

Balancing Between Permanence and Impermanence: On Living and Building as Perpetually Reshaping Our Previous and Anticipated Homecomings

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1. Somewhere in space somehow in time

Building a house somewhere is related to living somewhere, in the sense that a house is related to a home. But the one does not coincide with the other. There is a creative tension between building and dwelling, between a house and a home.¹ This creative tension, in turn, has to do with space but also with time. To be more specific, it has to do with the conditions of being present somewhere (space) and it has to do with the conditions of being present somehow (time).

The next step in this chain of distinctions, then, would be to suggest that, on the one hand, the conditions of being present somewhere are more physical, material and objective, and therefore associated with permanence, because a house may last for ages whilst its inhabitants will not. On the other hand, the conditions of being in the present somehow are more psychological, mental and subjective, and therefore associated with impermanence, because to be present somehow is about moods and attitudes that change constantly or over time.

The conclusion, then, could be that there are two chains of meaning: on the one hand, building somewhere, a house, the material and objective conditions of being present somewhere in space, and permanence; on the other hand, living somewhere, a home, the mental and subjective conditions of being in the present somehow in time, and impermanence:

building somewhere	living somehow
house	home
material and objective conditions	mental and subjective conditions
presence in space	presence in time
permanence	impermanence

But are things as clear-cut as that? Is building a house about establishing permanence and living at home about embodying impermanence? The house at the Gedempte Zuiderdiep in Groningen (Netherlands) that has been worked on since 1997 suggests otherwise. In what respects? To find out more, the frameworks of the past, of the future and of the present will guide us.

2. Framework of the past

The framework of the past opens up a prehistoric window on the rather foggy early morning horizon of dawning differentiations that have yet to fully settle down as distinct categories in our minds. Where did dwelling somehow turn into building somewhere? Regarding the origins of architecture, I suggest that we

¹ Martin Heidegger, 'Bauen, Wohnen, Denken', in: idem, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Pfullingen: Neske, 1954, 145-5; Libert Vander Kerken, *Filosofie van het wonen*. Bilthoven: H. Nelissen, 1965; Jacques de Visscher en Raf de Saeger (red.), *Wonen: Architectuur in het denken van Martin Heidegger*. Nijmegen: SUN, 1991; Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home*. London/New York: Routledge, 2006.

distinguish between two initial forms of construction: enclosure and erection, related to house and monument, to protecting and marking respectively.²

If one goes by the movements of earlier populations, living somehow would have meant being present anywhere instead of somewhere specific, provided shelter can protect humans from the intrusions of nature. The primary form of constructing a home is likely to have been a protective *enclosure* of some sort, either around a fire place or in a cave or a tent, either constructed as a circular or as a rectangular structure. The enclosure implies a spatial orientation that combines the tension between centre and periphery with the tension between inner and outer, inclusion and exclusion, familiarity and strangeness, safety and danger, embeddedness and exposure.

The origins of architecture are definitely linked up with such constructions of an enclosure but this seems only half of the story. The origins of architecture must have included another primary form of construction: the *erection* of a pillar, tree or stone, in order to mark a special place in space and a special occasion in time.³ Again, this is about movements through space and time, but the movements here are ritual in nature: ritual creates the social setting for a spatial orientation that combines the tension between centre and periphery with the tension between special and common, precious and useful, sacred and profane.

enclosure		erection	
protecting		marking	
house		monument	
centre	periphery	centre	periphery
interior	exterior	close	far
inclusion	exclusion	precious	useful
familiarity	strangeness	special	common
safety	danger	ritual	practical
embeddedness	exposure	sacred	profane

The erection of plastic volumes is monumental in nature and aspires to permanence but it is not necessarily itself permanent in nature. The earliest temples in Hinduism (Vedic religion) were temporary structures to be burnt at the end of the ritual sequence.⁴ Japanese trees were brought down from the mountainous forest, dedicated and erected as sacred pillars within the context of a ritual performance, and later on their wooden temple structures were renewed, literally taken apart and rebuilt, in order to revitalize them, all thanks to the transformative but temporary power of a ritual performance to eternalize things, in this case not because of some inherent permanence in the

2 Cf. Bart Verschaffel, *Van Hermes en Hestia: Teksten over architectuur*. Gent: A&S/books, 2006, 83: "De twee basistypes van plaats zijn het monument en het huis."

3 G. J. Wightman, *Sacred Spaces. Religious Architecture in the Ancient World*. Leuven/Paris: Peeters, 2007, 903, on pillars.

