

PRESENCE OR MEANING IN ARCHITECTURE

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1. THE DAVOS DEBATE

Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger met in 1929 for a public debate in the town of Davos in the Swiss Alps.¹ Over time the debate took on a legendary character and has become a key episode in the European history of ideas. Cassirer and Heidegger defended two antithetical images of the human being, which are also two antithetical images of culture and hence of architecture.

The Davos debate was a great cultural antagonism of the Weimar Republic. On the one side Cassirer, heir of Kant and Goethe, a humanist of the Enlightenment and a cosmopolitan Jew. On the other side the anti-humanist and provincial Heidegger. Four years later, Heidegger embraced the Nazi revolution and Cassirer was forced into exile.² It is tempting to draw political conclusions from both philosophies (and we will draw some conclusions at the end of this paper), but to contemporaries of the 1929 debate, the confrontation was philosophical, not political.³ Heidegger's thinking implied a radical break with and destruction of the past, but this break had not yet received the political form he gave it in 1933.⁴

In general terms the Davos debate involved the clash of two different conceptions of philosophy: between humanist philosophy and the existentialist, non-humanistic philosophy of the new era. What Heidegger criticized during the 1920s were the

humanist ideas of progress and freedom. In a direct encounter with Cassirer, the most eminent representative of neo-Kantian “rationalism,” Heidegger presented himself as the author of a fundamentally new kind of philosophy destined to replace the remaining “rationalist” tendencies in Husserlian phenomenology as well.⁵

Heidegger in fact “won” the debate against Cassirer and the young students at Davos agreed with his revolt against the “rationalism” of the neo-Kantian tradition.⁶ Heidegger gave voice to the generation struck by the violence of the First World War, which was seen as a huge break with tradition.⁷ This perspective of a new generation led some toward fascism and others toward communism, while others, like Cassirer, stood for the democratic parliamentary politics of the Weimar Republic.

Cassirer was not only one of the most eminent representatives of the classical liberal intellectual tradition in Germany, he was also a representative of modern political republicanism. He owed his academic career to the Weimar Republic, because he was offered a professorship at the newly founded university in Hamburg in 1919. He defended Weimar in the university on the occasion of the tenth anniversary celebration of the Republic in August 1928. Against the popular view that the Weimar Republic was “un-German,”⁸ he argued that the idea of a republican constitution had its origin in the German philosophical tradition.⁹

The confrontation in Davos turned on the interpretation of Kant’s philosophy. Yet the debate was more enduring and broader than the technical matters of philosophical interpretation, and touched on the central issue of what it is to be human. Their essential disagreement was that, for Cassirer, the human being is essentially a being endowed with a capacity for creation. For Heidegger, the essence of the human being is a special kind of receptivity by virtue of which the human stands within the “openness of Being.” Where Cassirer puts activity, creativity and freedom, Heidegger proposes passivity and receptivity.¹⁰ The disagreement between them defines two opposing anthropological conceptions: the human capacity for world-construction against the human receptivity for world-interpretation.

2. ERNST CASSIRER

From 1919 until his exile in 1933 (the whole period of the Weimar Republic), Cassirer held a chair in philosophy at the newly founded University of Hamburg, located in one of the most liberal towns in Germany. It was during this period that he brought out the three volumes

of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume One: Language*, 1923; *Volume Two: Mythical Thought*, 1925; *Volume Three: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 1929.

With this mature work, Cassirer distances himself from the neo-Kantian Marburg school to which he belonged. This is not to deny the continuities between Cassirer and neo-Kantianism. The essential philosophical position of the entire neo-Kantian tradition, also shared by Cassirer, is transcendental idealism, which states that we only understand of the world what we put into it through our own reason, concretized by Kant as applying concepts spontaneously to what is passively received by the senses. It requires the dualism of intuitions and concepts. Kant's Copernican turn means that nature is not something we experience passively, but something to which we ascribe concepts in order to understand it. We understand what we put in nature, rather than what nature gives us. Cassirer points this out: what is true for us is only what we ourselves have created.¹¹

Both the neo-Kantian Marburg school and Cassirer reclaim science as an essential transcendental creation of human reason. But Cassirer distances himself from Kant and neo-Kantianism by relaxing the scientism of the Marburg school in favour of a more pluralistic theory of cultural expression, including a historical variation to the fixed Kantian a priori. Cassirer takes a new and original step from the *Critique of Reason* to a critique of culture.

