

The Meaning of Dwelling, and the Experience of Space

M.Ghassan-Alemam¹ and Asst. Prof. Dr. Çağda Özbaki²

^{1,2}Altinbas University, Turkey

Abstract— Ever since the beginning of history, humans have always attempted to personalize the spaces they occupied and transfer them into places that can fulfil their needs (both physically and/or psychologically). They have always used, during this process of personalizing, symbols, mostly art-based, as initials to these spots in order to establish a connection between them and the spirit of these spaces. The aim of this paper is to discuss a critical topic which is how users or inhabitants can sense a connection (not only material but also psychological) with the space they occupy, and how they can define this space as a private, public or even semi-public place. This psychological connection will be explored in this paper by understanding the characteristics of a place, as well as the types of space from an inhabitant point of view, and from an architectural perspective. The understanding of the relationship between an inhabitant and the spirit of a space will fill a large gap that exists in our current era between architects and inhabitants. It is noteworthy that the findings of this paper are centred on the understanding of space and the impact of defined places on humans' psychology, and most crucially, the importance of dwelling as a process.

Keywords— Genius-Loci, dwelling, definition of a place, experience of space.

INTRODUCTION

Diving into the concept of experience of space requires providing an academic architectural understanding of space as a point of departure. As Nikolaus Pevsner states in his book, *An Outline of European Architecture*: “the history of architecture is primarily a history of man shaping space”. Architecture is not about filling a space with a building or/and furnishing elements, but rather defining a space using these elements. When space is defined, a place is created, and nothing in history could happen without “taking place”.

Moreover, place is security and space is freedom. And in order for human beings to create a place, a connection between them and the space, they are trying to occupy, needs to be established. This connection is the key for inhabitants to be able to dwell with their shelters, in other words, to dwell in a place is to touch its spirit. As a matter of fact, all living creatures need to feel the spirit of their places, and when we say living creatures, we are not only referring to human beings and animals, however, even single-celled organisms like bacteria for instance need to construct shells for themselves that suit the environment they live in. Over and above that, and to be more precise, advanced animals, like weaver birds, for instance, build their own pear-shaped shelters and nests that suit their everyday life activities. Another example could be termites, which prefer to live in high nests that soar like skyscrapers rather than living in nature, these relatively “artificial” skyscrapers are mostly built using materials like clay or chewed wood glued by their saliva. Thus, the variation in building

techniques among living creatures emphasizes the need to build a shelter in which these creatures can both live and dwell. Furthermore, intelligent creatures, like human beings, intend to use symbols to personalise their places, and progressively, these symbols begin to harmonize within the places they exist, creating a whole new identity for this place in which only its inhabitant can feel.

SPACE AND PLACE

“Habit,” Yi-fu-Tuan says, “dulls the mind so that a man builds with little more awareness of choice than does an animal that constructs instinctively”. Having said that animals and single-celled organisms construct and dwell with their place, the best case to exemplify this point is human beings. In fact, Neanderthals, an extinct species or subspecies of archaic humans who lived in Eurasia until about 40,000 years ago, and are known nowadays as cavemen, are one of the most interesting examples of that, as the first discovered pre-historic cave painting was referred to them in the Andalusian cave of Ardales. The paintings can be understood as some ladder-like lines or as some hand stencils, still, unfortunately, we lack the evidence for clear answers about the story behind these paintings, since even archaeologists could not exactly tell what a Neanderthal man was trying to express. The significance of the painting, however, is not to know that Neanderthals could paint, it's the fact that they were engaging in symbolism that matters. And regardless of the meaning of the paintings, one can easily tell that the Neanderthals' goal of the paintings was not to decorate or to make an artwork, but to

personalize their cave. A Neanderthal man must have felt the need to dwell with his cave in such a way that only he was able to understand, and he could not find a better way than applying clay or ochre to his own hands and end up painting across his shelter.

Despite the 40,000 years difference between a modern human and a Neanderthal human-like, this vital need to harmonize with the place is still pretty much the same. We as modern humans try to dwell with our places in diverse ways. And by place here, we do not only mean shelters or houses, even a working desk is a personal place compared to the wide space of the house. Placing a small picture of our family members on our working desks is a process of dwelling for instance. Painting our personal bedroom with our favourite colour or applying our most preferable wallpaper is a similar way of customizing our private places to the one used by the Neanderthals.