4 Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, 38.

plastic volumes themselves.⁵ Nonetheless, whether by ritual means or by selecting lasting material such as monolithic stones, monumental architecture aspires to memorable permanence, to a permanence that mortal humans do not own themselves but in which they participate, to pre-established places within a socio-cosmic order into which their lives are destined to fit. Even if there is a clear awareness that there is a clash between culture and nature, the focus is on *embeddedness* into the natural order, on being *at home* in the wider world. In primal myths and rituals, cultural constructions have often been presented as violent infringements on nature or as a trickster's theft by a cultural hero of the gifts of nature and the gods to humankind.⁶ Yet, such a cultural breach or initial disturbance always seems unavoidable. Moreover, the transformation of parts of nature into culture is meant to regain its embeddedness in nature. Nature sets the permanent conditions for its cultural reshaping on a temporary basis, if one is to go by ancient rituals and myths. Both living at home somehow in an enclosure and erecting a monument somewhere are meant to be integrated into pre-given positions of permanence and into ideal patterns of renovation of the stabilizing past. The inhabitants of their homely houses are expected to adapt the habits of the ancestral habitat, in much the same way as the traveller in a Noh theatre play who visits a location that turns out to be the home of its local spirit and to become a shrine to the visitor.⁷ In both cases, that of the enclosure of a house and that of the erection of a monument, the inner world of subjective conditions is meant to be determined by the outer world of objective conditions. Permanence and the past are perceived to set the boundaries.

3. Framework of the future

The framework of the future opens up a postmodern window on the rapidly changing horizon of shifting perspectives. The movements and changing shapes of the passing clouds are perceived as part and parcel of the very fabric and reconfigurations of the building and its 'windowhood'. The design of the house is expected to integrate its futures without anticipating the blueprint of one specific future. Surely, Modernity had one particular future in mind, a project of progress, a road of renewal towards destiny constructed by destroying and removing the past. Postmodernity, however, has many futures in mind, and none in particular. Postmodern openness is imagined as the anticipation of endless possibilities to occur.

prehistory	postmodernity
eternal permanence	perpetual impermanence
one centre	many peripheries
clear and stable boundaries	blurred and shifting boundaries
located identities	virtual networks
solid volumes	total transparency

5 Mitsuo Inoue, *Space in Japanese Architecture*. Translated by Hiroshi Watanabe. New York/Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1985, 7-12; Fred Thompson, 'Japanese Mountain Deities', in: *The Architectural Review* 202 (October 1997), 78-83.

6 Barbara C. Sproul, *Primal Myths: Creating the World*. San Francisco/New York: Harper & Row, 1979; Robert S. Ellwood, 'A Japanese Mythic Trickster Figure: Susa-no-o', in: William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (eds.), *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1993, 141-158.

7 Arthur Waley, *The Nō Plays of Japan*. Rutland/Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1976.

one past	many futures
protective exclusion of the external world	destructive inclusion of the external world

How do contemporary architects try to shift from a sense of one past to a sense of many futures, from eternal permanence to perpetual impermanence, from one centre to many peripheries?

Modernity came up with a revolutionary solution: to enlarge the window to the point of creating entire walls of glass, total transparency, to pierce and demolish the boundaries between the interior and the exterior. The modern project was to break down old walls, to establish eye contact with the outer world of the horizon, and to allow the outside world to enter and renew the interior.⁸ What is it about the modern project that worries postmodern and other contemporary architects? Why might they hesitate to embrace a perpetual reshaping of past and present home-building in the name of the future? First of all, of course, postmodernists have many possible futures in mind, and they do not want to impose one particular blueprint of a single future. Secondly, the modern project allows the outside world to enter and renew the interior to the point of destroying everything, not just the past but also the sense of boundaries between the interior and the exterior, and the sense of links between places and identities. If everything is on the move and anything goes, nothing is safe anymore from destruction. And protection is exactly what 'home' is all about. If every visitor to the house were the imposing prophet of unlimited futures, no protective host would be able to only offer limited hospitality to a temporary guest. Faced with the intrusive claims of promising and threatening futures, no private sphere of intimacy would be left to allow the inhabitants to withdraw from the public sphere of constant exposure. There would be no recovery from the movements and changing shapes of the clouds.

How, then, do contemporary architects try to shift from eternal permanence to perpetual impermanence without destroying a sense of safety, intimacy, and identity? Where does 'building somewhere' turn into 'dwelling somehow'? How does the house of many possible futures turn into the home of many actual homecomings?

4. Framework of the present

In a digital publication in *archined* (March, 19th, 2007), entitled "(Ver)bouwen in de tijd" ["(Re)building in time"], Piet Vollaard describes and comments on the house at the *Gedempte Zuiderdiep* in Groningen and its building process. His succinct description and comment, in my reading of them, touch upon several strategies that try to cope with the problem of embracing perpetual impermanence and anticipation of future homecomings without destroying a sense of protection, intimacy, and identity.

