

Architecture + Phenomenology Conference

Kyoto Seika University, Kyoto, Japan

26-29 June 2009

Phenomenology as Architectural Praxis: Two Houses in East Anglia

Alexandra Stara

School of Architecture and Landscape, Kingston University London

Introduction

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his Preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, reminds us that: “The world is not what I think, but what I live through”, at the same time as: “Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning, and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history.”¹ These two dimensions of embodied experience, on one hand, and historically conditioned meaning on the other, have remained in varying degrees of tension and harmony at the heart of architectural making.

Contemporary architecture faces a great challenge in the quest for a relevant, meaningful and ethical practice, at a time when the perceived division between dimensions of existence seems to be at its most extreme. Phenomenology and hermeneutics are gaining ground as an intellectual framework and sensibility for addressing and reconciling this division. In this paper, a discussion of the idea of praxis and its relationship to *poesis* will be followed by an exploration of the two dimensions of our being highlighted in the two opening quotes by Merleau-Ponty, and their implications for architecture. The second part of the paper will discuss work from two young British practices, Lynch Architects and Dow Jones Architects. While sharing an understanding of their architecture as poetic disclosure of space grounded in the continuity of tradition, it will be argued that the two practices accentuate different aspects of this process through their projects, which will be presented here in the terms set out at the beginning of the paper. The paper will conclude with a suggestion that, their respective emphases aside, both practices represent a discernible trend in worldwide architecture towards an encompassing and conciliatory praxis arising out of a phenomenological understanding.

Praxis/Poesis

Dalibor Vesely has devoted much of his work to date to an understanding of the classical Greek notion of poesis and poetics as a way out of the cultural conundrums of our era specifically in relation to architecture. He writes:

In its original sense, poetics refers to a way of making (poesis) in which the result preserves continuity with the conditions of its origin. In other words, what characterizes a way of making as poetic is the situatedness of its results in the communicative space of culture.²

This understanding of making as a situated event stands in clear contrast to an instrumental, one-sided imposition or appropriation, or a direct application of abstractions, emancipated from reality. The problem of abstraction and emancipation is particularly acute in contemporary architecture, where innovation and difference – whether aesthetic or technological – are still considered valuable attributes setting the standards of the discipline. The possibility of a poetics of architecture hinges upon the understanding of situations as the ground wherefrom the architectural work emerges reciprocally, as an appropriate response.

Linked to the rich and stratified idea of poetics, which Vesely proposes as no less than a discipline that “could be, as far as architecture is concerned, more rigorous than an analytical or causal approach”³, is the notion of praxis. Although it is poetics and poesis that deal explicitly with the creative aspect of architecture – and the one which seems most in need of reconsideration in the contemporary world – praxis emphasizes the contrast between the abstraction of thought and the reality of life, which is of particular relevance to this paper.

The word as a noun in Greek strictly means “act” – from the verb *prattein*, “to act”. Its adjectival form, *praktikos*, which we have adopted as “practical”, has an even stronger emphasis on the non-reflective nature of this act: we tend to think of something practical as concrete and ready-to-hand or applicable, against the abstraction and projection of thought. However these narrow definitions fail to capture the proper meaning of the word in the context of the classical Greek world, which is still very much relevant today. Out of Vesely’s discussion of this notion, praxis emerges as a reciprocal event, which involves human life and the situations it takes place in.⁴ Praxis has a close affinity with typical situations – and this indicates that it always belongs to the world it articulates and thus brings about.⁵ So

there is profound reciprocity between the act and the reality of the world wherein it takes place. Being thus inextricably situated in the world, distinct from pure abstract thought and “always concretely (i.e. practically) motivated”⁶, praxis has a clear ethical dimension. “What is praxis?”, asks Vesely. “Generally speaking,” he answers, “it is living and acting in accordance with ethical principles. More specifically, it is best to see praxis as a situation that includes not only people doing or experiencing something but also the things that contribute to the fulfillment of human life.”⁷ Architectural making as praxis therefore, is not the application of abstract ideas, conceived independently from reality, but a situated event that unfolds as part of the continuity of the world and is bound by its conditions. It is this bond to the lived, experienced reality that I would like to emphasize in the context of this paper.