Cassirer defines the human being by his special capacity to create, in complete freedom, worlds of meaning. These worlds become the objective culture of myth, religion, art, language, and science. He terms these objective cultural worlds "symbolic forms."¹²

For Cassirer, to be human is to be an animal symbolicum, an animal distinguished by the spontaneous capacity for symbolic expression. This

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capacity has developed historically: as the human being passes from the mythic to the modern-scientific understanding of the world, it undergoes a process of enlightenment, an emancipatory awakening to its role as creator of its own symbolic reality: the history of human culture is “the process of man’s progressive self-liberation.”¹³ Even though Cassirer understood the sequence of symbolic forms as a historical narrative from myth to science, during the 1920s and by the time of the Davos debate he defended a pluralistic approach and tended to see mythical thinking and rational thinking as co-existing forms of reflection and of approaching reality. It was only after the Third Reich that he became much more critical about mythical approaches (mainly in his last book, *The Myth of the State*.) He then argued that the mythic symbolization of reality had to be overcome by scientific reason in order to prevent philosophical and, much more dangerous, political irrationalism. As we will see at the end of this paper, Cassirer interpreted Heidegger’s philosophy and Nazism as such irrationality. Both were made possible the irruption of myth in modern times.

2.1 FROM SUBSTANCE TO FUNCTION

This narrative of human beings’ historical emancipation was already in place in Cassirer’s previous work of 1910, *Substance and Function*,¹⁴ in which Cassirer explains two ways of concept formation: the traditional and the modern one.

Cassirer begins by discussing the problem of concept formation and by criticizing, in particular, the “abstractionist” theory on which concepts are arrived at by ascending inductively from sensory particulars. This is the traditional manner of concept formation, the Aristotelian logic of genus and species. Any science based on this theory of concept formation can only be descriptive and classificatory, and proceeds by abstraction, forming ever-higher generic concepts (ascending from the sensory particulars to ever higher species and genera). This theory is also an expression of realism, where reality is thought to exist in itself, and the concepts “mirror” or “copy” nature as the realm of things conceived as substances. The substance is the fixed and ultimate substratum of changeable qualities. From this results a metaphysical “copy” or mimetic theory of knowledge, according to which the truth of our sensory representations consists in a relation of pictorial similarity between them and the ultimate things or substances lying behind our representations.¹⁵

Cassirer is concerned to replace this mimetic theory with the

“constructivist” theory:

In opposition to the logic of the generic concept, which, as we saw, represents the point of view and influence of the concept of substance, there now appears the logic of the mathematical concept of function. However, the field of application of this form of logic is not confined to mathematics alone. On the contrary, it extends over into the field of the knowledge of nature; for the concept of function constitutes the general schema and model according to which the modern concept of nature has been moulded in its progressive historical development.¹⁶

With the new concept of function, we achieve the truth of an object, not by picturing a realm of metaphysical substances constituting the enduring substrate of the empirical phenomena, but rather in virtue of an embedding of the empirical phenomena into an ideal formal structure of mathematical relations.¹⁷

This is the modern manner of concept formation, which is not descriptive and mirroring but constructive. This type of concept formation constructs concepts and thereby things. What are constructed in this method are relations of things. The relations are not in the world, but constructed by pure thinking. They are logical relations and nothing existing in nature. This concept-formation defines the logic of scientific knowledge in modernity: the new symbolic language of mathematics and physics, which is totally formal.¹⁸

Metaphysics of substance implies a mind-independent reality, which imposes its conditions on conceptualization. The theory of function, on the contrary, is totally a conceptual abstraction or symbolization to which reality adapts.

2.2 SYMBOLIC FORMS

Cassirer’s theory of scientific development therefore

presupposes the gradual desubstantialization of reality and its replacement by a symbolized, purely conceptual theory of relations. Science gradually breaks free from a substantive conception of reality. Just as the functional theory replaces the “copy” theory of knowledge, so does the more general theory of meaningful representation developed in the philosophy of symbolic forms. We overcome the mimetic theory of knowledge by the insight that science must work up our sensory impressions into freely created theoretical structures. Similarly, all symbolic forms must subject the mere sensory given to the free creative activities of the transcendental subject.¹⁹

In the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, Cassirer explains the plurality and historically evolving symbolic forms according to three main symbolic capacities or functions of the transcendental subject: the expressive function²⁰ (Ausdrucksfunktion), the representative function²¹ (Darstellungsfunktion) and the significative or meaning function²² (Bedeutungsfunktion.). These functions give rise to three main world-presentations: the mythical world, the intuitive world, and the theoretical world. The more primitive ones give birth to the more sophisticated ones. The most basic and primitive type of symbolic meaning is expressive meaning, which is the product of the expressive function. The experience of events in the world around us is charged with affective and emotional significance, as desirable or hateful, comforting or threatening:

[T]he world of mythical experience is not grounded in either representative or significance-giving acts, but in pure experiences of expression. What is here present as ‘reality’ is not a complex of things provided with determinate ‘marks’ and ‘characteristics’, on the basis of which they can be recognized and distinguished from one another; rather, it is a manifold and profusion of originally ‘physiognomic’ characters.²³

