

Coming to Our Senses: Architecture and the Non-Visual

by

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Books discussed:

• *Body and Building: Essays on the Changing Relation of Body and Architecture*, George Dodds and Robert Tavernor, Eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2002) • *Sensory Design*, Joy Monice Molnar and Frank Vodvarka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) • *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture*, Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007) • *Encounters: Architectural Essays*, Juhani Pallasmaa (Helsinki: Rakkennustiet Oy, 2007) • *Sense of the City: An Alternate Approach to Urbanism*, Mirko Zardini, ed. (Montreal: Canadian Center for Architecture and Lars Muller Publishers, 2005)

The five books under consideration here—all phenomenologies—have this in common: they aim to bring architects to their senses. All argue that a building’s meaning, beauty, function, and value lie not just in how it appears—how it looks—but in how it addresses and affects the other senses: hearing, touch, kinesthesia, temperature, balance, and even smell. The architect’s palette as an artist, the architect’s concerns as a social agent, and the architect’s interests as a professional, these books imply, ought to be much broader than purely visual—the undue bias towards which is perpetuated by architecture magazines through photography and by studio education through daily emphasis on screens, drawings, and models. The “experiencing subject”—the one who lives in and among buildings—is *embodied*, and the body cannot be reduced to its eyes.

It’s useful to begin by recalling that “phenomenology” referred originally to school of philosophy initiated by Edmund Husserl around 1911 and perhaps best summed up by the injunction to take appearances seriously. There’s nothing *mere* about the texture of everyday experience, about our moods and how they affect the look and feel of things. Such matters ought to be central to philosophy, said Husserl. Understanding the world

phenomenologically is no less delicate or demanding a task than, say, understanding Time, Space, or Causation. Our sensory perceptions, our moods and intentions, and indeed consciousness itself are integral parts of one Reality—and hence perfectly objective and study-able.

In later life, Husserl took up the quest to theorize the nature of consciousness itself—before it becomes filled, so to speak, with content (sensations, intentions, meanings, etc.).¹ Many prominent followers of Husserl, however (primarily Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gaston Bachelard, not to mention Martin Heidegger and all three widely read at architecture graduate schools in the '80s and '90s) kept to Husserl's original program. Merleau-Ponty examined consciousness's dependence on our *being* weighty and limbed bodies rather than on just having them. For Merleau-Ponty, our bodies are paradigmatically both “in here/subjective” and “out there/objective,” and it's hard to disagree. Bachelard concentrated on the status of daydreams and the power of poetry to uncover and intensify the latent and all-but-universal meanings of everyday places, while Heidegger dwelt on the feeling all moderns have of living with diffuse intentionalities and yet nostalgic for ultimate purpose, our wanting to feel free of the old ways...and yet at home.

Within architecture itself, the stream of phenomenological writing runs not quite as deep. It would include Steen Eiler Rasmussen's classic *Experiencing Architecture* and Rudolf Arnheim's *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*, as well as Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Genius Loci*, Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin*, David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer's *Dwelling, Place and Environment*,² Yi-Fu Tuan's *Topophilia*, Junichiro Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*, Lisa Hescong's *Thermal Delight in Architecture*, Peter Zumthor's *Thinking Architecture* (and *Atmospheres*), and perhaps my own *For an Architecture of Reality*. Siegfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* and Bruno Zevi's *Architecture as Space* were works of phenomenology too it could be argued, as was Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown's *Learning From Las Vegas*. All take the enhanced *experience of* buildings, landscapes, and/or the city to be their starting point, their touchstone, and their end. All offer the interpretations, narratives, and explanations they offer (say of construction methods or social history) in order to raise consciousness of the sensory and emotional qualities of *being* in certain physical environments, and most especially the ones architects design.

For example, whether or not you are persuaded by Giedion's narrative of historical succession—Greek space to Roman space to Modern space—you really have to *experience* these three kinds of “epochal” spaces to get his argument at all.³ Take Las Vegas's glitter,

signage, referentiality, and strip-layout seriously, and you will begin to ponder architecture's possible (d)evolution to super-efficient climate-controlled volumes covered over and lined by arbitrarily formed and/or electrified skins. You might begin to feel excitement at the plausibility of the notion that buildings of the future will float like cruise ships in oceans of cars, and should. Either way, after reading *Learning From Las Vegas*, you cannot see signage, traffic, or the strip the same way.

Read Tanizaki and you will have new eyes for the darkness that accumulates far from windows. Read Heschong and you will suddenly become aware of the air.

Now, in phenomenologies like these, as well as in popular criticism of architecture, one frequently hears the plea to architects to “move beyond the visual.” What should we make of that? If architecture *is* detrimentally mired in the visual, we might ask: how did that come to be? And we might ask in corollary: would the charge that some building is “eye-wash” (a metaphor for *shallow*) have been avoided or remedied if the architect had had concern for the other senses (say hearing and smell)? In other words, can a building be multi-sensory *and* shallow in meaning, or purely visual *and* deep in meaning? I think the answer must be yes.

