THE NEED FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE

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> *Some have said that it was fire and water which were initially responsible for bringing men together into communities, but we, considering how useful, even indispensable, a roof and walls are for men, are convinced that it was they that drew and kept men together.* [1]

These remarks on architecture's social function are taken from Giovanni Battista Alberti´s *De re aedificatoria*, in which he searches for underlying principles behind the architectural categories and concepts of Vitruvius. This passage expresses both an underlying principle of social life and awards architecture a unique role in relation to society: Because four walls and a roof bind a group of people together they are a force that fashions a society.

Alberti, however, bases society also on a strong notion of *the individual human being*; and thus for him, architecture's second, and equally important focus must be the individual. This focus is, as he emphasizes, a necessary precondition for the socially important *varietas* (variety) of the city. In the beginning of the fourth of his ten books, dedicated to the scrutiny of "works of a public nature", he writes:

> *It is obvious that buildings were made to serve man. [...] buildings were designed for life´s necessities, others offer themselves for practical requirements, while still others are for occasions of pleasure, [...].*
>
> *Yet, when we look around at the quantity and the variety of buildings, it is easy to understand that [...] the range of different works depends principally on*

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the variation within human nature. If we wish to give an accurate account of the various types of buildings (as was our intention) and of their constituent elements, our whole method of investigation must open and begin here, by considering human variety in greater detail; since buildings arose on man´s account, and for his needs they vary; so that they may be dealt with more clearly by distinguishing their individual characteristics.[2]

For Alberti, only if the individuality of human beings is taken as the starting point, can architecture fulfil its social role; and only then do we understand the task of architecture properly.[3] Good architecture and good cities care for both society and individual human beings; but the individual must come first. Alberti was inspired by the ideals of early modernity which celebrated the re-birth (Re-naissance) of individual accomplishment. It was a time when man became a self-aware individual as Jacob Burckhardt famously stated in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* in 1860—at the same time proposing Alberti as a true Renaissance-man (*uomo universale*).[4]

Alberti set the tone for subsequent thinkers up to the modern period. The 20th-century's concern about the role of architecture for society is like a distant echo of his thoughts, but in a lopsided way. Modernity often focuses too much on society. Equality becomes the prime value and for some the collective gains absolute priority over the individual. Not much has changed when we reflect on the digital revolution and other major transformations relating to architecture in the 21st century. Debates are largely dominated by ideas and texts of architectural modernity and its tradition that remains biased towards the collective over the individual. For Le Corbusier or Hannes Meyer[5] and other heroes of this tradition, the individual human plays a subordinate role, despite occasional contradictory utterances (for example in the *Athens Charter*).[6] To be sure, this is a somewhat simplified picture that forces at least three reservations: First, architectural modernity is not a homogenous movement. One can distinguish at least five strands of early architectural modernity at the beginning of the 20th century: constructivism, functionalism, rationalism and biomorphic and sculptural architecture.[7] And especially within biomorphic architecture we can find architects like Hugo Häring who take the biological functionings of the single human being as their starting point.[8] Despite this variety of approaches it seems fair to talk about architectural modernity in a more general sense to identify its predominant form (sometimes called "International Style" or "*Neues Bauen*"), promoted by Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer and Le Corbusier as dominant figures who sought to tie modernism to social change. Second: Since World War Two, additional varieties in the form of postmodernism or deconstructivism have

emerged. These movements can be defined as reactions to modernity. However, in retrospect, they did little to challenge its basic precepts. Third: Several outstanding modernist architects did place the single human being in the centre of their (mostly practical) efforts. Alvar Aalto, for example, stressed the importance of individual human beings (as Nicholas Ray has pointed out[9]). In his address to his old school, the *Jyvaskyla Lyceum*, Aalto says that in order to make a "cultural contribution" one needs an "unwillingness to 'move with the stream,'" that can ultimately be transformed into a "love with a critical sensibility […] It is a love that lasts, as it rests on a critically tested foundation. It can result in such a love for the little man that it functions as a kind of guardian when our era's mechanized lifestyle threatens to strangle the individual and the organically harmonious life."[10] Ralph Erskine and Aldo van Eyck embody other prominent examples who consciously aimed to balance concern for both society and the individual as Alberti demanded. But these architects are to be regarded as exceptions from the rule. Their works are explicitly judged as "humane architecture" in order to distinguish it from the mainstream,[11] which means that the latter is obviously seen as somehow less humane and—again—one reason for this is that in general social considerations are regarded as more important than "considering human variety in greater detail."