The following symbolic meaning, the representative meaning, is the product of the representative function of thought that takes us out of the original mythical world and into the stable and enduring world of substances, identifiable and distinguishable as such. It is in natural language that this symbolic meaning of representation is most clearly visible.²⁴ Through natural language we construct the intuitive world of ordinary sense perception. We distinguish the enduring substance, on the one side, from its variable manifestations from a different point of view and on different occasions on the other, and we thereby arrive at the fundamental distinction between appearance and reality.²⁵

The third and final meaning of the symbolic forms is the product of the significative or meaning function of thought and consists in the pure relational concepts characteristic of modern mathematics, logic, and mathematical physics that are finally freed from the bounds of sensible intuition.²⁶ The language of mathematical-physical theory transcends all expressive and representative meaning exhibited in the mythical and intuitive worlds, and we thereby finally attain the stage of pure signification of the theoretical world. The purely logical relations replacing all “picturing” of a substantial reality finds their most precise and exact fulfilment in modern mathematical logic.²⁷

3 MEANING OR PRESENCE IN ARCHITECTURE

3.1 FUNCTION OR SUBSTANCE: HANS BLUMENBERG'S INTERPRETATION OF THE DAVOS DEBATE

In order to draw some consequences from Cassirer's as well as Heidegger's philosophy for architecture we will follow the suggestive and, for our purposes, very fruitful interpretation of the Davos confrontation given by the great German historian of philosophy Hans Blumenberg. This philosopher interprets the debate using Cassirer's categories of “substance” and “function”: “Against the distinction between the concepts of ‘substance’ and ‘function’ which had already been introduced by Cassirer in 1910, Heidegger decided, with Luther, in favour of substance as the first and the unique category, against the functional propagation of categories into ‘symbolic forms’ – and in favour of [...] the conventions of the realists.”²⁸

According to Blumenberg, Cassirer sides in favour of “function,” “meaning,” and “idealism” whereas Heidegger favours “substance,” “Being,” and “realism.” For Cassirer, modern science has transformed reality into a symbolic order, which is not the reality in itself, but only its signifier. Our

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capacity to create symbols consists in creating meanings or signs that point to reality but they are not reality itself. Heidegger, by contrast, understood philosophy not as the study of our capacity to create meaning, but as the phenomenological description of that which “shows itself.” What shows itself is reality,²⁹ not just a symbol or a sign of it. Cassirer’s preference for the “functional propagation of categories into symbolic forms” presupposes the primacy of human agency, whereas Heidegger’s decision “in favour of substance as the first and the unique category” and his study of what shows itself presupposes the primacy of human receptivity.

Following this thread of interpretation we can distinguish two types of architecture that, together with both images of the human being, underlie either creativity, meaning, function and abstraction or receptivity, reality, substance and presence. The first one, in Cassirer’s guise, is internationalist and trusts in the human capacity for world-construction. Architecture is conceived as a materialization of new and creative meanings and the architect is a free agent for the construction of new worlds. The second, more Heideggerian, conceives architecture as environment-interpretation. Architecture is here understood as world disclosing, a world that is always already there, and the architect as the interpreter of that world or environment as it shows itself. In the first case architecture proposes new ways of living, buildings are the bearers of new meanings, and the emphasis is in the meaning that buildings convey. In the second case the building just shows itself; it is an irreducible presence of itself that opens up the environment.

Where Cassirer emphasizes the creation of new meanings oriented toward the future, Heidegger opposes with the priority of the origin; the interpretation of what is already there. He emphasizes paying attention to the presence of what is there and shows itself before proposing new constructions.

3.2 ARCHITECTURE AS MEANING

We now try to draw some consequences of Cassirer’s philosophy for architecture. Our task is to apply Cassirer’s philosophy to architecture, beyond what he in fact said about this kind of art. The reason for this application is that Cassirer includes architecture in the symbolic form of art:

[W]e can interpret certain spatial forms, certain complexes of lines and figures, in one case as an artistic ornament and in another as a geometrical figure, so endowing one and the same material with entirely different meanings. The spatial unity, which we build in aesthetic vision and creation, in painting, sculpture

*and architecture, belongs to an entirely different sphere from the spatial unity, which is represented in geometrical theorems and axioms. In the one case we have the modality of the logical-geometric concept, in the other the modality of artistic imagination—in the one case, space is conceived as an aggregate of mutually independent relations, as a system of “causes” and “consequences”; in the other, it is conceived as a whole whose particular factors are dynamically interlocked, a perceptual, emotional unity.*³⁰

