhabiting a building over an extended period, as one might experience a familiar piece of music that suddenly yields a kind of enhancement of our existential and sensory life, and perhaps even addresses fundamental values of existence.

I think this is true throughout the history of architecture, which includes not only buildings and public spaces, but also gardens and a myriad of situations that one could qualify as ephemeral transformations of quotidian

[10] A. Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, p. 256.

[11] The urban housing complex of Pruitt Igoe, in St. Louis, Missouri, built in 1954 and fully demolished by 1976, offers one notorious example.

life, mostly in cities, including religious, political and civic celebrations. These are all responses to existential questions, including how architecture contributes or doesn't contribute enough to alleviate the ecological crisis and the problems that we face in the environment. But I think we have to be both ambitious, as architects, and humble. Architecture is not exclusively about buildings and never has been. It's indeed a small portion of the fabric that humans construct to transform the more-than-human world into our environment. But like a piece of poetry, it has always had the capacity to reorient us.

That's why I deliberately use the word *attunement* to denote the possibility of architectural meaning in our complicated world, with its universal aspirations and local cultural differences. The term is kindred to the German *Stimmung*, the rich word co-opted by German Romantic philosophers to denote the meaning of all works of art, that itself means both "atmosphere," and "mood," while *Stimme* is a tuneful voice. The centrality of atmosphere in the tasks of architecture foregrounds the importance of cultural habits and the need to propose coherent environments, it weakens formal conceits and stylistic expression and demands a recognition of the needs of others while enabling the poetic realization of a participatory consciousness.

Attuned atmospheres give home to our needs, they represent a human-centered architecture but not merely a banal functionalism, understanding that the main questions of human beings are existential. I use the term attunement in my book with its Heideggerian resonances. Heidegger argued that we are fundamentally out of tune when we are born as humans because of our awareness of mortality. And there are certain things in the world that orient us and make us a little bit more tuned. We become more harmonious, if you like, in certain moments due to certain conditions, to certain artifacts that include architecture, music, and poetry.

RK: And food. I recently reread several articles by Marco Frascari on the phenomenal relationship between architecture and cooking, and the interplay of taste (*sapor*) and wisdom (*sapienza*)...[12]

[12] M. Frascari, "*Semiotica ab Edendo*, Taste in Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education*, XL, 1, 1986, pp. 2–7. See also, M. Frascari, "Cooking an Architectural Happy Cosmospoiesis," *Built Environment*, XXXI, 1, 2005, pp. 31–37.

APG: Oh yes, I remember that work! Attunement is at the center of our discipline, the condition that architects must seek. That's what I've concentrated on in my later work. And I'm not alone. Like you say, there are many colleagues who are trying to recuperate architectural meaning by focusing on these issues rather than on the objective, formal characteristics of a building. And so, one can get there by adaptive reuse. One can get there by building new fabric. One can get there by building ephemeral structures in many different ways. There's not only one way. But this question of attunement is central to the discipline.

In recent decades the significance of attunement in architecture has been vindicated by neuro-phenomenology, a term coined by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch by bringing in line insights from evolutionary biology, Continental philosophy and Hindu philosophy of mind, and cognitive psychology. In their 1991 book *The Embodied Mind*, they evidence and valorize the insights of phenomenology, which had been criticized by postmodernist, post-structuralist, and deconstructivist philosophers, as well as by architects like Peter Eisenman and his students, for not being able to "demonstrate" the claims of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.

RK: Claims such as...

APG: Most fundamentally, that presence is *real*, a *fact* of experience—like the perception of meaning in a melodic phrase. It had been argued by philosophers like Jacques Derrida and many of his followers, that the *presence* of a work of art—how it contributes to our well-being and our orientation in the world—was a fallacy. Famously, Derrida "deconstructs" Heidegger's "Truth in Painting" constructed upon the premise of the presence evident in Van Gogh's painting of a peasant's shoes. Derrida argued, particularly vehemently in his earlier works, that the present is nothing but a *punctum* between past and future, and thus the present does not really exist. Well, the interesting thing is, neuroscientists now better understand how our neurons fire, vindicating ancient theories of mind in Buddhism and Hinduism along with Merleau-Ponty and Husserl's argument for the substantial prereflective foundation of consciousness. Contemporary neuroscience verifies that we are not dreaming presence as it appears in the world. Presence is real. The present has a thickness, and time is not merely a linear sequence of perpetually vanishing non-existent points.