Here is the crux of it. Buildings have a look and a feel, to be sure, *but the feel must come from the look* if architecture is to be one of the *fine* arts. Scanning a fine colonnade beats a quiet drum in the mind; and an arcade seen is an arcade *watched* if it evokes the sound of a rolling hoop or makes you feel like walking on stones across a pond. “Space” is a sensation powered mainly by the sight of surfaces, and involves the whole body already, which is why too direct a concern with sonic, haptic, or odor experiences risks making architecture a fairground entertainment rather than a fine art. As a result, no architectural phenomenology I know of makes a big deal of what it's like to open and close doors: that satisfying (or not) twist of the handle, movement on the hinges, thud and click of a reseating latch—the change in acoustics, those possible feelings of protection or exposure, of finality, exclusion, or entombment on closing a door, and of risk, anticipation, or freedom on opening it.⁴ Few make mention of the quality of the breeze that comes from windows rather than ducts, or of the disorientation caused by elevators, or of the muddying of speech caused by soda machines, or of the wonderful, gradual escalation of hubbub as one descends open carpeted stairways to a lobby (as one does, for instance, at the *Arizona*

Biltmore). Somehow these phenomena, because they are *not* visual in beginning or solution and cannot be museum-ized, stand outside the doors of architectural theory. Diller and Scofidio's *Blur Building*, for example, received the attention it did by the diagrams and the photographs of its stunning cloudlike presence on Lake Neuchâtel—not by the facts of moisture upon the face, the sound of spray, or unsure footing among rainbows. How close it came to entertainment—to a ride—rather than architecture.

It would be sad if there were no way to theorize the non-visual phenomena of architecture in a fine-art *and* technical way. There are few precedents for trying to do so, and the effects of these works on practice have been close to zero. (When has Heschong's *Thermal Delight in Architecture* ever lain open near a drawing board, much less a computer?) Architectural theory remains resolutely about the visual. If there is any blame to go around for this—and I think there is—then pointing to photography and/or the magazines is not enough. Also important are the sensibilities of gallery owners, museum curators, and art historians since around 1930, and how that meshed with the ambition of unknown architects to become known ones via *shows*. As artists do.

Whence, then, the remedy? How to hold to the *art*, rather than the entertainment value, of transcending the visual in architecture?

In the case of *Body and Building* edited by George Dodds and Robert Tavernor, the remedy is to come from architectural historians themselves—or at least, from certain of them. *Body and Building* consists of twenty essays written by some of architecture's most distinguished historians in honor of Joseph Rykwert on his seventy-fifth birthday. All through his career, Rykwert made the case that we should recognize and locate the source of architecture's emotional power in myth, politics, ceremony, the body, and certain seemingly insignificant everyday experiences. Rykwert's scholarship is "wet," selective, personal. Perhaps this is why he had the effect he did on Michael Graves and on all the Postmodernists who took seriously, rather than ironically, the modalities of architecture's meaning that he had uncovered. For Rykwert, buildings can be seen as persons: to look at them openly and vulnerably is to look also inside our culture and ourselves. In this Rykwert places himself where humanism—beginning in the soul-centered city-state of Plato and passing on through the Renaissance to such thinkers as the 19th-century German psychologist Theodore Lipps and the English writer, architect, and aesthete Sir Geoffrey Scott—intersects with the phenomenologies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the depth

psychologies of Freud and Jung. “Every moment of perception,” Rykwert wrote in *The Necessity of Artifice*, “contains a whole personal and collective past; our body is the incarnation of that past; and with every moment of perception this past is reordered and revalued.” (Accept this last clause and even *looking* can be revolutionary.)

The twenty essays of *Body and Building* are meant to explore various facets of Rykwert’s interests. Many only seem to do that. In the main, their stance is academic, which is to say determinedly objectifying, decidedly *I-It*, the love being for scholarly activity not being-in-buildings, the desire being for polite applause, not better architecture anywhere. I think that that alone will make them of limited charm to architects who love architecture in a direct *I-You* way.⁵

We have John Onians from the University of East Anglia claiming that “visual knowledge is organized verbally”—no architect would agree—and then invoking neural imprinting from daily ancient Greek life to explain ancient Greek ornamental themes (e.g., egg and dart = shield and spear), which may be true, -ish, but hardly needs “proving” by elementary neuroscience. We have Mark Wilson Jones from the University of Bath, in partial contrast, nicely challenging the Vitruvian triad and then mounting a convincing display of erudition about the Doric order and the multiple meanings of the tripod theme. Most intriguing.