But our claim is that, when dealing with modern architecture, we have to take into consideration technology as well. Modern architecture seems to require a convergence of the symbolic forms of art and technology. As far as we know, Cassirer himself did not study this convergence but he prepared the theoretical ground for such study. In that sense Cassirer’s philosophy has much in common with modern architectural theory and, in particular, with the Bauhaus, the great school of design and architecture whose history and final fate of exile runs parallel to that of Cassirer and to the Weimar Republic itself. Cassirer’s philosophical orientation is best expressed by the *neue Sachlichkeit* (the New Objectivity), a social, cultural, and artistic movement committed to internationalism and to a more objective and scientific organization of architecture and the social life through the project of uniting art and technology.³¹ This convergence of both symbolic forms, art and technology could be termed “functional aesthetics”³² or described by the familiar motto “form follows function.” That form follows function means that forms are not based on imitations or on mimetic qualities of a substantial reality as produced in traditional paintings, sculptures, and architectural ornamentation, but rather that form is the result of constructing relations, that is, form is the result of function in Cassirer’s sense of “function,” as opposed to “substance”: functional forms are an

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aggregate of different elements mutually related.

The works of the artists, designers, and architects of the Bauhaus are above all a realisation of the functional aesthetic approach. As an example, consider Marcel Breuer's furniture and Walter Gropius's lights in the Bauhaus' Dessau building. Both Breuer's and Gropius' designs show modular pieces of furniture and lamps as industrially produced series that create what we might call a functional space. A functional space is based on relations among parts according to repetition and variation. This kind of design allows the construction of furniture (tables, chairs, lamps) and the arrangement of space by fitting together the pieces in different ways. There is not only one way—say one substantial, “real,” way to relate the pieces—but rather different users have many equal valid possibilities for combining the pieces and creating their own spaces by sliding the modular elements. Design is not mimetic of a “real being” because the same elements (tables, chairs, or lamps) related otherwise would create a different space.

We can understand this kind of industrial design (or, more generally, functional aesthetics, and the slogans “form follows function,” “art and technology: a new unity,” “new objectivity”) as a functionalized symbol or as a sign without a real signified. It is a sign in the sense of Cassirer's citing of Helmholtz's theory of signs to explain scientific theories:

This tendency [explaining objectivity in terms of “pure formal relations”] appears especially pregnantly in Helmholtz's theory of signs [...]. Our sensations and representations are signs, not copies [Abbilder] of objects. For one requires of pictures [Bilder] some or another kind of similarity with the pictured object [...]. The sign, by contrast, requires no substantial [sachlich] similarity in the elements, but solely a functional correspondence in the two-sided structure. What is established in this structure is not the particular intrinsic character of the designated thing, but rather the objective relations in which it stands to other similar [things].³³

Philosophically considered we cannot interpret the production of such designed objects within the framework of the metaphysics of substance or the mimetic or pictorial theory of knowledge because the object and the space are the result of relations and combinations, and they open up the possibility of freedom to change, improve, and transform the space. The space is thus constructed rather than determined by conditions already existing. Functional space is the result of first bringing together independent parts. The space designed is therefore not holistic but rather mechanic—functional—because the part (the modular piece) is prior to



the whole.

FIGURE 1. BAUHAUS, DESSAU

Before considering the second type of architecture, let's take a brief look at Heidegger's philosophy.

4. MARTIN HEIDEGGER

In 1927, two years after Cassirer published the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, dedicated to myth, Heidegger published his first important work, *Being and Time*. For Heidegger, to be human is to be gifted with a special sort of receptivity or openness to the world that Heidegger calls the "disclosedness" or "unveiling" of Being. The phenomenon of disclosedness is deeper than our rationality and practical action. Heidegger calls "Dasein" the human being as capable of this opening capacity.

For Heidegger, human beings are defined by finitude, which is to say we discover ourselves in the midst of conditions we have not created and cannot

hope to control. My having been born in a particular year, in a particular land, to particular parents—everything that Heidegger designates as the “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*)³⁴—is no mere accident that can be overcome. The contingencies of history and the everyday cannot be transcended in such a way as to reveal some underlying essence—like the transcendental symbolic capacity of Cassirer’s subject—but rather constitute me from the ground up.

4.1 PRAGMATIC WORLD AND EXISTENTIAL SPACE

Heidegger begins his philosophizing with the analysis of the everyday situations in which the human being is involved.³⁵ In such situations the world disclosed to human beings is not the world of scientific explanation (the symbolic form of modern science, in Cassirer’s terms) but instead the “environment” (*Umwelt*). The environment shows itself in our practical involvement or dealing (*Umgang*) with the things. In such involvements the things of the environment appear not as objects but rather as things-in-use, as equipment or tools (*Zeug*).

Heidegger’s basic thought is that the human relation with worldly things is primarily a relation of practice and concern, and not a theoretical one. We understand things not as objects of theoretical analysis, but rather as they first appear within a context of practice. To reinforce this idea, Heidegger introduces the famous distinction between the “ready-to-hand” (*Zuhanden*) statuses of things as understood in an equipmental fashion versus the “present-at-hand” (*Vorhanden*) manner of being of entities as they are disclosed for perceptual cognition, theoretical inspection, and consideration.³⁶ The ready-to-hand is our everyday understanding, and that understanding is the primordial way things appear to us, while the present-at-hand is a consequence of theoretical dissociation from the more basic relation. The theoretical cognition of the merely “present-at-hand” is a derivative mode of *Dasein*, a modification of the more basic, essentially pragmatic mode of involvement with the “ready-to-hand.”