At this point, we might be wondering how inhabitants can dwell in a place that is not built by them? In fact, not hollowing-out caves anymore or living in traditional huts could be, in one way or another, the reason why what seems to be a greater awareness of space and built forms in a traditional rather than in a modern community, in which architects are hired based on their experience or how fancy their previous designs are. However, the job for an architect is to understand space and define it as a place, consequently, inhabitants dwell in this place and become a whole with it.

SPACE AND DWELLING

Space could have different meanings and definitions. For example, space could be explicitly defined as a geometrical unit that can be measured (like area or volume), and linguistically, the German word for space is “raum” which is the origin of word room that can be a synonym to space (in the English language). Notwithstanding, the space we are trying to understand here is the whole that includes both solid and void, the space in which we move, memorize, or even imagine. In his masterpiece, *The Book of Tea*, Okakura Kakuzo highlights the reality of a room which, according to him “was to be found in the vacant space enclosed by the roof and walls, not in the roof and walls themselves. In just the same way, the usefulness of a water pitcher dwelt in the emptiness where the water might be put, not in the form of the pitcher or the material out of which it was made”.

Leland. M. Roth, in his *Understanding architecture: its elements, history, and meaning*, divides space into four distinct types, the first of which is, physical space that can be imagined as a volume of air contained in between walls, floor, and a ceiling (like an empty room). The second type is perceptual space which is the space that can be felt using our five senses by touching or perceiving, this space can extend far beyond the walls that physically limit this space, windows play a significant role in this type. Conceptual space is the third type, which could be described as the mental map or the memory that is stored in our heads, which allows us to move and navigate through a place. Finally, the last type is behavioural space, the space in which we move and act, the space where we circulate and interact with people and objects around us. Understanding these four types of space gives us an essential idea of the crucial role played by architects (and even city planners) in shaping and influencing our daily lives, it contributes to the realization of how complicated it is to build a place (whether it is a large residential building, or a small bicycle shed). Indeed, we, humans, are capable of recognizing the difference between space and place, inside and outside, dark and light, public and private, even without architectural forms. This knowledge seems to be amorphous without the power of architecture. The kind of power that allows us to enhance the relationship between our senses and the spirit of the space. Regrettably, dealing with space as a void that needs to be filled anyhow ends up with a place that looks about good or fancy, but that is not what we, humans, merely look for in a place. A place is more than an abstract location, a place is a phenomenon, it is a concrete term of environment. The aim of a building should not be solely pleasing the eyes, as mentioned before, a human being needs to dwell in his/her space and feel the spirit of space and become a whole with it, this need is pretty much similar to the rest of our natural needs that we have in common with animals as well as the rest of living creatures. dwelling happens when all the sensations, memories, and behaviours of the inhabitants are coherent with their place, in other words, and as Martin Heidegger states, “the way in which you are and I am, the way in which we humans are on earth, is dwelling”.

Dwelling is not only about eating, sleeping, and working in a shelter. It is, also, about thinking, dreaming, and even daydreaming in a space that protects the dreamer and allows one to dream in peace.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bachelard, G. (1958). *The Poetics of Space* (1st ed). Beacon Press Books.
- [2] Heidegger, M. (1971). *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1st ed). New York: Harper & Row.
- [3] Kakuzo, O. (1906). *The Book of Tea Classic Edition*. G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS London and New York.
- [4] Little, B. (2021, December 13). *What Prehistoric Cave Paintings Reveal About Early Human Life?*
- [5] Norberg-Schulz, C. (1979). *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. Rizzoli.
- [6] Pevsner, N. (1943). *An Out Line of European Architecture*. London: J. Murray.
- [7] Pike, A. W. G. (2018). Neandertal cave art. *Science*. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aap7778>
- [8] Roth, L. (1993). *Understanding Architecture: Its Elements, History, And Meaning*. Westview Press.
- [9] Tuan, Y. (1977). *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press.

