

# THE HUMAN IN ARCHITECTURE AND PHILOSOPHY: STEPS TOWARDS AN "ARCHITECTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY"

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We build for humans—for the most part. Temples, zoological gardens, and multi-story car-parks seem to be exceptions. They are built for gods, animals, or cars. But then, even they are indirectly for humans. They are meant to be used by humans who worship there, gaze at giraffes, or park their cars. So in the end, architecture will always have to consider human beings as its recipient, observer, and user. Architects simply cannot avoid thinking about the human being. After all, it makes a big difference, what characteristics and needs, necessary life circumstances and life forms, what expectations of privacy or ideal social life, and even what emotions, hopes, fears, and visions we take as central for human beings. Our understanding of human beings will be the focus for entirely different architectural forms and ways of building. But to reflect upon ourselves and who we are is, essentially, a philosophical question. According to Kant, "What is man?" is even the central question of philosophy. Therefore, to think about the human being is an ineliminable concern for architecture and philosophy of architecture alike. But it is also a concern which has not been addressed very often in the last decades. That is why it has been the topic of the 3rd International Conference of the International Society for the Philosophy of Architecture. From July 19th to 23rd 2016 we invited some 100 scholars from all over the world to Bamberg University, Germany, to think about and discuss "The Human in Architecture and Philosophy."

Architecture has raised the question about the concept and the place of the human being in its

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efforts in many ways. Contemporary architecture is very often based upon the explicit claim to have put the human being at the centre of designing and building. And this is by no means new as architectural history and theory show. To take just a few examples: Le Corbusier and the CIAM wrote within their Athens Charter that, “architecture must once again be placed in the service of man,”<sup>1</sup> and even the sharpest critics of CIAM-inspired modern architecture seemed to search for the human being in architecture. The Austrian artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser, for example, wrote a manifesto “Give the houses back to the human beings.”<sup>2</sup> Many houses or even the works of some architects are marked as especially “humane.” Alvar Aalto is praised for being on his way “toward a human modernism.”<sup>3</sup> The British-Swedish architect Ralph Erskine is widely recognized as someone who designed humane buildings and is even called “the humane architect.”<sup>4</sup> But although a lot of people would agree with this judgement, we can hardly tell exactly why his or Aalto’s architecture are regarded as more humane than other members of Team X—such as Peter and Alison Smithson. They too tried to make a more humane architecture but somehow are widely perceived as having come up short.<sup>5</sup> Last but not least, one could point to the fierce discussions concerning the rightful interpretations of Rudolph Wittkower’s *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*.<sup>6</sup> The claim that architecture is made for human beings seems simultaneously obvious and in need of justification.

What is the relevance and what is the content of architects’ claims about building for human beings? For whom do and did we build if not for human beings? In the service of which concept or idea of human beings should architecture be placed (e.g., for sober rational beings, for creatures with emotional needs, for more atomistic or social beings)? And rather generally: What does it mean to build for humans? Is judging a work of architecture to be humane expressing anything more than a personal preference? There are so many questions and no easy answers.

It might seem surprising that all these questions have no obvious philosophical answer because it has long been central to philosophy to answer exactly Kant’s question “What is man?”<sup>7</sup> Many subsequent philosophers have tried to take up the challenge and to give answers. In the mid-twentieth century, even a veritable branch of philosophy called “Philosophical Anthropology” emerged in Germany that has been entirely dedicated to the study of the Kantian question. Philosophers such as Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen, and Helmut Plessner (partly also Ernst Cassirer and Hans Jonas) wrote their most important works about us humans and our characteristics. They tried to combine the results not only of modern evolutionary biology, ethology, and sociology but also

of history, cultural anthropology, psychology, and ethnology with the classical conceptions of humans as free and rational beings.<sup>8</sup>

But the heyday of philosophical anthropology seems to have gone. The latter half of the twentieth century was dominated by philosophical thought that dismissed such attempts at elucidating the essence of mankind as hopeless. Such thinking denies the existence of a fixed human identity that we can grasp, understand, or even talk about. There is no human essence; only history. Instead, we should look at what sociology, cultural anthropology, or evolutionary biology could tell us about the human condition.<sup>9</sup>

This thinking takes several forms. Some anti-mentalists suspect an outdated essentialism or idealism that is based upon an entirely wrong metaphysics. Radical naturalists agree, though with other arguments—for them there is no independent entity, like humans, and natural science has the last word (as Quine claimed at some point). Others take a dualistic stance according to which the realm of nature and of our cultural (socio-political) sphere have nothing in common and are to be looked at separately. For them, the only interesting questions about humans are attempts to locate them in (and explain them from) political or sociological conditions. All philosophical anthropology has to become sociology, as Habermas famously claimed.<sup>10</sup>

Others, like Wittgenstein, look for linguistic questions or forms of life as the basis for philosophical reflection on humans. And some, following Heidegger, would even argue that it is dangerous to ask about “the” human being because he or she is essentially open and un-definable. Everyone is simply what he or she makes out of himself or herself. Any attempt to encapsulate the human being (or human nature) would only serve to limit him or her and to miss what we really are.<sup>11</sup> The radical openness of humans as self-constructing beings does not allow for any characterisation of human beings as such, they claim.<sup>12</sup> These are

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just some philosophical positions of the twentieth century—but they all agree that we cannot ask what we are and expect meaningful answers.