Thus, we can grant the architecture of modernity is more complex than our initial remarks might have suggested while continuing to assert a dominant discourse biased in favour of the social. There are at least three reasons for this bias. First of all architectural modernity continues to derive much of its impetus as a political project that aims at improving the structure of modern societies by architectural means.[12] Industrialization had brought about modern mass societies, migration to the cities, and diverse social problems of all sorts; and

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there was an increasing need to respond to them–socialism, incorporated in architectural modernity, became the most prominent attempt to do so. This impetus continues today in architecture's insistence that it be part of the solution to global warming and to homelessness.

Secondly, the dominant architects of the modernist socialism subscribed to the idea that the individual s a product of society and not *vice versa*. The individual's reality is an "ensemble of social relations," as Marx famously remarks. As a consequence, architectural modernism understood itself as part of the project to create a better human being, via creating a better architecture for a new society without, for example, unjust privileges. This orientation also explains why equality became the dominant aesthetic guideline for this project. Equality, however, can often be mistaken for sameness, and an architecture exclusively guided by this idea tends to create over-homogenous environments.

Finally, the focus on improving society and the collective is a trademark of the 20th century, not only in architecture but also across post-war intellectual life. Most humanities, but philosophy in particular, have replaced the "paradigm of the epistemic subject" (that dominated 18th and 19th century philosophy) by the new "paradigm of inter-subjectivity," as Karl-Otto Apel famously calls it.[13] Language is the grand topic of the early 20th century, the age of the linguistic turn; and since language is, by its very nature, a social not individual reality, the turn pushes philosophical reflection towards society. Wittgenstein's "form of life", Habermas' "discursive community," or even Heidegger's critique of the modern subject are prime examples of the new paradigm. Inspired by Nietzsche and Heidegger, Foucault has even claimed that there is no such thing as the human being: "As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. […] one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."[14]

Alternative approaches that emphasize the individual human had a short life in the 20th century. Most notably, the so-called Philosophical Anthropology, a school of thought between 1920 and 1960, did not have a lasting influence. Its main representatives, Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen, Helmuth Plessner, Ernst Cassirer, and Hans Jonas (the two latter being both members of the tradition in a wider sense), tried to conceptualize what it means to be an individual, yet also a group-oriented social being, in an age of modern science. This movement was never given much attention by Anglo-Saxon philosophy and stopped rather abruptly on the continent when people like Jonas and Cassirer had to emigrate and then philosophers

and sociologists of the Frankfurt School began to dominate the philosophical discourse. In a famous paper from 1958, Habermas tellingly argued that Philosophical Anthropology should be entirely *replaced* by sociology because there is no relevant notion of the individual outside society–and it took him decades to moderate his conviction.[15]

And this still seems where architectural theory stands today. We find plenty of debate on formal questions, but when it comes to what architecture is about (or what building is for), most discussions focus on society. The topics of the *Venice Biennale for Architecture* over the last 20 years provide ample evidence: Except for the "Fundamentals" exhibition in 2014 (Rem Koolhaas) and partly the exhibitions "Out there: Architecture Beyond Building" (Aaron Betsky 2008) and "Next" (Deyan Sudjic 2002), all of the biennales dealt with either societal or formal problems: "Reporting from the Front" (Alejandro Aravena 2016), "Common Ground" (David Chipperfield 2012), "People Meet in Architecture" (Kazujo Sejima 2010), "Cities, Architecture and Society" (Richard Burdett 2006), "Metamorph" (Kurt W. Forster 2004), and "Less Aesthetics more Ethics" (Massimiliano Fuksas 2000).