RK: As you've noted, citing Friedrich Schelling, "We are not 'in' linear time. Rather, 'time, or pure eternity, is in us'."[13]

APG: The concept of temporal linearity, giving priority to the objectivity of seconds we can measure, is a convenient reduction of reality, a scientific fabrication that does not coincide with the way we actually experience the world. So that's a real contribution of neuroscience, and that's why you are absolutely right about behavioral psychology. This was tried unsuccessfully in the late 20th century. The quantification of comfort and optimization is not the issue. The claim for the centrality of attuned atmospheres in architecture cannot be reduced to prescriptions generated by experimental data. You cannot reduce design to metrics. Even if you can measure whether a street with very long walls is comfortable or it's creating discomfort and people become threatened and anxious, you cannot fold your findings into numbers and dictate how to design a better city. That is absurd. Sometimes the experience of the labyrinth, in Crete or Chartres, can bring existential realizations.

RK: "By revealing the limitations of mathematical reason," as you've noted, "phenomenology has indicated that technological theory alone cannot come to terms with the fundamental problems of architecture."[14] It's an intriguing plot-twist that it's the hard, scientific evidence produced by recent neuro-phenomenology that actually substantiates phenomenology's critique of mathematical reason.

APG: The struggle, now, is to take these insights of neuro-phenomenology and see if we can give ourselves tools as architects to design places, spaces, situations that are both more suited to human life so that our lives are more awesome, so that we have psychosomatic wellbeing, but also without losing track that the underlying issue for architecture is meaning, after all, *existential meaning*.

RK: This echoes your argument, forty years ago, that for contemporary architecture to "find a new metaphysical justification, its point of departure is once again the sphere of perception, the ultimate origin of existential

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[13] A. Pérez-Gómez, "Mind, Mood and Architectural Meaning," in *Timely Meditations: Sellected Essays on Architecture*, *vol. 2*, *Architectural Philosophy and Hermeneutics*, RightAngle International, Montreal, 2016, p. 256.

[14] A. Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, p. 325.

meaning."[15] Subsequently, several notable architects have explored the role of perception in their architecture and writing—Juhani Pallasmaa, Steven Holl, Peter Zumthor—several of whom you've collaborated with, directly.

APG: Yes, I worked with Juhani and Steven on *Questions of Perception*.

RK: So, let's delve more deeply into the "sphere of perception." For at least two millennia, philosophical and physiological debates see-sawed between theories of *extramission* and *intromission*. Where advocates of extramission posited that light rays are emitted from our eyes out into the world, enabling us to see, intromissionists argued the opposite—that we see as a result of light being transmitted from objects in the world into our eyes. These literal and metaphoric views of internal perception and worldly experience held direct consequences for aesthetics, ethics and artistic works. Alongside this debate, a legacy of philosopher-physicians evolved theories about a meeting place in the mind, the *sensus communis* (common sense), wherein sensory phenomena were integrated to form judgments and guide our actions in the world.[16]

The recent findings of neuroscience seem uncannily corollary: our everyday experience of the world is an ongoing reconciliation of embodied and out-of-body experiences. As the neuroscientist Anil Seth summarizes, "we don't just experience our bodies as objects in the world from the outside, we also experience them from within; we all sense being a body from the inside."[17] In an unceasing flow, our brains subconsciously integrate our *interoception* (sensory perceptions inside the body), with our *exteroception* (sensory perceptions of the exterior world), as well as our proprioception (sensory perceptions of the body's position and movement in space). Seth describes the seamless integration of these multiple perceptual streams as "a controlled hallucination generated by the brain," and observes that "we're all hallucinating all the time. It's just that when we agree about our hallucinations, we call that reality."[18]