Equipment appears always in a context of interconnections. This context is a totality within which each tool has a sense. The totality thereby assumes a transcendental status in that the whole is a condition for the possibility of understanding any one of its parts. The environment is a holistic structure of concern, in which objects are always understood in a context, before the explicit knowledge of any discrete item we may pick out for inspection.³⁷ For Heidegger the whole is prior to the part. The functional designs of Breuer and Gropius mentioned earlier run counter to this holistic space of the everyday since the part (the modular furniture)

exists prior to its arrangement.

The holistic character is of great importance for understanding the kind of space that belongs to our everyday, or, as Heidegger puts it, our “existential spatiality.”³⁸ This existential spatiality is a series of environmental regions where Dasein realizes its concerns, plans, and expectations, and it is fundamentally different from and prior to, its scientific understanding as functional space. Existential spatiality is fundamentally different from the Cartesian notion of extension or its more developed scientific-functional version. This conception of space does not apply to a being whose primary relation to the world is one of involvement because Cartesian space always places things at a measurable distance, whereas existential spatiality determines distances in terms of Dasein’s context of significance.³⁹ Existential spatiality is the precondition for our understanding of Cartesian space, because the former is an existential condition for understanding at all. Whatever formalized structures of measurement we might create, such structures were themselves merely a way of “thematizing” the spatiality of Dasein’s everyday existence. There can be, therefore, no breakthrough from existential spatiality to space, because an existential condition is by definition constitutive and could not be abandoned. Of course Heidegger does not deny the possibility that one could develop a purely mental representation of formalized space. But this representation is not something more real than the existential spatiality. Heidegger saw the existential structure of human understanding as constitutive rather than, as with Cassirer, evolving toward scientific abstraction.

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4.2 AUTHENTIC AND INAUTHENTIC EXISTENCE: EXISTENTIAL TIME

If we conceive Dasein not as primarily theoretical or cognitive but rather as oriented

towards pragmatic engagement and projects, then our conception of time (of “existential time” as well as the conception of “existential space”) is not just the thought of the line of time, and temporal finitude is not just the thought of an eventual limit to this line of time. Finitude is rather Dasein’s concern with its own death, the radical possibility that the on-going pragmatic projects will cease to be.⁴⁰ In facing existentially such possibility, the pragmatic subject is removed from the context of pragmatic involvement that defines the everyday understanding of himself. In “being-towards-death,” Dasein is revealed to him for what he is: as thrown into the world.

In the normal course of events, Dasein takes the context of its projects and practical activities for granted, a framework that is fixed and simply given. In “being-towards-death,” Dasein steps out of this given context, which is then recognized as neither fixed nor given. Dasein recognizes that its normal or everyday context is simply one possibility among others, one that is thereby subject to his own free choice. Facing death thus opens up the possibility of an “authentic” existence in which Dasein’s own choices rest on no taken for granted context at all. In “inauthentic” existence, by contrast, Dasein operates unquestioningly in its everydayness as a context of projects taken as given. Heidegger describes the inauthenticity of everydayness in terms of the “others” as “they” (das Man):

In utilizing public transportation, in the use of information services such as the newspaper, every other is like the next. This being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own Dasein completely into the kind of being of “the others” in such a way that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the they unfolds its true dictatorship. We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way they enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way they see and judge. But we also withdraw from the “great mass” the way they withdraw, we find “shocking” what they find shocking. The they, which is nothing definite and which all are, though not as a sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.⁴¹

Facing death singles out my existence as my own and makes possible the withdrawal from the uniformity of the “they,” from the “great mass.” It is thus on the basis of “being-towards-death” that the distinction between “authentic” and “inauthentic” existence is defined.⁴²

5 ARCHITECTURE AS PRESENCE

We can now distinguish a second type of architecture, inspired by

Heidegger; this kind of architecture goes against its modern conception as the construction of functional spaces or as the fusion of art and technology; it is less concerned with construction and more with the origin and the questioning of building. Heidegger wrote about architecture in the essays “The Origin of the Work of Art” and “Building Dwelling Thinking.” But our purpose is not to follow this or that work but the essential core of his thought that we find relevant for architecture, as it is expressed in *Being and Time* in the terms we have just explained. The main points relevant for architecture are the difference between a holistic and a functional space; and the difference between authentic and inauthentic existence, where authenticity means questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions and contexts of our everyday projects.