FIGURE 1: VENUE OF THE 3RD INTERNATIONAL ISPA-CONFERENCE 'THE HUMAN IN ARCHITECTURE AND PHILOSOPHY'. BAMBERG: VILLA CONCORDIA

And so Alberti's second criterion for good architecture and good cities, a focus on the well-being of the individual, is still unjustly neglected. A research field that would continue the tradition of Philosophical Anthropology and apply it to architecture simply does not exist.[16]

Do we need any such endeavour? We believe that it is as much required for any profound philosophy of architecture as for architectural

theory. Alberti can still remind us why architectural sociology, or a philosophy of architecture that focuses on society while neglecting the individual will always be insufficient. On a theoretical level, the relationship between the individual and society seems much more complex than much 20th century sociology and philosophy has assumed. Evolutionary and developmental psychology, amongst others, have shown that there are innate individual human needs, desires, and tendencies that have some correspondence in society, but are not simply their product. If architecture wants to respond adequately to this complex interactive relationship between society and the individual, it will have to develop more individualistic and flexible theories than mainstream modernism has been able to supply. Environmental psychology has shown that our relationship with buildings is both personal and individual. That is why a traditional sociological theory of architecture will not do. The problem is sharpened by the two conflicting tendencies that characterize our globalized world: one tendency towards multi-culturalism and the other towards an atomistic, uniform consumerism. Both tendencies dissolve traditional, more homogenous societies. They demand new architectural strategies of community-building and of guarding people against an overwhelming standardisation and enforced conformism. All of that speaks for an important role of architectural philosophy: it should pave the theoretical way for a more balanced view by adding a practical focus on the individual and the possibilities of creating space for all her needs and desires, thus for the good life within a community. This new research field might be called *Philosophical Architectural Anthropology*.

There is already a research-field called "Architectural Anthropology" in the Anglo-Saxon world, but as yet, it is more a sociological or ethnological endeavour than a philosophical. What we need is an investigation that is at least supplemented by philosophical considerations. This is something that is also argued for from within the already existing field of Architectural Anthropology:

> *The anthropology adjectivized as architectural should be a critical, ethical anthropology that keeps asking fundamental, philosophical questions about what being human and communicating through culture mean and what is best for humans in terms of what is habitable. Therefore, anthropology should add to interdisciplinary roots and evolutionary interests—characteristics that accompanied its birth a century ago—an ethical dimension that will provide a new set of questions to evaluate the huge ethnographical and archaeological corpus of information on the diverse human habitats created over the years.*[17]

A first step towards a Philosophical Architectural Anthropology was

made at the 3rd International Conference of the *International Society for the Philosophy of Architecture* from July 19th to 23rd 2016 at Bamberg University, Germany, with the topic "The Human in Architecture and Philosophy." Some papers have already been published in 2018 in a special issue of *ArchitecturePhilosophy* (APJ, vol. 3 No.1/2017); this is the second selection of papers that come out of the conference.

We open with Gerald Adler's "Architecture is Concealed Unto Itself: Helmuth Plessner and his Influence on Twentieth-Century Architecture." Adler presents the architectural implications of German philosopher Helmuth Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Plessner (1892-1985) saw the human being as characterised by an "ex-centric positionality," because humans, unlike animals, are able to self-distance, to be "out of their centre." Having simultaneously different perspectives on oneself constitutes the *conditio humana*, according to Plessner. He specified this ex-centric positionality in the form of three anthropological laws that are also in the centre of Gerald Adler's analysis: The law of *natural artificiality*, the law of *mediated immediacy* (or *immanence and expressivity*, the law that is most interesting for the philosophy of architecture,) and the law of *nothingness and transcendence*, which "drives man to engage in culture, it awakens needs that can only be satisfied through a system of artificial objects."[18] Buildings are obvious examples of such objects, produced within each society's architectural culture. Adler's assessment of the importance of Plessner's thought for architecture not only introduces a much-neglected twentieth-century philosopher to an English-speaking audience, but also provides reflections that lie at the very heart of what we call a Philosophical Architectural Anthropology.