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[15] *Ibid*.
[16] For debates on the location of the *sensus communis* in the brain, see R. Kirkbride, *Architecture and Memory: The Renaissance Studioli of Federico da Montefeltro*, Extended Caption #8, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008, http://www.gutenberg-e.org/kirkbride/extended-captions.html#ec8.
[17] A. Seth, "Your Brain Hallucinates Your Conscious Reality," TEDX Talk, April 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyu7v7nWzfo.
[18] *Ibid*.

Let's turn from perception to *phenomenon*, which is generally understood as a noteworthy and perhaps unusual situation, event or condition in our everyday experience of "reality." Among its etymological roots, the ancient Greek term *phainómenon* (*φαινόμενον*) defined a "thing appearing to view," extending from *phaínein* (*φαίνειν*)—"to show," and connecting with phantasy (to make visible) and phantom (illusory likeness, figment of the imagination). Interestingly, all these terms share an origin in *pháos* (*φάος*)—light.[19]

Neuroscience has revealed how nuanced and complex being a "self" is, let alone being a self among others. How might architecture show us how to better attune ourselves with one another and the world around us?

APG: Like an atmosphere, a mood is shared, and is contagious, just like laughter or yawning. In the everyday world our bodies spontaneously express our moods and others directly pick them up and respond to them. Merleau-Ponty calls this phenomenon "intercorporeality." According to Gaston Bachelard, we literally resonate with another's experience. First there is reverberation, followed by the experience of resonances in oneself, and these eventually have repercussions in the way we perceive the world. This is how the poetic image is communicated, and how we can all have the experience of being co-creators. Now neuroscientists have found an explanation for this important phenomenon in mirror-neurons, that fire both when one makes a movement and when one sees another person make that sort of movement: when we observe the actions of others, our nervous system literally "resonates" along with the Other.[20]

In support of this phenomenon, architects can try to bring about the appropriate moods for human actions that reveal life as purposeful,[21] incorporating in their designed spaces a more lasting mood, one that we may associate with the room itself: solemn, strange, quiet, cheerful, reverential, oppressive, etc. It's important to point out that regardless of these precisions, our architectural experience is always ultimately dependent upon our participation in an event housed in the space; it is in such circumstances that architecture "means."[22] That's what these recent discov-

[19] M. Frascari, "*Semiotica ab Edendo*, Taste in Architecture," n. 18.
[20] A. Pérez-Gómez, "Mind, Mood and Architectural Meaning," p. 266.
[21] *Ibid*., p. 267.
[22] *Ibid*., p. 265.

eries of neuro-phenomenology bring to the table in architectural design. I realize what I have always been trying to do is find ways to explore the atmospheric; with drawing, of course, *drawing* the atmospheric, sketching, but also with words. That's why I focus so much on the importance of poetic language in my book *Attunement*. Architects have disregarded, for a long time, the importance of language as *poetic* language, as metaphor in our design processes to make more attuned environments.

RK: Is this due in part to our professional preoccupation with technological instruments? One might argue that the coding of AI and software applications like *Grasshopper*[23] is simply a new form of language…

APG: Yet human language is distinct from the coding that generates artificial intelligence or parametric design software: it is intersubjectively emergent and rooted in prereflective bodily gestures and experiences.

RK: Anil Seth would agree with you: "we are biological flesh and blood animals," he observes, "whose conscious experiences are shaped at all levels by the biological mechanisms that keep us alive. Just making computers smarter is not going to make them sentient."[24] So perhaps that might help the dystopians among us to sleep more easily. You also note, citing Merleau-Ponty, that language "speaks through us" and captures meaning in its mesh.[25] If "words point towards meanings but never fully coincide with them," this means there's always a slight gap in understanding one another, like the misalignments we experience when navigating multiple languages. As the Italian phrase goes, "traduttore, traditore" (translator, traitor). When you transport a word, a colloquialism, an idea, across cultural boundaries, and even more specifically, across the boundaries of your own experience and comprehension, you cannot help but "betray" that word and its assigned meanings to a degree, even if unintentionally. Some may fear language's polymorphic multiplicity as a betrayal of monolithic, original "truths." And yet, as George Steiner argues in *After Babel*, the richness of language is its dynamic malleability and porosity, not its fixity or monolithic uniformity.