Tectonics/Type

As both embodiment and articulation, architecture participates in the world through both matter and form. As Kenneth Frampton puts it: “the built comes into existence out of the constantly evolving interplay of three converging vectors, the *topos*, the *typos* and the *tectonic*.”⁸ Although it is self-defeating to entirely separate typos – type or the historicity of form – from the tectonic – the poetic potential of materiality and structure – they do describe two aspects of architecture and two attitudes to architectural making. The suggestion of this paper is that, understood in a proper phenomenological context, both paths constitute architectural praxis – a situated and meaningful making.

Tectonics could be understood as a uniquely architectural way of making manifest. It is the meeting of material and spatial structure in a particular place for a particular purpose, which will be finally consummated through inhabitation. The discourse of architectural tectonics in the last two centuries can be seen as an alternative to the rampant historicism of the era, whether the revivalism of the nineteenth century or postmodernism in the twentieth. Shifting the focus away from style and the replication of now-meaningless ornament and forms, tectonics is a call to materiality and spatiality, focusing on experiential reality rather than aesthetics. A profoundly phenomenological notion, the tectonic posits the body – both the human body and the architectural “body” that it inhabits – as a primary frame of reference.

Less obviously linked to phenomenology, and if carelessly observed in apparent opposition to tectonics, is the architectural stance focusing on the historicity of type. Part of the difficulty with the notion of typology is its appropriation by postmodernism as a response to the

universalism and denial of history associated with modernism. However, much of postmodernism's relationship to type has been a misguided one, reducing this complex and dynamic idea to a purely formal structure with an instrumentally conceived relationship to history. Type is not an abstraction or a model to be dumbly copied. The repetition implicit in the idea of type harkens back to the classical idea of mimesis, which is ultimately a creative idea, albeit one defined in the traditional sense, as a dialogue with the real, not a departure from it.⁹ As Giulio Argan put it in his seminal re-reading of Quatremère de Quincy: "The word 'type' does not present so much an image of something to be copied or imitated exactly as the idea of an element which should itself serve as a rule for the model."¹⁰ Type is, therefore, historical, not historicist, and its role is paradigmatic and analogical, offering an interpretative schema for architecture as a historically situated creative act, rather than merely a set of formal choices.

It should be apparent, therefore, that the two paths of architectural making, tectonics and type, are not in opposition, but different starting points or "accents". Ultimately, both pathways need to address the same fundamental aspects of architecture. The tectonic is not ahistorical, nor can it operate independently of precedent. Its communicative possibility and poetic potential, although understood as inherent in the construction, in the embodiment of the building, rather than as a separate category introduced through form, is nevertheless rooted in the continuity of culture and its historicity. Conversely, typology – as understood here, within the parameters of architectural praxis and poetics – does not operate in the realm of abstract form, but is manifested through the embodied reality of the building and its inhabitation.

On a slightly willful aside, it could be argued that it is possible to associate the tectonic with a modernist sensibility and the typological with a postmodernist one. Although, as we have already seen, this would be a drastic narrowing of both ideas, appreciating these potential affinities would not be entirely amiss. The deep reciprocity between tectonics and type as part of a properly situated architecture suggests that the competition between modernism and its various "posts", acted out as a competition between technology and history, may be misplaced, with the real issues revolving around the nature of this reciprocity and the means through which it can be properly understood and embodied.

The second part of the paper will explore the above themes in relation to the work of two young architectural practices from Britain. I have chosen one project from each practice, both being early works in their respective careers, completed in the early years of this decade. Both projects are small rural houses for private clients, situated in adjacent counties in East Anglia, the easternmost part of England. There is further common ground between the two projects, but there are also considerable differences. I have chosen them precisely because such literal and metaphorical proximity highlights their divergences and the specificity of each more clearly.

Dow Jones Architects: Marshall House, Suffolk

This project, completed in 2001, is a family weekend/holiday house in the Suffolk village of Sudbourne, in East Anglia. The site is located between the centre of the village and a meadow – a threshold between countryside and human settlement. The project reinterprets primordial aspects of the house: the boundary of the enclosure, the distinct volume of the building within and the internal elements of floor, partition and stair. The planning of the house is extremely simple, accentuating this primordial quality. All openings except for one barn-like door are quite small, allowing for controlled views of the landscape and making a clear distinction between inside and outside. The whole project relies strongly on the idea of boundaries and the interior maintains a traditionally restrained relationship to the outside, belying its purpose as a place of leisure. This newly built house feels like a barn conversion, something that has always been there, belonging to the site and the landscape in a fundamental, rooted way, rather than treading the ground casually.



