

excerpts from the architectural theoretical essay:

# **IN-BETWEEN SILENCE & LIGHT: DWELLING ON SHADOWS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

I struggle to put to words even the title of this essay. It may come across as poetic, vague, murky, ephemeral. If that is in fact true, maybe I am closer to the essence than I thought.

Architecture is the realm in which the human condition can dream, imagine, create, and make. However, the modern human experience seems to replace dreams, desires and creativity with hyper realities of image and superficial commodity. It is important to first acknowledge these severe disconnects from the human spirit and then seek an honest path toward celebrating the human condition. Evolving forward or progressing rapidly toward the future is not always beneficial to the human condition. As in the Eastern philosophy of 'wabi-sabi,' it might serve humanity in a deeper more [spiritually] conscious way to 'devolve toward nothingness.'

An in-depth look into the phenomenological realms of Silence, Light and Shadow start to prepare a metaphysical foundation in which the human experience can begin to find its [re] connection back to the natural earth as well as its universal [re]connection to space and time. Universal laws of nature as well as phenomenological thought have shaped the human experience since 'Volume Zero', Louis Kahn's definition of the existential history of man that has not been written. The beginnings of time and the human experience have existed yet have an unwritten history that we can only imagine.

An ontological look into the realm of tectonic manifestation offers a dualistic approach to the actual making of our spatial and built environment. The understanding of dwelling as the tectonic manor in which humans exist on the earth provides the means for making. Furthermore, the understanding of tectonic expression and the essential use of the fertile detail, that is to say the joint, being the generator of physical architectonic manifestation, is what gives the human condition its true and honest Architecture.

This theoretical essay hopes to [de]accelerate the modern human being down from the hyper-chaos of contemporary superficial image-based commodity and consumerism; and allow the human being to dwell on existential and phenomenological [self] awareness as well as our [spiritual] journey in the human condition.

## **HYPER-SOCIETY**

Not all buildings are Architecture. Architecture allows us to confront questions of human existence within space and time; it is deeply engaged in the metaphysical question of the human [self] and physical world. However, the [in]humanity of contemporary architecture and of modern society is a consequence of negligence toward the human body and the senses, replaced by experiences of alienation and detachment in the technologically chaotic hyper-world of today.

Architecture today has turned into a visual commodity; a scenography devoid of the authenticity of matter and construction. Carlo Scarpa criticized against confusing architecture with its image or any kind of scenography.<sup>5</sup> As Louis Kahn lamented, 'There is no longer a sense of the humanness of the human body, nor a sense of place in such a humanness.'<sup>6</sup> Instead of an existentially spatial experience, contemporary architecture has pursued a psychological agenda of advertising and instant persuasion. Buildings have turned into image products completely detached from existential depth and honesty.<sup>7</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa expresses a deep phenomenological insight into the bias of vision and the suppression of the other senses, and the consequent disappearance of the sensory and the sensual qualities from architecture. 'Architecture must address all the senses simultaneously and fuse our image of [self] with our experience of the world.'<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger also expressed his concerns with the culture of modernity's ocular-centric approach in our age of the fabricated, mass-produced and manipulated image when he stated - 'The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture.'<sup>12</sup> Modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination, and dreams, homeless.<sup>13</sup> The rejection of the contemporary ocular-centric and chaotic hyper-city as commodity that is our modern built world relies on the concept of Phenomenology; which is a critic against the modern technological machine age. Central to this human existential concept is the hermeneutic theory of truth, which views the human condition from multiple standpoints and perspectives; as David Levin states - ' it is multiple, pluralistic, democratic, contextual, inclusionary, horizontal and empathetic.'<sup>22</sup>

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**The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress.**

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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## **SILENCE**

It is in that ethereal space between Silence and Light that the unmeasurable can move into the measurable. This moment begins with an intuition, a 'realization' in the realm of Silence; it is not simply a metaphor for the absence of sound. Philosophically, silence is the unmeasurable; it [inspiration] is already present in our consciousness, and as Kahn stated - 'Silence is not very quiet. It is something which you may say is light-less, dark-less [...] a desire to be, to express.'<sup>35</sup> As with the words 'Light' and 'Shadow', the word 'Silence' has a metaphysical [spirit] that transcends its literal language definition. It is important that the essence of these words express our physical descriptions of space as well as the metaphysical qualities and atmospheres of those spaces. It is equally important to express the notion of what these ethereal qualities and manifestations accomplish in the existential human condition.