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[23] *Grasshopper* is a visual scripting language add-on for *Rhino*, developed by Robert McNeel & Associates.

[24] A. Seth, "Your Brain Hallucinates Your Conscious Reality."

[25] A. Pérez-Gómez, "Mind, Mood and Architectural Meaning," p. 262.

APG: Yes. Indeed. That's why we may complement the somewhat despairing "traduttore, traditore," with "il vero traduttore e un poeta" the true translator is a poet].

RK: I've long been fascinated with Steiner's interpretation of the myth of the Tower of Babel, that humans didn't lose the capacity to communicate with one another due to a wrathful god's deliberate confusion of one "original" shared language, but rather the opposite. It is the *difference* among languages—and the inevitability of their mistranslation—that offers fertile ground for new ideas to flourish. New truths are revealed in the constant *becoming* of language, through our interpersonal exchanges. The more exchanges, the more possibilities emerge in the human experience. Perhaps Steiner's reading of this myth, which centers on the metaphoric interplay of architecture and language, also provides a way of seeing architecture as an unfinished and unfinishable project, always becoming?

APG: That's what is disregarded by understanding architecture as the production of buildings-as-objects. Place is not a postcard. Place is constituted by the habits, language, and the stories of the people that live in this place. If you're serious about building for others, truly respectful of the other, it's really a linguistic problem. You have to listen carefully to what others are about to be able to build for them, engaging with the others and their habits in true hermeneutic dialogue. Yet many architects are preoccupied with form-making. Whether we say it explicitly or not, this is unfortunately still very much what rules in the profession.

RK: And this formalism continues to have direct pedagogical consequences, especially with respect to the impacts of current technologies on architectural design skills and habits. Digital software programs promise users—especially novices—easier, speedier production of provocative building forms and building-like simulations than traditional analog methods of architectural representation that demand nuanced and slowly acquired physical dexterity. While one may rightly argue that "digital" and "manual" techniques should ideally complement one another, rather than be pigeon-holed as dichotomous adversaries, what matters is the *order* in which these skills are acquired. The correct order of learning would thus encourage embodied learning rather than digital dependence.

One ubiquitous software program, *Rhino*,[26] generates building sections with the greatest ease by use of the "clipping plane," a digital feature that enables users to choose a section cut by moving it back and forth, at the tip of their cursor. Unfortunately, the user-friendliness of the clipping plane requires little deliberation, nor does it instill the hard-earned habits acquired through hand-drawing and modelmaking. Consequently, many student projects currently feature an exuberant overabundance of rapidly produced architectural images that don't speak coherently as an ensemble. Frequently, neither windows nor doors are included in the sections, allowing no flow or access between interior and exterior, or from room to room. Where the construction of a tell-tale section would traditionally reveal how a building was to be constructed, from earth to sky and stem to stern, for an inexperienced student not yet aware of the interdependence of plan and section, the clipping plane too often renders the building section mute, its walls lacking the apertures to speak their purposes.

The clipping plane also inhibits the more advanced technique of "jogging a section," which merges multiple section lines into one representational plane to tell the story of a building, visualizing its throughlines and the pivots in its subplots. "Jogging a section" challenges mental and physical dexterity, combining abstraction and representation through bodily expression, by the kinetic gestures of drawing and making. By these more slowly acquired habits, a pen in an architect's hand becomes a scalpel, capable of revealing the anatomical workings and flows of light, air, and physical bodies that characterize the everyday life of a future place. Without such habits, an unwary student is easily distracted by software features that produce the semblance of a building by facilitating money-shots of its exterior, resulting in a building-as-object conceived from the outside-in, rather than from the inside-out. In this inverted process of architectural conception, form is lionized and the section has become perfunctory. Easily produced and undernourished, the section becomes an obligatory afterthought rather than a vehicle of revelation.[27] The results are often tasty-looking strawberries with insipid interiors.