Next, London School of Economics Cities Program director Robert Tavernor pits science against religion (omitting the middle ground represented by the humanities) and launches into an analysis of perspectival construction in Piero della Francesca’s *The Flagellation of Christ*, following Wittkower’s, to prove (as far as I can tell) that the Savior was exactly six feet tall—i.e., ideal in height according to Vitruvius—and that the rest of the painting was geometrically derived from that. Yes, I see.

A piece on figural ornament in the Renaissance by Alina Paine concludes: “Located at the intersection of literary theory, figural *imitatio*, and architecture, ornament could and did slide between the artificial barriers with which scholarship so often separates the disciplines. Yet is it precisely from its location on this edge that ornament facilitated dialogue and exchange between the arts and tied Renaissance architecture into the fabric of its culture” (113). Overlooking the mixed metaphors, what have we learned here that we do not already know?

Illinois Institute of Technology professor Harry Malgrave offers an essay comes to the rescue with breathtaking reconditeness: did you know that in his never-built ideal

palace (“Figure 8.4”), Bayreuth court architect Paul Decker (1677–1713) combined “the drama of Borromini with the grandiloquence of Fischer von Erlach’s first designs for Schönbrunn (c. 1688)”?

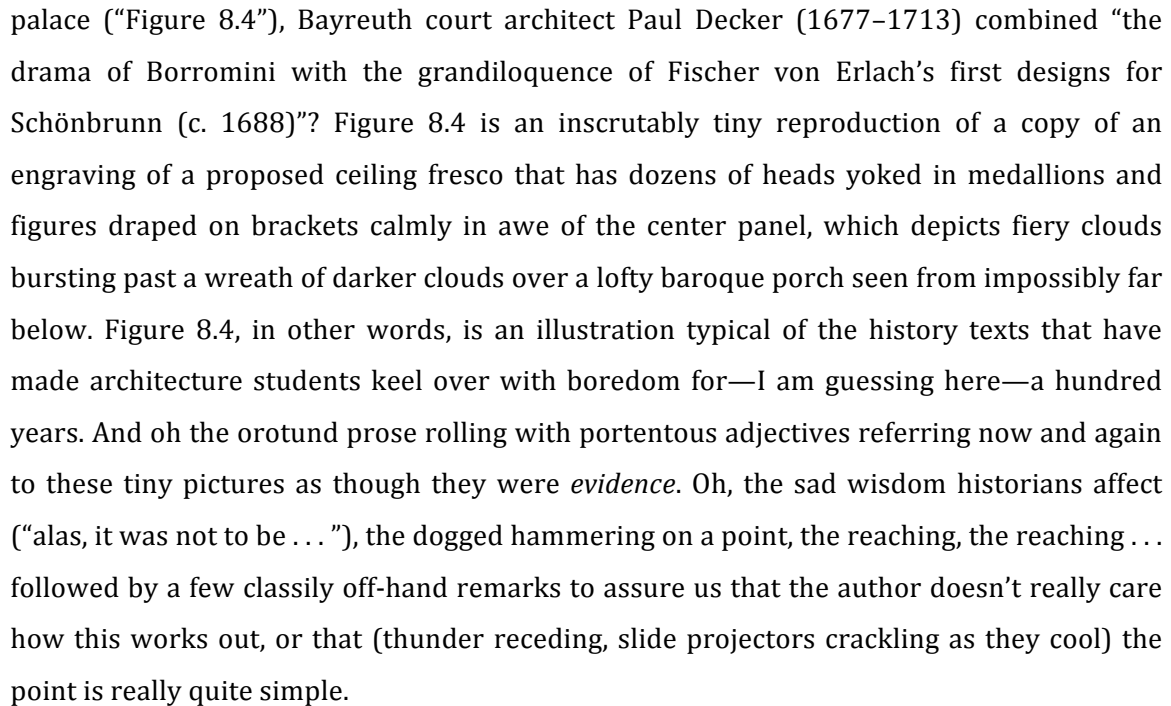


Figure 8.4 is an inscrutably tiny reproduction of a copy of an engraving of a proposed ceiling fresco that has dozens of heads yoked in medallions and figures draped on brackets calmly in awe of the center panel, which depicts fiery clouds bursting past a wreath of darker clouds over a lofty baroque porch seen from impossibly far below. Figure 8.4, in other words, is an illustration typical of the history texts that have made architecture students keel over with boredom for—I am guessing here—a hundred years. And oh the orotund prose rolling with portentous adjectives referring now and again to these tiny pictures as though they were *evidence*. Oh, the sad wisdom historians affect (“alas, it was not to be . . .”), the dogged hammering on a point, the reaching, the reaching . . . followed by a few classily off-hand remarks to assure us that the author doesn’t really care how this works out, or that (thunder receding, slide projectors crackling as they cool) the point is really quite simple.