"THIS NEW RESEARCH FIELD MIGHT BE CALLED *PHILOSOPHICAL ARCHITECTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY*"

Following Adler, we continue our focus on the individual, this time, however, on the individual

creator with Aleksandar Kostić's "Aporia in Architectural Design." An aporia, the experience of irresolvable internal contradictions, emerges when a designer, presented with apparently contradictory requirements, is unsure how to proceed further with her design, and finds that striking out in a new direction is necessary to overcome her perplexity. Thus, an initial source of a designer's dismay becomes both the occasion and demand for creative problem-solving. But, the resolution of this kind of puzzlement in architecture can only arise if the designer understands the conundrum and is fully engaged with the aporia. To explain the creative potential of aporiai, Kostić draws on the accounts that Plato and Aristotle give us in their works before moving into a detailed account of a classic aporia in architecture where the Ionic order must turn a corner. He then generalizes from this example to suggest that "aporia has intrinsic value for design and therefore that it should somehow be present in the more abstract subject matter of design itself."[19]

Graham Owen's paper, "The Anthropology of a Smoke-filled Room: Ethnography and the Human at OMA," moves us decisively back to a contemporary situation by employing the conceptual tools of Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory and the participant-observation work of Albena Yaneva to dissect the labour practices and ensuing working conditions of the celebrated Dutch architectural office. The article contrasts the relative absence of discussion of issues of labour and working conditions in other studies of OMA with their prominence in recent work by observers of architectural education and by activist academics such as Peggy Deamer, Paolo Tombesi and Mabel Wilson. A clearly ethical concern with the well-being of individuals underlies this discussion, not of architectural objects, but of potentially abusive processes which give rise to architectural objects.

The last two papers derive from keynotes from the 3rd international ISPA-conference by two great figures in the philosophy of architecture who, not at all coincidentally, happen to be two champions of the human individual in architecture. They have consciously kept their oral style.

In his reflections on "*Ut Architectura Philosophia?* Questioning the Relationship of Architecture and Philosophy", Karsten Harries considers the mutual inspiration of philosophy and architecture, their relationship and their mutual contributions to one another. To look at philosophy's contribution to architecture more closely, Harries begins by asking what it means that architecture should build for humans. By reference to observations by Vitruvius, Hegel, and Le Corbusier, Harries argues that "the requirements of human dwelling resist their reduction to the need

for physical shelter or functional frames for certain activities. Not only the body, the spirit, too, needs shelter, shelter especially from the terror of time." He then considers how architecture might influence philosophy. Harries looks at Heidegger, his important source of inspiration, and focusses on the need of humans to dwell and find a place—physically but also self-reflectively, thus philosophically. In his *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1997), a classic of the Heidegger-based phenomenological tradition of the philosophy of architecture, Harries had argued for the power of buildings to interpret the most fundamental truths of human existence, and to give humans a place and thus ethical orientation. Does that assertion still hold or is our modern society un-representable by architecture? Harries renews his earlier position powerfully by focussing on the challenges of modernity that seem to refuse a dwelling-place. Consequently, our world is most adequately represented by the decorated shed (a term popularized by Robert Venturi), a functional building with a superficial aesthetic addition. This shed becomes a "potent figure for the spiritual situation of this age, which tends covers up the spiritual poverty that is the price of our objectification of reality, with an often borrowed aesthetic veneer." But we are in need of more, he argues. Humans still have to find a meaningful place. To what extent architecture, or even reason-based philosophy, might still be able to provide the much needed orientation, must remain somewhat open.

While Karsten Harries is a founding father of contemporary phenomenological philosophy of architecture, Roger Scruton's *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (1979) plays the same role for the entire analytic tradition of philosophy of architecture. The title of his keynote from the Bamberg-conference, "Aesthetic Education and Design," indicates his central contribution to a philosophical architectural

anthropology: We need a fundamental architectural education, Scruton argues, "in which pattern, composition, and the idea of fit are given a proper place, and in which function and utility are regarded as the consequences of beauty and not prior requirements that must be independently fulfilled." Only such an education can work as an "antidote" to the kind of "depersonalised madness that had possessed the schools of architecture and town planning in the wake of the Second World War." Its desire has been and still is, he critiques, a "total solution" and thus a "total control in manifestoes and projects that involve destroying whole settlements and cities." Since this madness is inhuman, to fight it via education (and in keynotes) becomes a moral obligation. The new education must "transmit a culture that embodies shared conceptions of life and discovered solutions to life's problems, including the principal problem, which is how to live at peace with one's neighbours and competitors, even when you dislike them."