[26] *Rhinoceros 3D* is computer-aided design application software developed by Robert McNeel & Associates.
[27] For valuable antidotes to this predicament, see *Manual of Section* (2016), and *Manual of Biogenic House Sections* (2022), by David J. Lewis, Paul Lewis, and Marc Tsurumaki.

Shifting gears from architectural pedagogy to practice, is it too big of a synaptic leap to compare the temporal space between our prereflective and reflective experience—that thick present—with the life cycle of a building, from prereflective design development to post-occupancy reflection? How might the mechanically-centered commissioning of a building, post-construction, compare with the attunement you're describing?

APG: Your analogies are very rich, both the literal and the metaphoric. Maybe first I would say a few things about this business of prereflective, reflective, and how it connects to the question of presence in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, now vindicated by neuroscience. The prereflective is a condition that is always present as long as we are alive. It's fundamental intentionality—*motricity*—Merleau-Ponty describes, which allows us to play the piano, for example. We don't really do it reflectively, once the know-how is acquired. Our body *knows* how to do it, like riding a bike or driving a car.

Although there is a tendency to attribute prereflective knowing to the unconscious, this is problematic because the "unconscious" is really an invention of Dr. Freud in the 19th century. It has a usefulness, but it is only emerging through the stories that a patient recounts to an analyst. Otherwise, Freud himself would recognize that it's inaccessible, and in truth, has a Cartesian dimension. The prereflective dimension is something else.

Scientists and philosophers estimate the prereflective dimension of consciousness as about 80% of our full consciousness, with 20% being what you and I are using in this conversation. Yes, we represent thought to one another in order to be able to talk, and we consider it very important. We make our lives out of it, you and I as professors. But it's only 20% of our consciousness. The other 80% is tacit. It is like the bottom of an iceberg. They're always operating together in the lived present, but 80% of it is tacit, and it constitutes our habits, without which we cannot understand anything. Socrates cleverly said, "I don't know much except a few erotic things." Erotic in this sentence of Socrates really stands for this 80% of experience. If you don't experience love, you cannot talk about it. Forget about theorizing love if you have not experienced it.

Of course, love is the master emotion, right? It's the affective dimension of experience, it is part of this 80%. So, in our everyday life, we carry this

with us, and there are *eureka* moments, fantastic moments, enlightened moments, which are part of the reflective dimension of consciousness, which happen in architecture that we all talk about when a building is amazing, when we go visit something and we are moved, and yet it's only 20%. There's always 80% that buttresses this 20%. So, I think it's important to keep this in mind when we're designing because, usually, people only think of the 20% that appears when as voyeurs, we travel and visit the Acropolis or a work by Peter Zumthor. Yes, yes, sure, there's this poetic, metaphoric clarity of the 20% that enlarges our experience and makes our lives worth living. But without this other 80%, nothing of that would be possible. So how to deal with that is one of the big issues of design, because when you're designing for life in its fullness, you are not designing for the 20% of eureka moments, with wonderful and poetic architecture, however much we love it, right?

RK: Place is not a postcard.

APG: Now, you offered the possible analogy, connecting the prereflective dimension of consciousness to pre-occupancy and post-occupancy. This is fascinating. It reminds me of a connection that Paul Ricœur makes to describe how the imagination works in the creation and reception of literary works. For example, when the poet writes a piece, they are using the imagination to create the piece. When we read the piece, we are using the imagination to inhabit the poem. So, what the architect puts forth tries to anticipate, like you say, the possibilities of prereflective and reflective fruition. This dimension of the architectural imagination is linguistic and profits from understanding the architectural program as a fiction for a future life—rather than the common understanding of a diagram or list of spaces with stipulated square footage. But then there is also the condition, once the building is out there, of the post-occupancy reading of the building—the *inhabiting* of the building, if you like—that can also be dissected and articulated in similar ways. And you can, of course, adjust, suggest improvements, change the building according to certain changing dimensions of human life. There are different ways that an artifact, building, poem, or piece of literature can yield its poetic meaning, and part of it is put there by the poet or the writer, while another, crucial dimension, is brought in by the reader, by the inhabitant of the work.