If the kind of architecture that exemplifies Cassirer’s position was the Bauhaus-inspired modernist design, then we can propose a more recent architectural project, one critical of modernity, as an example to illustrate Heidegger’s thought: Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal’s 1996 project for the Place Léon Aucoc in the city of Bordeaux, France.

The Place Léon Aucoc is a triangular village space lined with trees, benches and a place to play. The house facades lining the Place were a good example of sober collective housing. Lacaton and Vassal said:

The question was: how is it possible to make an embellishment of the square? And the answer after three or four months of working research was to say: there is nothing to do. And our project is to do nothing. It’s our project and please, you have to do it like we want. And it has been done like that.⁴³

The architects decided to exclusively carry out simple maintenance tasks: changing gravel, cleaning

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more often, taking care of the trees, slightly modifying the circulation, and so on, with the aim of improving the way people meet. This kind of passivity is not indifference but rather an active non-intervention. Lacaton and Vassal say:

What does the idea of “embellishment” boil down to? Does it involve replacing one groundcover with another? A wooden bench with a more-up-to-date design in stone? Or a lamp standard with another, more fashionable, one? Nothing calls for too great a set of changes. Quality, charm, life exist. The square is already beautiful.⁴⁴

The architects' choice of non-intervention is existentially “authentic” in the sense that this decision rested on not taking for granted the architect's professional context at all. In “inauthentic” existence, the architect operates unquestioningly in the everyday professional work in which the construction of “something” is taken for granted. This project both shakes and radically subverts architecture's customary state of affairs by implying a step backwards towards questioning before constructing. We can understand this architectural project as a questioning of what building is and of what architecture is. These radical questions depended on a fresh interpretation of the place: what the place requires rather than what the architect's freedom wants. Of course, the place and the programme may require the construction of a building but it just as easily may not.

This radical project by Lacaton & Vassal exemplifies a broader attitude in architecture, one which consists in opening up to a given environment, in listening to place, to its sheer presence, and responding to it. The holistic character of the environment is of great importance for understanding this kind of architecture. The whole of the environment is a condition for the possibility of understanding any one of its parts that the architect might build. And these parts open up this whole through different ways and architectural strategies. This totality should not be understood just in terms of physical environment but in a much broader sense, which includes culture and the existential human situation as such. Architecture “mimics” this whole. Whereas for Cassirer architecture as functional space is a new construction rather than determined by conditions already existing, for Heidegger, on the opposite extreme, architecture is determined by these preconditions; that is, it “mimics” or responds to the priority of the whole or of “reality.” Heidegger expresses this whole and its architectural response in these terms:

The sun, whose light and warmth are in everyday use, has its own places – sunrise, midday, sunset, midnight; these are discovered in circumspection and treated



FIGURE 2. PLACE LÉON AUCCOC

distinctively in terms of changes in the usability of what the sun bestows. [...] The house has its sunny side and its shady side; the way it is divided up into “rooms” is oriented towards these, and so is the “arrangement” within them, according to their character as equipment. Churches and graves, for instance, are laid out according to the rising and the setting of the sun – the regions of life and death, which are determinative for Dasein itself with regard to its own most possibilities of Being in the world.⁴⁵

6 CASSIRER VERSUS HEIDEGGER ON MYTH

Heidegger’s description of the holistic character of the environment, of our everyday space, is shockingly similar to Cassirer’s description of mythical space:

There is no cosmology, however primitive, in which the contrast of the four main directions does not in some way emerge as the cardinal point of its understanding and explanation of the world. [...] The east as the origin of light is also the source of life – the west as the place of the setting sun is filled with all the terrors of death. And this opposition of night and day, light and darkness, birth and death, is also reflected in countless ways in the mythical interpretation of the concrete events of life.⁴⁶

Despite their surface similarities,⁴⁷ the use of these conceptions is radically different. In these radically different conceptions of myth resides the final explanation of the philosophers’ opposing visions of architecture and of human culture in general.

The description of myth is very important for Cassirer since it reveals not only the primitive stage that was reached many centuries ago but also the unmediated experience of perception. Myth embodies the concreteness of life before the categorization of theoretical consciousness. Myth is the lowest and most primary form of symbolic existence and it is the ground of any other form of culture. All other symbolic forms only come into existence by working through myth. Cassirer is convinced that in the history of human culture the rise of conceptual abstraction is a welcome progress. He is committed to philosophical modernism and understands modernity, and thus modern architecture, as the triumph over, and a displacement of, myth. As we said before, Cassirer holds this view during the 1920s but in a moderate way, accepting the plurality of symbolic forms. It was only after the Nazi seizure of power that he became critical of mythical thought: to move from myth to higher forms of symbolic consciousness is a demand placed upon human beings; it is the call to work oneself—as an individual, as a civilization—out of myth and to come to light, to enlightenment, as living a life in culture.⁴⁸ It is a demand to keep the forces of myth at bay.