Figures 1 & 2. Marshall House, Sudbourne, Dow Jones Architects (the architects/Sue Barr)

This clarity and simplicity of the plan allows the building's tectonics to emerge as its most expressive element. Timber for the main structure and walls, brick for the plinth and floor, and clay tiles for the roof are the main materials, which ground the building in the vernacular while, through its sophisticated detailing for both functional and expressive purposes, a firmly contemporary sensibility is established. The thoughtful reinterpretation of traditional tectonics produces a building both of its time and of its history.

The composition of the plinth and floor, made out of exposed brick inside and outside, is described by the architects as a trough, or folded plate that sits on the ground and establishes the house as vessel of inhabitation. Brick plays a central part in all of Dow Jones' work and here we see what has become a kind of signature brickwork: bright red in traditional English bond (alternative courses of headers and stretchers) and with pronounced lime-based mortaring that is laid flush with the bricks. The effect is strongly that of a weave, which, both in its pattern and color stands out from the dark weatherboard cladding externally and the white rendered walls internally, affirming the plinth's presence as "base" for the house. The articulated structure of the bricks at the base finds correspondence on the similarly scaled tiles on the roof, which are plain clay and flat rather than the more usual curved pantiles, resulting in a pared down effect and tighter geometric form for the building as a whole.



Figure 3. Marshall House, Dow Jones Architects (copyright the architects/Sue Barr)

The interior is free of structural elements, emphasizing the solidity of the external walls both in terms of function and the expression of the house as enclosure and sanctuary. The plain internal partitioning and the ceilings are from light blond Douglas fir, which contrasts with the nearly black weatherboarding externally and makes the generous, continuous interior feel even more spacious and warm. The presence of elements such as the free standing, timber encased staircase leading to the upper floor and the fireplace set into one narrow wall where the brickwork weave of the plinth extends all the way to ceiling in an exaggerated “fireplace” form, are two striking instances in the otherwise heavily pared down space, which underline the elemental nature of this project.



Figures 4 & 5. Marshall House, Dow Jones Architects (copyright the architects/Sue Barr)

Trevor Garnham, writing about the project when it was just completed, suggested that: “It speaks of the pleasure to be found in material and of its meaning in relation to our understanding of ourselves in the phenomenal world”.¹¹ History as an accretion of architectural praxis and its resulting forms constitute the paradigm for Dow Jones’ reinterpretation of the rural house. We can talk about typicality here, but it is a paring down of type, like a search for a domestic archetype of and, thus, a quest for its essence, which always includes “building” as both verb and noun. As the architects themselves state, what they’re interested in is “doing something mute, abstract, elemental”.¹² Their understanding of place and the vernacular is not as a style or aesthetic interpretation of “place”, but as a whole way of making.

Lynch Architects: Marsh View, Norfolk

Marsh View is another weekend/holiday house, completed in 2003, in Norfolk, the northernmost part of East Anglia, which shares a border with Suffolk in the south. Built for two artists – a textile designer and her mother, a sculptor, it sits in a loose scattering of 50s bungalows, at the bottom of a gentle slope. The project required the demolition of an existing bungalow on the site and its partial reconstruction as part of a new composition. Archetypal elements of “house” are also present here – the pitched roof, the chimney – but they are reinterpreted with exaggeration that borders on subversion, as well as being made more complex and contingent rather than pared down and clarified. The aim is not destructive – there is no postmodern irony of pastiche here – but a certain disquiet, a referential or expressive richness that invites, even demands, reflection. If Marshall House brings to mind Luis Barragan and Kenneth Frampton’s call for architecture to express serenity and combine vitality with calm¹³, then Marsh View is decidedly more baroque in both its inspiration and aspirations. Diana Periton, describes the project as “decidedly uncanny”¹⁴, because of the several conceptual and formal twists that simultaneously invoke a type and provoke its questioning.



Figures 1 & 2. Marsh View, Lynch Architects (copyright the architects)

The appropriate typological reference for Marsh View is the villa, a type of house that is characterised less by its domestic and more by its social dimension, as well as its relationship to landscape. The Renaissance villa and its garden as symbolic representation of the cosmos, as mediator between nature and artifice, and as stage set for the potential

transformation of the mundane into the festive, is an essential reference for Lynch Architects. They state that, with Marsh View, they wanted to create a sense of the past and the present, and of nature and building, infused with each other, combining an archaic appearance that exaggerates the effects of weathering and a formal arrangement of enfilade rooms that spill-out into the garden, blurring boundaries.¹⁵

The elements composing Marsh View include the main house, a separate studio, a carport and various small ponds. The architects suggest that they thought of the composition as “rooms in the landscape”, highlighting the importance of the site as setting for the architectural drama. The theme of reflection is recurrent in the project and the mirror treated studio cladding, apparently disappearing into the landscape, is one of the most prominent such instances. Dramatically framed views, unexpected angles and surprising spatial articulations abound throughout, firmly rooting the project in the tradition of the villa. What is equally clear, however, is that such references are translated into the local vernacular, itself appropriately reinterpreted for its modern inhabitants. In other words, the tradition of the villa is “taking place” in Marsh View, rather than just being signified.