RK: Akin to Octavio Paz's description of poetry and poetics in *The Bow and the Lyre*, where poetry isn't a *thing*, per se, an object, or category, it is the *act* of performing a poem.

APG: Yes, the *performance*.

RK: In this vein, a building is a poem brought to life by others the architect may never know, and much is to be gained from closely considering the 80% of a building people tend not to think much about, closely reading how others in-habit and perform in a place. Do they embellish, ignore or even erase your ideas with their habits, their furniture, clothing, and stuff, the *flotsam* that equips—*ornaments*—our lives?

Meanwhile, we do not hallucinate the reality that architect-designed structures constitute only two to five percent of a built environment whose construction accounts for approximately 40% of the carbon released, yearly, into the earth's atmosphere. If the philosophical value of architecture is not merely to embody knowledge poetically, but to problematize it by expressing and facilitating existential questions,[28] to what extent is it architecture's responsibility to problematize the other 96% of the built environment as well as its own influence on the 4%?

APG: Good architecture can do both. It can certainly be critical and also poetic. It's important that it do both, though—that it not only problematize, but that it propose something. It should open up a world, state an ethical position upon which we may live our lives. Otherwise, it's a little bit like Derrida—endless critique with a deferral of ethical positioning, similar to what so-called deconstructive architecture once tried to accomplish. Sure, you can problematize, but I think you have to propose something for others to live a better life, and to deal with our questions of existence. A good piece of architecture does actually show the limitations of all that other 96% of stuff built in the world that doesn't have the thoughtfulness of architecture, but perhaps I'm thinking about it too simplistically. I may not understand the full scope of what might be intended by the usage of "problematize," but I think it's possible. Problematize, yes by all means, but it doesn't mean that you solve or *even address* a problem just by "problematizing" it.

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[28] J. Dodd, *Phenomenology, Architecture and the Built World: Exercises in Philosophical Anthropology*, Brill, Leiden, 2017, p. 8.

I think ultimately one must be very humble. Architects may add little to pragmatic shelter, compared with the other 96% of what is built. In addition, we know and must acknowledge that our natural world is very sick. Obviously, this adds to our responsibilities, but without detracting from our central poetic, political and philosophical vocation. I think good architects are becoming more and more ecologically responsible. We have a lot to learn from traditional and vernacular building practices that are already sustainable and are already doing the right thing. And they have been doing it for a very long time.

RK: Yet much of what is currently celebrated as consequential architecture on social media are object-buildings that are truly exceptions to the rest of the built environment. What do we make of an ecological stance that urges us to build nothing new and to focus our architectural energies and innovation on the adaptive reuse of existing infrastructures? How does one counter the evergreen habit of architects to design buildings at the whim of the wealthy and powerful, who may be largely uninterested in the social and ecological perils that confront us?

APG: It's very important to become aware of all these things. I don't have an answer other than better education, so that students who become practitioners have really solid ethical grounding to be able to articulate a position when some wealthy and powerful person urges them to build something stupid, although I don't think that's going to change the way things usually work, unfortunately.

I don't know how much we can do other than be keenly aware of our ethical responsibility, that we are not—and that's something that as you know, Robert, and I know you do the same since we've been saying constantly to our students since the beginning of our pedagogical practices—that we are not mere specialists in making formal decisions. We have to be responsible for our acts. What we put out there is a political statement. It matters. There's no excuse if you work for some bastard that asks you to do the unthinkable. You should just say no.