Silence is the vast emptiness of potential and desire; an endless space. As architecture domesticates limitless space, and allows us to inhabit it. This relationship between Silence and 'architectonic space' is powerful and crucial to the human condition. Daan Koch summarizes it best - 'Silence is the quiet calmness in which the tectonic form can reveal itself.'<sup>39</sup> The quality of Silence is not about a void or absence of sound; it is about the

mental and [spiritual] space in-between thoughts, surroundings, and nature. These are intended to flow through the space in-between, what the Japanese call 'Ma', within the absolute of that exact moment, yet capable of transcending cosmic space and time. Additionally, the Japanese concept of 'Mu' - the ever so difficult concept of the quality of nothingness [emptiness], also dwells in the realm of metaphysical Silence.

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**What man makes, nature cannot make, though man uses all the laws of nature to make it. What guides it to be made, the desire to make it, is not universal in nature. Dare I say that it is Silence, of lightless, of darkless, desire to be, to express a prevalence of spirit enveloping the Universe.**

Louis Kahn

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## LIGHT

As with the notion of Silence,<sup>43</sup> Louis Kahn forms the philosophical foundation of the metaphysical essence of Light. Light is the measurable; that which is. It is the giver of all presence, by will, by law [nature]; it is the measure of things already made. Material, is spent Light.<sup>44</sup>

Even in the scientific world of data and logic, scientists have proven how the particles of Light [materialistically] can manifest itself into matter. In physics, scientists are able to slow down light. As light slows, and even comes to a stop, it gathers mass. Furthermore, they discovered that this change [alters] space and time!<sup>45</sup> How fascinating when Louis Kahn's words from decades past refer to this scientific realization through metaphysical [spiritual] and poetic intuition - 'Light is the source of all being; a pure being, as yet without material. Material begins where light stops; light condenses to form the material world. Structure is the giver of Light. Light is the revealer of Architecture.'<sup>46</sup>

Jun'ichiro Tanizaki gives many wonderful examples of the metaphysical quality that [natural] light plays in our human condition. He is not speaking of Light in a literal or physical expression, but rather as a metaphysical revealer of material things that humans make or experience.

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**All materials in nature, the mountains and the streams and the air and we, are made of Light which has been spent, and this crumpled mass called material casts a shadow, and the shadow belongs to Light.**

Louis Kahn

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## SHADOW

After an in-depth approach to the metaphysical duality surrounding the realms of Silence and Light, we are left with the deepest sense of existential thought in the realm of Shadow. As with Silence and Light, we can not simply dwell on its literal definition; however, its power lies in the space-between the realm of Shadow. As Kahn so poetically describes -

'Architecture has existence; its existence, echoing Silence, gives the sun [Light] its Shadow.'<sup>52</sup> This 'Treasury of Shadow' is the architecture which exists at the [threshold] between Silence and Light. It is at this threshold where human dreams, imagination, inspiration and desire dwell. Pallasmaa dwells on the significance of the shadow through the senses of the human body. He points out that sight [vision] is the sense of distance and separation, whereas touch senses nearness, intimacy and affection. During very emotional experiences, we tend to close our eyes when dreaming, listening to music, or in the intimate embrace of loved ones. He elaborates - 'Deep shadows and darkness are essential, because they dim the sharpness of vision, make depth and distance ambiguous, and invite unconscious peripheral vision and tactile fantasy.'<sup>53</sup>

The master of Shadow, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, guides us on a metaphysical journey of the senses with his ethereal and haptic descriptions of the quality of the shadow. While Kahn uses the shadow as the [threshold] of manifested material form in the space between, Tanizaki uses shadow to build an atmosphere that also manifests itself into the built world of the existential human experience. It is in this world of shadows, the atmosphere of utter silence and repose, that finds its beauty not in the thing [material] itself, but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one [material] against another creates.