Heidegger's primordial space, by contrast, cannot be overcome but only concealed or forgotten. Such forgetting is symptomatic of what Heidegger calls the "fallenness" of Dasein. The scientific calculation and objectification of space robs the world of its "worldhood" and transforms the existential space into functional space. Heidegger wishes to return us to a purer and more authentic state of being, one located not in some mythic past but under the surface of everyday life. For Heidegger mythical existence is a simplified model of the human existential structure but essentially remains the same.

Whereas for Cassirer the path from myth to science is an inevitable and welcome progress of mind, and the culmination of the human capacity to create worlds, for Heidegger this process is rather more like a lapse, a regrettable breakdown in the otherwise constitutive structures of human being. The functionalist symbolization of reality that Cassirer sees as a high achievement is, for Heidegger, a historical impoverishment in human understanding. In fact, Heidegger says that such a break from existential space to a modern scientific one is not progress but a loss and an alienation from both the world and individual existence. What Heidegger calls thrownness and passivity is for Cassirer a primitive and mythical conception of humanity that denies both its responsibility and emancipation. What Cassirer calls freedom and creativity is for Heidegger an old metaphysical misconception that hides the essential human finitude.

We have seen the antagonistic understandings of Cassirer and Heidegger on both architecture and on culture broadly considered. It is not our intention to decide which one is preferable because only together do they define the complete image of the human being and how it shapes its place in the world. If we compare metaphorically human beings' life and history as a play in two acts, the night from which culture springs and the day that overcomes the night, we can say that Cassirer draws attention to the second, the day of culture, and Heidegger to the first, the night from which it springs. One looks at what has flourished, the other at its roots.⁴⁹ Human culture involves both.

That said we would not like to finish this paper without a last commentary on politics. Cassirer's continuous confrontation with Heidegger, in the context of the weak parliamentary politics of the Weimar Republic, had more than purely philosophical motivations; they were at opposite ends in social and political terms as well. In his last work, *The Myth of the State*, written in his American exile, Cassirer writes:

*In all critical moments of man's social life, the rational forces that resist the rise of the old mythical conceptions are no longer sure of themselves. In these moments the time for myth has come again. For myth has not been really vanquished and subjugated. It is always there, lurking in the dark and waiting for its hour and opportunity.*⁵⁰

From his exile Cassirer interpreted the irruption of Nazism as the irruption of myth in modern times and judged Heidegger's philosophy as encouraging myth's staying power. Cassirer's philosophy helps us to prevent political radicalisms such as xenophobia and radical nationalism that today, when Europe is again in crisis, threaten our societies.

I would like to conclude by saying that Cassirer was overall a moderate humanist and defender

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of the Enlightenment, and even though he thought that science is the highest stage in human consciousness, he rejected the reductionist views of scientism on the one side and of myth's irrationalism on the other. In the early twentieth century, these two reductionisms appeared in the guise of positivism and *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life). Cassirer condemned both because they elevated a single symbolic form into an absolute conception of the world, presenting a partial truth as though it were total.

This is something we can learn today at the beginning of the twenty-first century from the debate that took place early in the twentieth.

ENDNOTES

[1] For a thorough understanding of the Davos debate see the excellent book by Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide. Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010.) See also Michael Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways. Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2000), 1. Friedman writes: "Davos, Switzerland; March 17–April 6, 1929. An intensive "International University Course," having the express purpose of effecting a reconciliation between French-speaking and German-speaking intellectuals, was sponsored by the Swiss, French, and German governments. The high point of the occasion was a series of lectures presented by Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, followed by a disputation between the two men."

[2] Edward Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 196.

[3] See Deniz Coskun, "Cassirer in Davos: An Intermezzo on Magic Mountain (1929)," *Law and Critique* 17 (2006): 1-26.

[4] Skidelsky, *The Last Philosopher of Culture*, 196-197.

[5] Friedman. *The Parting of the Ways*, 3.

[6] Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968). Gay explains that one of the main tensions during the Weimar Republic was the generational conflict between fathers and sons. This conflict was represented in Davos by the figures of the old philosopher Cassirer and the young Heidegger.

[7] Skidelsky, *The Last Philosopher of Culture*, 196-197.

[8] Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

The author explains how the right-wing intellectuals of this period, the so called “reactionary modernists,” argued that the Enlightenment tradition was un-German. The Enlightenment belongs to “civilization,” a term used to characterize the tradition of nations such as France and the United Kingdom while German is defined by Kultur, term understood as the opposite of Zivilisation.

[9] Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*, 4.

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[10] Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 7.

[11] Sebastian Luft, *The Space of Culture: Towards a Neo-Kantian Philosophy of Culture* (Cohen, Natorp, and Cassirer) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 45. See also Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*, 99.