I prefer (as Rykwert might) to think of historians in the field: the wind in their hair on Mykonos or with their steps resounding off the floors of the *Doge’s Palace*; turning a foggy corner to see Plecnik’s *National and University Library* or hearing the bells of *La Tourette* on a Sunday as children on horses clop by on their way back to town . . . and then, notebooks in hand over lunch, searching for the language that, back home, will make history live with these experiences too. Phenomenal history of lived phenomena!

You might say my criticism is misplaced. Scholars are scholars, God bless ’em. Their love of architecture is shy and a bit fetishistic.⁶ By mid-way through *Body and Building*, however, things begin to turn. A broader love of architecture begins to bloom. Karsten Harries’ account of the modern architect’s growing interest in defying gravity and denying the look of handmade-ness—reminders of the body—has real gravity. The central portions of Alberto Perez-Gomez’s chapter on Charles Étienne Briseux’s theorization of the relation of architecture to music is good enough to form the foundation of the much larger study, one extending architectural theory today deeper into music theory and vice versa, embracing jazz, psychoacoustics, music synthesis and composition, and much else.⁷

Neal Leach of the University of Bath suggests in his essay that Renaissance interest in writing human proportions into buildings signaled a desire to *become* a building, to be magically invested with a great building’s composure, harmony, capaciousness, longevity.⁸ This empathy is more than self-love (where one looks at the other and sees oneself). It is

one of the hallmarks of *I-You* love, and it can happen between oneself and an inanimate object.⁹ Naked and spread-eagled, Vitruvian man is *crucified*, argues Leach, and so stands for a mimetic engagement with the built environment wherein the self is actually sacrificed. “The subject surrenders itself to the other in order that it might live on through creative engagement with the other,” he observes, meaning, by “the other,” architecture. Nice. True of the time? Perhaps.

In the mid '20s at the Bauhaus, abstract painter Oskar Schlemmer's interest in the socializing, moving, clad figure raises at least two questions for any modern architectural humanism that would base itself too univocally on the body: first, how is one to regard the non-ideal (and recall, in 1925, non-ideal was soon to mean non-Aryan) body that most of us have, and second, what architectures are already conjured by bodies in clusters, bodies in relative motion to each other with crisscrossing gazes. I.e. what status purely *social* space? Marcia Feuerstein, from Virginia Tech, offers an essay that leads us to ponder these points.

Next, Carlo Scarpa's *Brion-Vega Cemetery* near Treviso, a paradigmatic example of the phenomenological, time- and experience-based architecture, comes under the examination of George Dodds of the University of Tennessee, who finds there mastery not just of the optical, but also of the erotic and the oneiric—sprung strongly from the visual to be sure, but complemented by the acoustic variances of passage, vault, pools, and chapel; the smell of earth and flowers, the preciousness of water in a bowl of porcelain and gold, the weight of a door, the inertia of a gate. Dodds' own piece ends with what can only be called a paroxysm of poetic scholarship, inspired, clearly, by a wind-in-the-hair encounter with his subject.

I wish I could say the same for David Leatherbarrow's elegant disquisition on interiors in relation to urbanism, which skips over architecture to find it, but never leaves the Book. The essay by William Braham (U. Penn) and Paul Emmons (Virginia Tech) on John Russell Pope's *Payne Whitney Gymnasium* at Yale is a fine example of architecture theory-criticism that mistakes finding homonyms and making puns (in this case, mainly on the words “upright” and “flexible”) for actual theorizing, and lack-of-specificity (e.g., How did the gym's posture-correcting machinery actually work? What measures were applied?) for intellectual generality. Echoes of poststructuralism linger.

With his usual acumen, Kenneth Frampton looks at Tadao Ando—one of today's most “phenomenal” architects—and misses very little. (Although I do wish he had commented on why the white sofa in the *Koshino House* laps over the far window.) His

Rykwertian interpretation of the iconic cross at the *Church of Light* is dead-on: the cross's reversal of the physicality of the Passion means more than removing Christianity from Catholicism; it means removing the body from architecture as inscription "out there" in favor of the pure experience of one's own body, and of nature, where one stands.

I have not remarked on all the essays in *Body and Building*. Nor have I done them full justice. But Vittorio Gregotti surely gets it right in his own concluding essay: Rykwert is a historian whose focus on "the life in the work" of architecture and whose passion for origins—archaic origins, anthropological origins, depth-psychological origins—creates passages, tunnels, to the existential situation of designers down which few of his peers can follow with any hope of emerging, as he does, at the designer's side, and still in love with architecture as an *I* with a *You*.

Sensory Design by Joy Monice Molnar (University of Illinois) and Frank Vodvarka (Loyola University) would fall into a class of books that might include Rasmussen's classic *Experiencing Architecture* were it not for its forensic style, its handbook/textbook ambitions. Ditto *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* by Barry Blesser (former teacher of acoustics at MIT and developer of digital reverberation systems) and Linda-Ruth Salter (independent scholar), although the latter is the better book.