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**Between the idea and the reality  
Between the motion and the Act  
Falls the Shadow**

T.S. Elliot

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## **[ARCHI]TECTONICS**

As important as ontological meaning is to the idea of the built environment, it is equally important [as architects] to understand the tectonic quality of materials used, how spaces are made, and how it integrates into nature. However, we do not have to throw away metaphysical understanding about materials or the human built environment, as Kenneth Frampton said - 'Tectonics is defined as the poetics of construction.'<sup>69</sup>

Etymologically, the word 'tectonic' derives from the term 'tekton' [Greek] signifying a carpenter or builder. Its roots go back even further to the term 'taksan' [Sanskrit] referring to the craft of carpentry. In a physical sense, building is really tectonic dwelling; and as Martin Heidegger states: 'but only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.'<sup>71</sup> Dwelling is the 'tectonic' manor in which human beings exist on the earth. This is not so much a play on words as it is a metaphysical duality to our human existence. An architect may be unable to control completely the conditions of structure and construction, for example, but as Sekler stated: 'he [architect] is the undisputed master of tectonic expression.'<sup>74</sup>

Architectural theoretician and critic Kenneth Frampton argues that our built environment is produced in an interplay of three aspects - topos [place]; typos [building type]; and the tectonic. According to Frampton, the full tectonic potential in every building comes from its

capacity to articulate both the poetic and the cognitive aspects of its substance [material]; between the representational and the ontological aspects of tectonic form.<sup>77</sup>

This duality is metaphorically described in the notion of the brick. Referring to Kahn when he described his phenomenological conversation with the brick - 'You say to brick, "What do you want, brick?" Brick says to you, "I like an arch." If you say to brick, "Arches are expensive, and I can use a concrete lintel over an opening. What do you think of that, brick?" Brick says, "I like an arch."<sup>78</sup>

Architect and theorist Marco Frascari gives one of the most specific and eloquent understandings of this metaphysical and physical duality in the 'tectonic detail.' As he states - 'In any architectural element, the detail is always a Joint.'<sup>79</sup> The 'joint' is the original detail, both formally and materialistically; 'the detail tells the tale.'<sup>80</sup> Details are not merely subordinate elements; they can be considered the minimal units of signification in the 'architectonic' producing of meanings. This exercise in detailing in the Italian language translates to 'Particolareggiamento,' - it derives from the singling out of parts [elements] to reach a presentation and an understanding of a whole. Frascari describes this duality in the concept of mental 'construing' and physical 'constructing' in architecture as its primary procedure.<sup>82</sup>

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**The art of Architecture is the selection of appropriate details whose result is beauty.**

Leon Baptista Alberti

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## **CONCLUSION**

From the hyper-chaos of contemporary architecture to the [de]acceleration and conversation with a brick; the phenomenological realms of Silence, Light and Shadow offer an opportunity to bring humanity back to the sensuous and metaphysical qualities of architectonic materials and spatial expression.

Essential to the human condition, Architecture should provide a duality between the physical and the ontological aspects of tectonic form and the making of space. Furthermore, the human being must understand that Dwelling is the 'tectonic' manor in which human beings exist on the earth.

Through our human existential experience, our intuition and tacit knowledge allows us to dream, to imagine, and to express the beautiful essence and human craftsmanship of the space in-between [Shadow] - that is to say the ethereal vagueness that lies between desire and joy, between Silence and Light.