[12] Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 13. Gordon writes: “The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms represents the effort to interpret all of human creativity after the transcendental model. Culture is an ever-expanding and pluralistic field of symbolic expression, which obeys certain laws of formation, the a priori principles of human spirit.”

[13] Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 228.

[14] Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function & Einstein’s Theory of Relativity* (Chicago: Open Court, 1923). For a commentary on this work see Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*, 94. See also Luft, *The Space of Culture*, 157-161.

[15] Cassirer, *Substance and Function*. For Cassirer’s treatment of substance and the realist position see Part I, “The Concept of Thing and the Concept of Relation” and Chapter I, “On the Theory of the Formation of Concepts,” 3-9.

[16] *Ibid.* 21.

[17] Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*, 95.

[18] Luft, *The Space of Culture*, 157-161. For example, the atom, as a concept, is not a name for a thing, which one could identify in nature, no matter if one had the most powerful microscope. The atom is a name for an idea, a theory, for the relation of different elements that make up reality. The thing “atom” is a construction in the framework of a theory.

[19] Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*, 103-109.

[20] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume Three: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). See Part I, “The Expressive Function and the World of Expression.”

[21] Ibid. See Part II, “The Problem of Representation and the Building of the Intuitive World.”

[22] Ibid. See Part III, “The Function of Signification and the Building Up of Scientific Knowledge.”

[23] Ibid. 68.

[24] Ibid. 119. See also Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*, 104, 105.

[25] Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 142.

[26] Ibid. 284.

[27] Ibid. 46.

[28] Hans Blumenberg. “Afinitäten und Dominanzen” in *Ein mögliches Selbst-verständnis: Aus dem Nachlass* (Stuttgart: Philip Reclam, 1996), 161-168. See Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 349:

Blumenberg reprises and old theological controversy that took place 400 years earlier between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, over the character of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. The confrontation was between the orthodox view that the body of Christ is really present in the bread and wine, and the unorthodox view according to which Christ's embodiment is merely an illusion, that the bread and wine only signify his body and blood though they are not literally so.

[29] For a discussion of the realism of Heidegger see the crucial §44 of Heidegger, “Dasein, Disclosedness, and Truth,” in *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). See also the arguments given by Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*, 54-58. Friedman says that Heidegger “rejects (in §44) the “Copernican Revolution” in favor of an apparently “direct realist” conception of truth.” From Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*, 54. Friedman also writes that “Heidegger is a “direct realist” in so far as he begins with the idea of “being-in-the-world.” We do not start with a cognitive subject together with its contents of consciousness, but rather with a living practical subject necessarily engaged with its environment.” From Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*, 55.

[30] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume One: Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 96. See also Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume Two: Mythical Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 166. Here Cassirer directly links art and architecture together.

[31] We can also find a close bond between the modernist architect Adolf Loos and Cassirer. In *Ornament and Crime*, (Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*. Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1997). Loos writes: “I

have discovered and given to the world the following notion: The evolution of civilization is synonymous with the elimination of ornament from the utilitarian object.” We find a parallelism between the historical narrative of the elimination of the ornamental with Cassirer’s historical emancipation from myth and religion in order to achieve the enlightenment of reason and science. According to this interpretation, architecture should be freed from ornamentation in the same way that philosophy should be emancipated from myth. See Peter Galison, “Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism,” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1990): 726. The author compares in this article the Bauhaus theory of design and architecture with the philosophy of logical positivism. Even though Cassirer criticised the scientism of the logical positivists, there are some points in common between both.

[32] Birgit Leitner, “Ernst Cassirer and (?) the Bauhaus: The Question of Functional Aesthetics,” *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 3 (2011): 167.

[33] Cassirer, *Substance and Function*, 304.

[34] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §29.

[35] For the following discussion of the everyday pragmatic situations in which Dasein is involved see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §15-16.

[36] For the conversion of the “ready-to-hand” to the “present-at-hand,” see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §16

[37] Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 221-224.

[38] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §§22-24.

[39] Ibid. §18.

[40] Ibid. §§46-60. For the analysis of “being-towards-death” and the possibility of “authentic” existence.

[41] Ibid. §27, 119.

[42] Friedman, *The Parting of the Ways*, 50-51.

[43] <https://www.lacatonvassal.com/index.php?idp=37#>

[44] Ibid.

[45] Heidegger. *Being and Time*, §22.

[46] Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume Two: Mythical Thought*, 98.

[47] In 1925, while Heidegger was working on the manuscript of *Being and Time*, the Deutsche Literaturzeitung sent him a copy of the second volume

of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* dedicated to myth. It is certainly a possibility that Cassirer influenced Heidegger. See Skidelsky, *The Last Philosopher of Culture*, 205.

[48] Luft, *The Space of Culture*, 164.

[49] Rudiger Safranski, *Un maestro de Alemania: Martin Heidegger y su tiempo* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1997), 226-227.

[50] Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 280.