Molnar and Vodvarka's book particularly seems premised on chastising architects—even architecture—for their/its lack of attention to all the "sensory systems," witness the bland junkspace of travel-related architecture, the din of malls, our deadening office "landscapes," and architecture magazines with little in them but pictures of slanting sunlight through tall walls of glass (you cannot print echoes). And what are our "sensory systems"? They list five: Basic Orienting, Auditory, Haptic, Taste-Smell, and Visual. These they dutifully cross-compare under the categories of Mode of Attention, Receptive Units, Anatomy of Organ, Activity of Organ, Stimuli Available, and External Information Obtained, to recreate a chart from the late great perception psychologist James J. Gibson,¹⁰ without, alas, seeming to grasp Gibson's primary poetic-scientific insight (one shared with French psychiatrist Eugene Minkowski): There is no truly empty space on earth or perhaps anywhere, since, from the sparsest desert to the most hectic downtown, space is thick with already-structured, already-patterned information carried by light (in "optic arrays"), air pressures, molecules, and gravity—information which we soak up just by being immersed *in it* (and of course, having evolved in it). "Location" means nothing more than uniqueness

of information available (just as it does on the Web); and buildings are more things to look *with*—pacing, hiding, revealing, and generally arranging other, usually more salient sources of information—than things to look *at*. These space-as-field insights can have profound effects on how architects think about space (and already has),¹¹ but neither they, nor the line of thinking they generate, can be found in *Sensory Design*, for all its attention to J. J. Gibson.¹²

Molnar and Vodvarka proceed, rather, to toy with crude functional models of how we perceive (you know, words like “perception,” “intention,” and “world” put in little boxes and joined by arrows), as though this could be gotten right or mattered very much. Deployed fairly early (on page 56), for example, is their own such formulation: “Perceptual systems ÷ Cultural modifiers = Contextual percept”—a joke surely, until you see it again on page 237 decked out with dotted lines and arrows whirring between Complexity, Coherence, Sensory Modes, Memory, Legibility, Place, and Mystery. Although admirably filled with reports of studies in environmental psychology, leavened with rich place-descriptions from novels, and raisined with some color plates, the book offer earnest, vague, and unhelpful statements like “We perceive frameworks of order in terms of particular characteristics of form, material, color, and directional emphasis” (80) everywhere. By the book’s end, one becomes convinced that no progress has been made either within its covers or in environmental design research. If one dreams, as I do, of the day that architecture can simultaneously be theorized scientifically, artistically, *and* “historico-philosophically”—a feat that music theory seems to be pulling off on behalf of music composition—then to read *Sensory Design* after *Body and Building* is to court despair.

How does *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* fare by this measure? I opened the book hoping for the aural equivalent of physicist Marcel Minnaert’s classic (and so far unsurpassed) phenomenology *The Nature of Light and Color in the Open Air* (1954).¹³ God knows, the way buildings *sound* is a much-neglected concern for designers today, and deafness would oddly be no handicap to an architecture critic or historian. *Spaces Speak* goes all out to elevate the status of sound design to a full-time architectural pursuit, and this far beyond controlling noise transmission or fixing concert halls. “Acoustic architect” is a profession for the future. To this end, the book proposes many fine distinctions and useful terms, such as *acoustic arena* and *acoustic horizon*. But perhaps the most engaging thought the book offers is the idea of “sonic illumination.”

Consider: both light sources and sound sources emit waves that reverberate through and around a building and which, in so doing, bring a building's surfaces to sensory, phenomenal life. Both can be natural, artificial, or hybrid. Both have depth and blendable color (timbre). And so on. Agree with Le Corbusier that architecture is the "correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light," and it becomes intoxicating to imagine oneself sensitive enough to *hear* that magnificence and correctness, since these masses shape the sound field too. More than that—and this is not in Blesser and Salter's book—one might begin to see that the perception of depth yielded by vision overlaps in provocative ways with the depth information yielded naturally by *sonar*: casting the world (and architecture) phenomenologically not as a sequence of perspectives or pictures, but as a transforming array of surfaces at varying distances from oneself in every direction, surfaces forming the boundary of a block of space that "moves" as one moves, changing shape.¹⁴ One might even argue that our visual sense's primary task is to generate this dynamic ambient depth experience, the capacity for which has been suppressed by modern literacy, painting, print media, and video screens.

Be this as it may, the entire "vibrational picture" of architecture given by acoustic phenomenology could overhaul much of what designers do with visual form, which is their *métier*. *Spaces Speak* is not the book to do this single-handedly, but in spite of its occasional repetitiveness and *I-It* technicality (albeit scrupulously avoiding mathematics), the love of the sound of space—of seeing with one's ears and hearing with one's eyes—comes through on almost every page; and it's a new place to start. Would that the book had come with an audio CD or DVD so that we might *hear* the difference between a finely tuned room and a poorly tuned one as we looked at it.