One (post)modern strategy is to shift the source of stability and identity from the house and its positioning within a given order to the inhabitants and their changing needs: the inhabitants are described as "having gradually made the house an extension of themselves". The choice of words strikes me as the opposite of that used in 'the framework of the past'. The outer world of

⁸ Jürgen Joedicke, *Raum und Form in der Architektur: Über den behutsamen Umgang mit der Vergangenheit - Space and Form in Architecture: A Circumspect Approach to the Past*. Stuttgart: Karl Krämer Verlag, 1985.

objective conditions is now meant to be determined by the inner world of subjective conditions, as described in 'the framework of the future'. Perpetual impermanence and future needs are thus perceived to set the boundaries, instead of the other way round.

Postmodern architects may be fully satisfied with this strategy that celebrates personal choice and taste. But Volllaard seems apprehensive of something. Is it the fickle moodiness of the inhabitants and their constantly changing needs? He adds some crucial ingredients that may or may not be beyond Postmodernism but that are very much inherent to homeliness.

One such ingredient or strategy touched upon is the exercise of soft pressure, instead of imposing the violent order of premeditated construction. The use of force is to be eliminated from the design and building process. The tentative draft is to remain informal, a provisional arrangement, never to be turned into a final rearrangement. Every step is a move forward until decided otherwise, until proven a step too far, a step to be undone, revised. The window of possible futures is to be kept open permanently. But futures are allowed to enter only conditionally, only if their intrusive potential for destruction can be kept within limits, within the protective limits of constant feedback that elicits redrafts.

A related strategy is Volllaard's introduction of "a design and building process of trial and error that is characterized by patience and taking one's time", a strategy that does not just counter Modernity's speed and hastiness⁹ but also Postmodernity's evanescent casualness. In fact, he reintroduces a form of permanence in time: the continuity of reflection and focus over a prolonged period of time. Impermanence is balanced with reintroducing some degree of permanence.

Thirdly, the prolonged reflection and focus bring about something else that is no longer postmodern but very homely: a sense of dedication and commitment to the place. Modern and postmodern movement, that is to say, moving out, moving away from home, comes with a loss of embeddedness and rootedness but also with a loss of commitment to this very place that used to materialize one's identity and that remains irreplaceable.¹⁰ Having left, one's new house can only be imbued with some degree of homeliness if one is committed to devote time and mindful attention to it, and to identify with it over a longer period of time. Homes are not arbitrarily exchangeable and replaceable, on the contrary. It takes existential investment, slowly moving time, and ritual dedication on the part of the inhabitants and their bodily and mental presence in the house, to have the house transformed into a home with a soul, an animated place imbued with homely presence. There is no home as long as the intimacy of its inhabitants has not materialized and become the soul of the house. The inhabitants need to appropriate the house as their own.¹¹ It is not just the architects who have to construct and reconstruct the foundations and contours of homeliness. The inhabitants too, have to develop a constructive attitude of homeliness that attunes to and permeates the existing house.

A fourth strategy evoked is postmodern again: to emotionally consider the house an expression of the joy of creating and inhabiting a dwelling, instead of

9 Lourens Minnema, 'Readiness and Timing: The Early Modern Virtues of Hamlet's Providential Christianity', in: Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, Wessel Stoker (eds.), *Crossroad Discourses between Christianity and Culture*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2010, 255-271.

10 Verschaffel, *Van Hermes en Hestia*, 73-74.

11 Jacques de Visscher, 'Architectuur en zinnebeelden van het wonen', in: Jacques de Visscher, *Het Symbolische Verlangen: Over onze architectonische, erotisch-seksuele en godsdienstig-religieuze zinnebeelden*. Kampen: Klement / Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2002, 71-96.

cognitively trying to measure and judge a dwelling according to presumed ('objective') aesthetic or technical criteria.

In my opinion, these additional strategies illustrate that contemporary architecture does not automatically embrace Postmodernism unconditionally. On the contrary, the destructive potential for total exposure and unlimited flux in fruitful and futile futures alike is reduced. The house at the *Gedempte Diep* in Groningen has two exteriors. The outer one consists of walls of glass, the inner one constitutes a more or less solid box. My suggestion is that the outer one manifests the (post)modern preference for total transparency, and that the inner one is its next step in the design process, its much needed counterpart, balancing too much transparency, exposure, flux and impermanence with some degree of protection, intimacy, solid identity, and permanence, a much needed condition for contemporary homecomings.

5. Conclusion

In my understanding of the house at the *Gedempte Diep* and the comments it seems to evoke, the historical shift from eternal permanence to perpetual impermanence is balanced with the reintroduction of units of physical and mental forms of permanence. The physical forms of permanence are primarily what architects tend to contribute, the mental forms of permanence are primarily what the inhabitants tend to contribute. My conclusion, then, would be that it takes two arts instead of one, to neither destroy the past of the building and its inhabitants nor block their futures: the art of building a house somewhere, and the art of living at home somehow, and that the two arts are related. Both are about constantly attuning and balancing, balancing an imagined place with a material space, balancing impermanence with permanence. Nothing new, one might say? The initial creative tension between building and dwelling, between a house and a home, has multiplied.