Figures 3 & 4. Marsh View, Lynch Architects (copyright the architects)

Typology is here manifested in an entirely dynamic way, in reciprocity with the reality of the project’s place and time, as a continuing idea and ideal of a certain way of living in the countryside, of leisure, reflection and the meeting of the everyday with the extraordinary. As Patrick Lynch puts it: “These spatial conditions are seen less in terms of fixed functions and

more as a fluid series of places for participation within the overall architectural setting”¹⁶ and, I would add, participation in the continuity of history and the shared ground of culture. Type for Lynch Architects is the basis for architecture’s communicability, which is distinct from mere signification and extends to the building’s materiality and construction as well as, ultimately, to its mode of inhabitation. The use of plywood as structural skin internally, the black concrete floor uniting the “rooms in a landscape” of the central volume, the instances of exposed concrete, brickwork and reflective glass, are all tectonic gestures intrinsic to the architects’ engagement with the typology of the villa, as embodied and inhabited meaning.



Figure 5. Marsh View, Lynch Architects (copyright the architects)

Conclusion

Lynch Architects and Dow Jones have been working consistently within a phenomenological background since their formation, both within the last decade. Although they have different ways of engaging with site, program and technique – with focus alternating between the poetic potential of tectonics to the historicity of type and form – they share an understanding of their practice as poetic disclosure of space, making place for inhabitation and encounter, firmly grounded in the obscured yet enduring continuity of tradition. Their understanding of and engagement with type and tectonics is not part of some theoretical framework or abstract method which is applied to their projects. Both are working ideas for their architectural practice. They constitute a *thesis*, a stance towards and understanding of architecture, as a manifestation of culture, with inalienable historical and material dimensions. We are talking here about a philosophy of architecture, then, in the proper sense

of the word, which distinguishes it from theory because of the former's essential and reciprocal relationship with the real. Such a philosophy of architectural practice I have called praxis, in its fundamental grounding within the reality of each situation, which is inescapably both specific and general, both of its time and its history, of its culture and of all humanity.

The architects discussed in this paper have a stated interest in phenomenology and hermeneutics as a ground for their practice. They are not alone in this but, equally, there is a growing body of architects whose practice shares phenomenological and hermeneutic attitudes and approaches, yet without operating explicitly within such a philosophical framework. This is of great significance in the context of this conference, as it suggests that phenomenology, as a way of understanding and being in the world part of which is architecture, is becoming increasingly relevant; and that this relevance transcends disciplinarity or narrowly-defined theoretical frameworks, opening up, instead, a whole realm of possibilities for architectural practice and interpretation to overcome long-seated misconceptions and false dilemmas.

Endnotes

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge, 1992 [1962]): xvi-xvii & xix.

² Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2004): 387.

³ Vesely, *Architecture*, 389.

⁴ Vesely, *Architecture*, 356-389.

⁵ Vesely, *Architecture*, p.373.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Vesely, *Architecture*, p. 368.

⁸ Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995): 2

⁹ For such a discussion of mimesis see Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Art and Imitation" and "Poetry and Mimesis" in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. N. Walker (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1986]): 92-105 and 116-122.

¹⁰ Giulio Carlo Argan, "On the typology of architecture", in K. Nesbitt (ed.), *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: an anthology of architectural theory 1965-1995* (NY: Princeton University Press, 1995): 243.

¹¹ Trevor Garnham, "Dow Jones in Suffolk", *Architecture Today*, no.116 (2001)

¹² From their talk as part of The Architectural Foundation's Summer Nights, at BDP, London, 27 Aug. 2008.

¹³ Frampton, *Studies*, 27.

¹⁴ Diana Periton, "Marsh View", *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no.357 (2005)

¹⁵ Patrick Lynch, "All memory has to be re-imagined: The villa and architectural imagination", *Architectural Research Quarterly*, no.2, vol. 9 (2005)

¹⁶ *ibid.*