It's reasonable to surmise that architects learn most naturally from books by architects-who-write. And it's probably more important that they—the authors—be interesting *as architects* rather than as writers. This is not to say that architects do *not* read poetry, philosophy, literature, history, science, and art criticism. It's just that books by architects are more likely to be premised on the architect's peculiar way of loving architecture, which, ideally, is in an open, vulnerable *I-You* mode, and with the problem of *how to design* never far from view.¹⁵ Writing by architects may contain phenomenologies—descriptions of complex multisensory experiences, evocations of the texture of everyday life, and delicate, trying-not-to-be-reductive cogitations as to how they come about by architecture's hand (I

am thinking here of Steven Holl or Michael Rotondi). But few present themselves as “phenomenologies,” possibly because of the word’s stuffy provenance.¹⁶ One exception is the writing of Finnish architect and educator Juhani Pallasmaa.

Encounters is a collection of twenty five essays written by Pallasmaa over the last thirty years. “Phenomenology” is everywhere in this book. The very title reminds one of Martin Buber’s language for the *I-You* relationship: to *encounter* another being is more than just to “experience” him, her, or it; is it to address and feel addressed by them or it, for good or ill but never with indifference. Pallasmaa want us to encounter architecture, and clearly to love it in all the ways he does. His readers are just as clearly his peers—designer-architects who practice and teach, or enjoy reflecting upon and refining their understanding of the phenomenon of architecture. The ambition is to advance the art—and here is a point of departure for us—not for its own sake but for how it might enrich our lives and the lives of future generations.

The scholarship in Pallasmaa’s essays is broad and eclectic and thus bound to displease historians. Images are plentiful and contemporary, as befits a good slide lecture; if one wanted to complain, one might say: a little too lovely, a little too photo-magaziney. This reviewer is happy with both features. Diagrams are absent; the writing style is cultivated, calm, and systematic (but not too), all of which makes reading the book a pleasure. But beneath Pallasmaa’s discourse runs a lover’s anger at suitors whose offerings to architecture he deems shallow, mere formal play, too academic, and/or too removed from life as lived by people he likes. Pallasmaa finds himself where many Proustian architect-writers find themselves: intoxicated by architecture’s magnitude-in-delicacy and thus unwilling to let her play the fool, haul capital, or join the army.

He has my sympathies.

For lack of space, I shall engage Pallasmaa on just one of the essays in *Encounters* (there is considerable overlap among them on the themes of “sensory thinking,” “embodied intuition,” “authenticity,” and the like)—the 1994 essay “Identity, Intimacy, and Domicile.”¹⁷ There I was struck by a passage as emblematic as it is problematic:

[T]he architect’s responsibility is to penetrate the surface of what is most often commercially, socially, and momentarily conditioned desire. The authentic artist and architect consciously or unknowingly engages in an ideal world. . . .

J. M. Coetzee has said that taking the reader into consideration when writing is a deadly error for the writer. Umberto Eco, for his part, has distinguished two types of writers: the first type writes what he expects the reader to want to read, the

second creates his ideal reader as he writes. In Eco's view, the first writer will write mere kiosk literature, whereas the second writer is capable of writing literature that timelessly touches the human soul.

In my view, only the architect who creates the ideal client as he designs can create houses and homes that give mankind hope and direction instead of mere superficial satisfaction. Without . . . *Fallingwater* . . . the *Schröder House* . . . *Villa Savoye* . . . *Maison de Verre* and . . . *Villa Mairea* to concretize the possibilities of human habitation, our understanding of modernity, and of ourselves, would be considerably weakened. . . .

(T)oday's architecture seems to have abandoned life entirely and escaped into pure architectural fabrication. Authentic architecture represents and reflects a way of life, an image of life. . . . (T)oday's buildings do not seem to reflect any real and authentic way of life.¹⁸

One cannot help but note the sweeping Heideggerian cast: the architect must withstand the blandishments and distractions of modern life to reestablish the authentic and ideal relations we ought to have to our surroundings.

The problem is that even if one were to agree, there is some question about what the architect's knowledge should consist in, phenomenologically. One is in a bit of a jam: a phenomenology unmixed with class and cultural judgment would have to presume the NASCAR life-world, say, of Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights*—all Applebee's and adrenaline—to be as rich and authentic and multisensory, at least in principle, as Pallasmaa's Bachelardian, Rilke-esque world of "quiet kitchens where someone sits reading with a book propped up against a loaf of bread," all "snow flakes" and "homecoming."¹⁹ And how shall we judge the quality of sitting through the night on a thrown-away sofa in the middle of an empty street in a small Nevada town, as Howard Spence does in Wim Wenders' *Don't Come Knocking*? Phenomenology sits uneasily with moral-aesthetic judgement based on anything but *quantity of life*. Not *quality* of life, note, but *quantity* of life, as Albert Camus argued; for to judge quality of life without an extremely broad tolerance of cultural variation is to beg the question of quality. Let it be proved that environment A is more impoverishing of life—in quantity—than environment B. This is not so difficult in the case of extremes: office building corridors on the one hand, street markets on the other. It's the vastly more numerous in-betweens that are difficult.