Given Scruton's well-known public engagement for re-establishing beauty in the public space, it comes to no surprise that his keynote turned into *philosophie engagé*, a passionate *Philippica* for a new education and for beauty as a primary goal in architectural design. And since few escape the vigour of his pen and voice, his keynote obviously provoked critical responses at the Bamberg-conference. This provides an excellent basis for a debate about his theses. In a future issue of *Architecture Philosophy* we would like to present several responses to Scruton's plea for changes to architectural education and his attack on the apparent failure of most architectural modernism. We hope in this way to further a stated goal of the journal to provide a forum for ongoing discussions and continue these exchanges in subsequent issues.

Next to contemplation, engaged argumentation, debates and disagreement are the elixir of philosophical life. According to Thomas Kuhn, strong debates and heavy disagreements can also mark the crisis of an existing paradigm and the search for a new one. It seems fair to argue that architecture is currently in a crisis and struggling about what sort of answer it can provide in the modern world shaken by environmental, societal and political crisis, in which the over-challenged, homeless individual still has to find his or her place to dwell. And this place must be built. We hope that a flourishing *Philosophical Architectural Anthropology* will contribute to it being a good one.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building. In Ten Books*, translated by Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, Mass, London: MIT Press, 1988 [1452]) Prologue, 3.

[2] Ibid., book IV, Chap. 1, p.92.

[3] Hanno-Walter Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory. From Vitruvius to the Present.* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press., 1994), 49.

[4] See: Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Modern Library, 2002 [1860]).

[5] The writings of the former Bauhaus director (1928-1930) Hannes Meyer are probably the most striking example for the ideas mentioned. In his essay "Die neue Welt" from 1926 he states for example as follows: „Die Gemeinschaft beherrscht das Einzelwesen. […] Das sicherste Kennzeichen wahrer Gemeinschaft ist die Befriedigung gleicher Bedürfnisse mit gleichen Mitteln. Das Ergebnis solcher Kollektivforderung ist das Standardprodukt." Hannes Meyer, „Die Neue Welt" in: *Das Werk* 13 (7, 1926), 205. Online: http://www.cloud-cuckoo.net/openarchive/Autoren/Meyer/Meyer1926.htm.

[6] See especially the §87 of the Athens Charter of the CIAM. Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter* (New York: Grossman Publishers 1973), 101.

[7] See: Jürgen Pahl, *Architekturtheorie des 20. Jahrhunderts* (München, London, New York: Prestel, 1999), 54.

[8] See Peter Blundell-Jones, *Hugo Häring. The organic versus the geometric* (Stuttgart: Ed. Axel Menges, 1999).

[9] Nicholas Ray, *Aalto* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[10] Quoted in Göran Schildt, ed.: *Alvar Aalto in his Own Words* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1998).

[11] See: Mats Egelius ed., Ralph Erskine: *the Humane Architect. AD - Architectural Design* Vol 47 (11-12, AD Profile 9. London, Architectural Design, 1977). See also: Winfried Nerdinger, ed.: *Alvar Aalto. Toward a Human Modernism* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 1999)

[12] Le Corbusier concludes his seminal book *Toward an Architecture* from 1923 with considerations about architecture as the key to solve societal problems: "C'est une question de bâtiment qui est à la clé de l'équilibre rompu aujourd'hui : architecture ou révolution." Le Corbusier, *Vers une Architecture* (Collection de "L'Esprit Nouveau". Paris: Éditions Crès, 1923)

[13] See: Otto Apel, "Die Kommunikationsgemeinschaft als transzendentale Voraussetzung der Sozialwissenschaften," in *Transformation der Philosophie*, (vol. 2, 1972), 220–263.

[14] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* (London Routledge, 2006), 442.

[15] Jürgen Habermas, "philosophische Anthropologie" in Alwin Diemer und Ivo Frenzel, ed., *Fischer Lexikon Philosophie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1958), 18–35.

[16] There is social or cultural anthropology of architecture, but these sciences dwell upon different issues and mostly place, again, society in the centre.

[17] Mari-Jose Amerlinck, "The Meaning and Scope of Architectural Anthropology," in Mari-Jose Amerlinck, ed., *Architectural Anthropology* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001), 1–26.

[18] Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1928), reprinted 1975 (Berlin: de Gruyter), Sammlung Göschen 2200.

[19] The quote is taken from Aleksandar Kostić's paper in this volume.