I know some colleagues, even some former students that make me proud, that have truly ethical practices. They have managed to find the good developers with a conscience, lobbying politicians to enhance the public realm, putting together programs that may be both profitable economically and

contribute to the common good. But I do recognize this is not the rule. And yet I think it should be emphasized that that's what we are about as architects. It's first an ethical responsibility towards others. What else can we do about our compulsion to build anew? At least we must recognize the gravity of our work, which is a promise we make to others toward a better future, in atmospheres that are both beautiful and just.

I remember teaching in Venice a few years ago, in the PhD program at IUAV, and people made me aware that the thesis projects of most architecture students in Italy are rarely, if ever, new constructions. They always work with historical fabric, which makes a lot of sense in Italy, less so in North America. So, I would agree on your principle of building nothing new, yet I think it's also in a certain way our responsibility as architects to see in new ways. Dictating that we should not construct new buildings in view of our ecological crisis has wisdom, but honestly it makes me nervous. If we understand architecture is a setting for lived situations, the issue is never building, per se, but proposing new ways of life. Our responsibility, I think, is understanding how from our present conditions we may evolve a more spiritual, better, more wholesome environment. Whether that means we build a new building or whether that means that we pursue adaptive reuse, that's maybe secondary. As a pedagogical position, though, I think it's a sound political statement.

RK: Can works of the poetic imagination cause change?

APG: Yes, I certainly think so. Perhaps not "change" in the terribly urgent meaning of the word that we see today, with our burning environment and the dire circumstances that surround us. But works of the poetic imagination can certainly cause change. Probably nobody saw the world in perspective before the painters painted it. I remember that my maternal grandmother could not make sense of a Cubist painting and now we think of it as reality. I can see a Cubist painting and I can see the real world through it.

RK: Likewise, the poets and painters manifest(o)ing surrealism were not concerned about fascism in the United States, and yet "surreal" is a commonly heard phrase when describing the disturbing turn of events in recent U.S. politics, and current events worldwide. The dreamlike—often nightmarish—works of surrealism have equipped us to describe experiences that do not align with the reality many thought we shared.

APG: And in the tradition of *phronesis*, the practical philosophy of Aristotle, what evidences truth is the poetic work, right? That's where real wisdom appears because it's always *situated*. So, where I learn about the possibilities of my own life is really through the fiction that is around me. Today it happens in movies, or in some television series. Now that I've retired, I read more fiction. I seriously read *a lot* of fiction. I truly believe that's the way we find our way in the world. So, I am convinced that works of poetry *do* change things, but they change things in ways that matter to people personally, existential issues that need to be addressed.

RK: So, the influences of poetic works are not necessarily direct, nor do they effect large-scale problem-solving; they are more intimate, incremental, activating us personally and interpersonally. I recently came across an interview with Richard Kearney, who also cites Aristotle's view that the "detour" of fiction enables us to look at the most hideous things, the most difficult things, the most painful things, the most tragic things and see them in a new way.[29] In other words, if you want to better understand and empathize with others, read their ghost stories, watch their horror movies, and understand that there are always, somewhere, buildings and places that are haunted.

APG: That's why I think our little luxuries, poetic luxuries such as architecture, help make us live properly as humans. That's not an insignificant task. There's such bad conscience about so many things with young students now. I know we have to be critical, to seek equity and social justice above all, but I think we also have to realize that there's only good to be gained from artifacts that address existential questions and reveal the ever-present enigmas in everyday human life, conveying emotional wisdom through awe, evidencing the coincidence of truth and beauty. Even if they may be of an order and magnitude that cannot be placed at the same level as "the decimation of the world," we have real experiences and issues that may be addressed through poetic artifacts, including architecture.

Interview conducted by Robert Kirkbride.

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[29] "Fiction Stronger than Truth: an Interview with Richard Kearney on Imagination," July 9, 2013, interview of R. Kearney by Rebekah Smick, http://www.groundmotive.net/2013/07/fiction-stronger-than-truth-interview.html.