So if idealization of the client is to be the virtue Pallasmaa wants it to be, it needs to be an idealization whose notion of the ideal transcends the sensibilities become cultural authority of European art and literature from 1755 to 1955, say. As true artists know, it is the designer's *own* life that provides the grounds for his or her phenomenological sensitivities and preferences; and the important thing is that *that* life be as rich as it needs

to be to reflect and embrace life-in-general's burgeoning complexity. Of equal importance are the training and techniques to convert that experiential richness into satisfying and inspiring places for people to live and work. Not far behind that in importance is the tolerance to allow some to investigate architecture's further reaches—formal, theoretical, technical—for *architecture's* sake. For theirs is the purer love, purer for not wanting to put their beloved to work for their keep.²⁰

None of this should dissuade the reader of this review from spending time with the essays in *Encounters*. Few writers provide as rich and wise an account of what the phenomenological approach could mean to architects. The heavy and unpainted table of his grandfather's house, Pallasmaa recalls, "was the stage for eating, sewing, playing, doing homework, socializing with neighbors and strangers. The table was the ongoing center of the farmer's house, marking the difference between weekday and Sunday, working day and feast" (122). How important and un-abstract are *tables* still, how worthy of real "design within reach."

I turn last to *Sense of the City*, edited by Mirko Zardini, a book of nine essays accompanying the exhibition of the same name held at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in 2005 and 2006.

Sense of the City is and is not a work of phenomenology. It *is* because, aside from its direct calls for designers to pay better attention to the full sensorium, its subject matter is organized by qualities of the *experience* of the city: the city at night (its lights and shadows), the city in winter (and over the seasons generally), the sounds of the city (mainly noise, but also music, sirens, etc.), the surfaces of the city (considered mostly tactilely and acoustically), and the air of the city (pollution, perfume, wind). *Sense of the City* is not a phenomenology in as much as its essays mostly provide historical background and technical insight into matters like street lighting and asphalt road making. In the area of sound, for example, the recording, cataloging, and map-making life-work of Canadian composer, writer, music educator, and environmentalist R. Murray Schafer and his Soundscape Project looms large. Cities do not sound like they used to (no hooves on cobblestone). Nor do they smell like they use to (no downtown factories or exposed sewage). And so forth.

There is in all this a sense of loss as well as gain. The sensorium was richer once than it is now. Although their lives were less *visually* intense (think of Times Square), people lived more exposed to the air and all the sounds and smells that air carried from people,

animals, planting, and machinery. Without iPods, cell phones, and television isolating them in private sensoria, the city was more present in first-hand way. To appreciate the gain one has to be grateful for the first-world city's relative cleanliness, and to appreciate car interiors, booths in restaurants, air-conditioning on cold and hot days, and so forth.

In format and feel, if not quite gravity, *Sense of the City* reminds one of *The Family of Man*, published by the Museum of Modern Art in the 1950s, with an essay by Carl Sandburg. Half book and half museum-catalog (with just a touch of Bruce Mau), *Sense of the City* offers photography heavy on images from the mid-20th century, a global scope, and the use of italicized quotes from dozens of authors floating among the photographs. But above (or beneath) it all it is the love—not of humanity per se, but of the city as a phenomenon in its own right—and that's what reminds us of *The Family of Man*. The cumulative effect is powerful, especially if you read the essays (which few readers will, alas). The effect is also, well, phenomenological. One puts down *Sense of the City* and walks outside just a little more appreciative that the road is not mud, that the lights burn so steadily, that the traffic is hushed and even comforting, that the air clear and . . . wait, is that the smell of bread?

A book is a book. Reading is visual, at least in beginning, becoming aural as one “hears” the words, and then becoming multi-sensory as the words start to vanish into the thoughts they generate. Imagination fills out the sensorium in direct proportion to the writer's skill with language. Not only do sensations “appear” as if by magic, but also the emotional tone that goes with them—the intentionality of the writer, the characters, the places described. All this is well known. Architects work further down the food chain of experience, as it were. They can make places that are supposed to feel a certain way at certain times, but they cannot ensure the result or be confident that society has asked them to do just that.

But what architects lose in the ability to control experience the way novelists and movie-makers can, they gain in having at least some artistic control over appearances in their original vividness: real surfaces at real distances, real sounds, and real smells, which have in them a kind of electricity, a presence, salience, materiality, and openness that poetry cannot quite reach, that film can come close to, and that schematizing discourses on the “nature of perception” cannot engage.