The absence of anthropology from most contemporary philosophy creates a rather tricky situation. On the one side, contemporary philosophy tells us that all attempts to define what is characteristically human will fall short. But on the other side, we deal with humans every day and should know what that means (and actually do have some idea of it). Furthermore, architects have to create buildings for beings of some description—a task which comes to seem altogether paradoxical if humans are, for us, a kind of black hole or invisible phantom that no one can possibly catch. Building for a phantom is an otherworldly challenge.

Philosophy, it seems, cannot get off the hook of the Kantian question. It is, after all, the paradigm human practice of reflecting on fundamental questions and challenges and thus of giving orientation to people. Who else should do it? Simply to run away (“Catch me if you can!”) and to argue that humans are no possible object of reflection cannot suffice. The pertinence of the challenge demands better, even if we never get a final answer to the big question. That is probably also why some philosophers like Noam Chomsky in very recent years dare to ask again: “*What kind of creatures are we?*”<sup>13</sup>

That is why the 3rd International Conference of the International Society for the Philosophy of Architecture (see the call for papers at <http://isparchitecture.com/events/3rd-international-conference/>) has turned to human beings in architecture. It is, as we might say, an approach to the big question by the side entrance. Our philosophical focus is not human beings as such, or human nature, but humans at home: Human beings as those for whom we design and build houses which they use and where they stay. At the conference, this side entrance has turned out to be a rather successful door. Even if the conference did not answer the big question—unsurprisingly—the papers and discussions showed us a wide range of fascinating facets of the human being in Architecture and Philosophy. On the one side, it helps us to formulate more clearly what architecture is meant to do. On the other side, it contributes to an important aspect of philosophical anthropology, namely that humans are beings that build houses. We need some kind of shelter, but houses are almost always more than a merely functional hut. They are deep expressions of our being and of our aspirations, what we belong to and how we conceive individual life and the life of a community. Although it has always been generally acknowledged that human beings built dwelling places, more careful analysis of this need is revealing a lot about us.

Issues 3.1. and 3.2 of *Architecture Philosophy* contain a selection of papers developed out of the conference that did most to reveal its many facets.

We have selected them on the basis of their originality and quality, but we have also aimed at illustrating the variety of methodological approaches. “Architectural anthropology,” as we might call it, is a field very much in the making and it seems too inappropriate to determine one kind of approach as the only possible one. That is also the reason why we are grateful to be able to include a dialogue at the outset between Karsten Harries and Sir Roger Scruton about this fundamental question;

namely on how to conceive of a philosophy of architecture and architectural anthropology. The two founding fathers, or at least great inspirers of two different schools of architectural philosophy (a more analytical orientation from Scruton and a more phenomenological tradition from Harries) rightly deserve to have the first word in this debate. True to form, we find that Scruton approaches architecture as a demand on its justification, while Harries begins with questions of home and of place. Yet, should we be surprised to find that, starting from oblique angles to one another they find much convergence?

This dialogue leads naturally to a paper that takes its starting point from another encounter of two great philosophers. Pau Pedragosa scrutinizes the discussion between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger about philosophy and the human being that took place in Davos (Switzerland) in 1929.



FIGURE 1: BAMBERG UNIVERSITY

His paper's title, "Presence or Meaning in Architecture," encapsulates the fundamental oppositions in that debate that can be drawn from Heidegger's and Cassirer's ideas about the human being. Drawing on the two philosophical giants' different philosophical anthropologies, Pedragosa argues for cultivating two different ways of understanding culture and, hence, architecture. Cassirer's and Heidegger's antithetical conceptions of the human being can be described as the human activity for world-construction against the human receptivity for world-interpretation.

Finding merit in both conceptions, Pedragosa follows Cassirer to propose an understanding of architecture as a symbolic form that constructs new meanings; that buildings are the bearers of meaning. But he also finds much to recommend in Heidegger's approach; that architecture is less concerned with construction and more with the origin and the questioning of building; that the building is an irreducible presence of itself that opens up the environment. Pedragosa argues that, while at the time of the debate it was widely perceived that Heidegger had won, in the hard-won wisdom of the ensuing century, a more balanced appraisal is warranted. The exchange between two established philosophers and Pedragosa's paper examining established philosophic controversy surrounding the human in architecture are followed by selections that seek to expand the possible approaches to our topic.