So this is the challenge for architectural phenomenology. The bridge from enhanced sensitivity to the modalities of sense and consciousness that are engendered by architecture to the production of new places that must function in a hundred other ways too, is a bridge

that is now crossed only by intuition and by genius fueled by love of the very mystery of the phenomenon. There is travel; there is living with open eyes; there are books; there are school exercises; and there is working with and for master architects. But there is also *science* to all of it, which I think is essential, but which has hardly begun. When it comes to understanding the phenomena of architecture with both heart *and* mind, the love of the best of us is still young. •

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Notes

1. “Consciousness studies” today tends to reverse the Husserlian/Buddhist/Taoist model, which poses consciousness as a primal, universal fact. Rather, consciousness *emerges from* acts of perception, attention, memory, and so on, the fruit of local neurological density and computational complexity.
2. For an overview of environmental-architectural writing in the Heideggerian tradition of phenomenology, see David Seamon, “Phenomenology, Place, Environment, and Architecture: A Review,” at www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/Seamon_reviewEAP.htm.
3. Before 1750, the concept of *space* was little used in architecture. “Extension” is what philosophers were interested in. *Place*, together with *proportion*, was the *métier* of architects. The idea that architecture had to do with *space* received a huge boost in the 20th century with the popularization of Einstein’s theories.
4. And why does every movie character, about to leave a room, stop at the door and say something more?
5. The profound distinction between *I-You* and *I-It* relationships comes from Martin Buber, student of both Husserl and Heidegger. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Walter Kaufmann, Trans. (New York: Scribners and Sons, 1970 [1937; 1923]).
6. Don’t just trust me on this. See Bonnie G. Smith, “Gender and the Practices of Scientific History: The Seminar and Archival Research in the Nineteenth Century” *The American Historical Review*, Oct. 1995, 1150–1176.
7. David Brown, *Noise Orders: Jazz, Improvisation, and Architecture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) is a new contribution.
8. These are my epithets, not Leach’s.
9. In *I and Thou*, Buber contemplates the possibility of having an *I-You* relationship with a tree. Theodore Lipps’s notion of *einfihlung*—empathy—as a way to appreciate architecture was in the intellectual atmosphere at the time.
10. Specifically from his groundbreaking *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).
11. See for example the work of Space Syntax, Ltd. for Norman Foster and Partners (www.spacesyntax.com).
12. For examples of the Gibson-influenced line of thinking, see Serge Boutourline’s prescient “The Concept of Environmental Management” in *Environmental Psychology*, Harold M. Proshansky, William H. Ittelson, and Leanne G. Rivlin, eds. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 496–450; reprinted from *Dot Zero IV*, September 1967) and Philip Thiel’s *Paths, Places, and Purposes* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1998), which, though analytical in format, proceeds from a deep understanding and love of place-making. For more one might also Google “isovist(s),” “viewshed(s),” “optic array(s),” and “space syntax.” Within psychology, Gibson’s legacy is the movement called *ecological psychology*. Start at www.trincoll.edu/depts/ecopsyc/iseppjournal.html.

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13. Minnaert is not at all concerned with the nature of consciousness per se, which makes his phenomenology a little different than a philosopher's. But as an exercise in paying attention to the visual world in wonderment and with infinitely keen eyes, it cannot be beat. One comes away from studying *The Nature of Light and Color in the Open Air* twice as alive as when one began it. Ditto Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), Chandler Burr's *The Emperor of Scent* (New York: Random House, 2004) and Luca Turin's *The Secret of Scent: Adventures in Perfume and the Science of Smell* (New York: Ecco, 2006). Turin is the subject of Burr's book. Linda Heschong's *Thermal Delight in Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980) and Junichiro Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (New Haven, CT: Leetes Island Books, 1977) come closer to architecture per se.
 14. My own work explores this idea, starting with "To Take Hold of Space: Isovists and Isovist Fields," *Environment and Planning B*, Vol. 6, 1979, 47–65.
 15. My list would include *Kindergarten Chats* (Sullivan), *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (Venturi), *Body, Memory and Architecture* (Moore and Bloomer), *The Architecture of the City* (Rossi), *What Will Be Has Always Been* (Kahn/Wurman), *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas), *Thinking Architecture* (Zumthor). I may be showing my age, but it seems to me that with few exceptions (MVRDV?), the new generation of interesting architects—now in their 40s, say—are not as drawn to writing sustained, philosophical essays or books as was the generation before them. This is not to say that they are not *publishing*.
 16. Two other architect-writers come to mind: Christopher Alexander (especially in *The Timeless Way of Building*) and Paul Shepheard (*What is Architecture?*).
 17. See also his *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), and Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture* (San Francisco: William K. Stout Publishers, 2006).
 18. *Encounters*, 124–125.
 19. The poet here is Bo Carpelan, quoted by Pallasmaa in *Encounters*, 126.
 20. Unless the beloved *wants* to work, of course; and then one just helps. Point is: never should they need to be useful to "justify their existence."