How important to our sense of home is the simple expectation that our architecture outlive us? Mari Hvattum's paper "On Durability" looks at how time is inscribed in human artefacts. Starting with the sensible observation that architecture, in most cases, lasts longer than the people building it she makes a case for considering that in an age when the extremes of the ephemeral and the eternal are cultivated in equal measure, there may be reason to look again at the particular kind of durability pertaining to the human-made. This involves studying, not so much works, as work: how human making, as both Gottfried Semper and Hannah Arendt have reminded us, transforms ephemeral acts into (relatively) durable worlds, and how the past, whether we know it or not, inhabits the present. She does this by drawing on the specific example of the destruction and reconstruction of the famous bridge of Mostar, Bosnia; employing it as something of a case study for discussing how architecture provides essential touchstones for temporal beings.

Even though humans may not have a static nature, our relation to nature itself—that is to say, the world that goes on without us—is too important a topic to go unaddressed. Henry Dicks, in his paper "From Anthropomimetic to Biomimetic Cities: The Place of Humans in

Cities like Forests,” observes that even though in recent years biomimicry has emerged as a powerful response to the problem of sustainability and today exerts an important influence on both architecture and urbanism, its implications for the humanities have been largely overlooked. Taking a historical approach, the first key argument of this article is that throughout Western history the dominant model for the polis, qua both city and state, has been the human being and that it was also this basic model that underlay traditional understandings of the place of humans in cities and states. With the transition to biomimetic cities and states, the key model of which is the forest ecosystem, the question of the place of humans arises once again. In response to this question, Dicks proposes a speculative philosophical anthropology based on a combination of Heidegger’s thinking of the clearing and recent insights from the study of human evolution and pre-history with a view to grounding a new model of the polis not simply on the forest, but rather on the forest and the clearing. His invocation of the Heideggerian forest and clearing in this regard is likely to spark future debate. 7

We then conclude the first volume with Marion Roussel’s “Towards a Post-Human Era? Digital Architects and the Future of Mankind,” which looks at possible futures. Roussel believes that in this age of unprecedented technological progress, we can no longer ask “what is man?” without examining what we think man will become. In the field of architecture such an examination necessitates considering both what and for whom we will be building in the decades to come. Looking at the future world visions from the commentary of digital architects from the 1990s to the present day, this paper aims to show how these architects have already been imagining the future of mankind. It attempts to shed light upon our present state of evolution and the expected outcome of that evolution.

Taken together, we believe these papers illustrate that addressing the question of what we mean now by the human in architecture can and must run the full gamut of humans’ time on the planet; from the prehistory of the clearing in the forest to the strange possible futures made possible by modern technology. It is a question as relevant ever.

#### ENDNOTES

[1] Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter* (1943), §87. Based on studies undertaken at the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in Athens, 1933. Accessed on Modernist Architecture, <https://modernistarchitecture.wordpress.com/2010/11/03/ciam%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cthe-athens-charter%E2%80%9D-1933/>.

[2] Our translation. For the original, see Friedensreich Hundertwasser, *Gebt den Menschen die Häuser zurück* (München: Pattloch, 2003).

[3] Alvar Aalto, *Toward a Human Modernism*, ed. Winfried Nerdinger (New York: Prestel, 1999).

[4] Mats Egelius, “Ralph Erskine: the humane architect,” *Architectural Design Profile* vol. 9 (London: Architectural Design, 1977).

[5] *Team 10 Meetings: 1953-1984*, ed. Alison Margaret Smithson (New York: Rizzoli, 1991) and Alison Margaret Smithson and Peter Smithson, *The Charged Void: Architecture* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2001).

[6] Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (New York: Norton, 1971); Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism. A Study in the History of Taste* (London: Architectural Press, 1980); and Alina Alexandra Payne, “Rudolf Wittkower and Architectural Principles in the Age of Modernism,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 53, no. 3 (1994): 322–342, doi: 10.2307/990940.

[7] Immanuel Kant, “Logik,” *Akademieausgabe Band IX* (Berlin: 1900ff.), AA IX S.25.

[8] For an extensive view on the tradition of Philosophische Anthropologie see Joachim Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie: Eine Denkerichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Alber, 2009). Some of the most important books include Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1991); Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1962); Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965); and Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[9] Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[10] Cf. Jürgen Habermas, “Anthropologie, philosophische,” in *Das Fischer Lexikon: Philosophie*, ed. Alwin Diemer and Ivo Frenzel (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1958), 18–35.

[11] Martin Heidegger, *Über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2000).

[12] Ibid.

[13] Noam Chomsky, *What Kind of Creatures Are We?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).