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Presence and the Architectural Imperative

Does “presence” require noise or quietude? That seems to be at least part of the tension in the discussion. On the one hand, there is Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and the football stadium that he admires so much, and on the other hand, there is Peter Zumthor and his marvelous chapel. Is presence

a movement into the social or away from it? I would like to propose that the two are more similar than one thinks—that there is something about the idea of presence in both these situations that is in tension with ontology and that requires that ontology be placed in a particular condition in order for it to be presence. In other words, without the noise of a football stadium or the quiet of a chapel one cannot get “presence.” We might use the word experience, as that which is needed for presence-to-come-about, but that word is much too narrow and vague. In the proverbial everyday world presence is latent, but itself not present, or perhaps better stated, it is present—in the passive sense—but not activated. Presence requires activation—a stretching of ontology into the sensation of its consciousness.

It is not accidental, therefore, that the conversation centers on architecture, architecture not as a professional practice

or as a set of design protocols, but as a setting for presence, whether purposefully designed as such or not. But it also seems that architecture is more than just the setting. Is it not instrumentally tied to presence?

A Buddhist monk can, of course, sit under a tree, but many Buddhists will visit a stupa. As a structure, it is “present” as a piece of architecture in the environment, but unless it is activated by the circumambulation it is ineffective. The circumambulation by the devotees winds it up, like a hand-cranked motor. When one stops turning the crank, it slowly loses power. The same with the stupa. It is only when the monks circumambulate it, that its status changes for the devotee. The building, together with the mantras that are spoken, and the communality of shuffling feet all work together to produce the desired effect.

A similar but obviously different situation can be found in a Catholic church, where it is the altar at the west end that sets the stage for the activation of the space when the Eucharist is performed. The appearance of the spirit of the lord during that ceremony is the magical moment when what tastes and looks like wine is actually, though conceptually, the blood of Christ. Though the Buddhist monk can wind up the stupa as many times as he or she wants, and whenever and wherever he or she wants, the Eucharist requires a person who has the appropriate institutional background and preparation. Regardless, both require a specific set of architectures and beliefs. In both cases the excitement is in the movement—the activation as I call it—from present to presence and back to present.

Another example, the Altar of Heaven in Beijing. It is

a three-terraced circular structure about 450 feet in diameter. Once a year, the emperor used to stand on the top to communicate with the deities above. He had to ritually prepare himself prior to the event, on which the entire destiny of the kingdom rested. All of the million or so inhabitants of the city had to be completely silent, upon pain of death; the message to the deities could not be cluttered by unwanted chatter. The emperor stood not at the center of the disk, but just next to it, the center being in essence the sacred, though invisible, beam that connected heaven and earth. The emperor whispered his prayers into the beam for transmission upward. One can think of the structure like a great sound-cancelling speaker system scaled not to the dimensions of the living room, but to those of the universe. It took a high degree of precision to make sure the “power” for the altar was fully operational. Rituals, cleansings, incantations, and scared fires

connection to his or her ancestor is established. The paint may be visual to us, but for the islanders, it produces a specific smell that the ancestors will recognize as friendly. The islanders use other means, so to speak, to protect themselves from errors and to at least partially “control” the signifiers of smell. Smoke, it seems obscures the spirits’ capacity to smell, so when moving about outside of camp, which can be dangerous since one’s attachment to the ancestors is weakened, a group will always walk in a single file behind a man who carries a special torch that emits a rising trail of smoke. It is literally a smoke screen.

Smells are directly related to the three seasons. October to January is the period of the northeast winds. February to May is the period of no rains or winds, and June to September is the period of southwest winds and rains. The middle season is not technically a season, since the islanders

see this period as a man-made season that they themselves produce by scaring away the wind spirits by means of a set of rituals. In other words, they can make their presence un-presented. During this period they can gather honey and hunt pigs with little danger to themselves, since there is no wind and thus the spirits are inactive.

The reason I bring up these various examples is to help us get out of a narrow assumption that presence can be discussed or even resolved philosophically. Humans have been designing the tension between present and presence—and architecturally enhancing that tension—since the earliest of times. It is who we are, anthropologically and philosophically, as humans.

Now all the examples I have given might be seen as belonging to the domain of religion, implying that the problem is

largely non-existent in so-called secular contexts. But I would hardly think that our ancient philosophical urges have been erased simply because some of us refuse to adhere to the principle of "faith." But how do we tackle the problem of continuity. One possibility is that presence as a philosophical thematic is really a pretext for some disguised ideological critique of the modern. For me that would be not a good way to get to the issue of presence, namely to see it as a half-way house, where we want to live like moderns, but do not want to fully give up our attachment to perhaps what Theodor Adorno called *geistiger Gehalt* (spiritual content). A more complex reading of presence—when taken out of the realm of cultural- and religious traditions and enforcements—is to engage its avoid see presence as authentic and present as inauthentic or as "the modern." What architecture shows is that through time present and presence have been designed to work together depending on the various circumstance of cultures and this is just as true today as it once was, except that our intellectual sensibilities to that process have added a new layer of reflection to the issue, making it all the more tantalizing as a question; regardless, it is—or will be—architecture that carries the proof.

all had to be done to exacting detail, all to enable, for a few minutes a year, a mere human to communicate with the gods. From present to presence and back.

My examples are only meant to flesh out the area between noise and silence and to remind us firstly of the powerful role that architecture plays and has played in the transition to—or the activation of—presence, and secondly, of the huge array of presence-making devices in human culture. We should avoid the tendency to universalize.

Let me close with a quick view toward the Andaman Islanders who live on a remote group of islands in the Indian Ocean. Anthropologists tell us that they are possibly the last remnant of the oldest human population on the planet. Their world-view is astonishingly more complex than the old Enlightenment idea of life-in-nature might suggest.

The key element for them is smell, not the real smell that you or I might think of, but a conceptual, almost philosophical smell that pervades every living entity in the world. Hunting is referred to as *gitekwaterbe*, which means “releasing smell.” For the hunter, it is only in the act of *gitekwaterbe* that death, as we would understand it, becomes possible. In other words, the hunter does not kill his prey, but releases its “smell” so that it joins the word of the spirits.

The ancestors in the spirit world navigate by means of their smell capacity. Think of a radar device with blips on its screen. The ancestors, otherwise blind, see (or rather smell) the world through these blips of smell and in the process differentiate enemy targets from good targets. The safest place is in the communal hut, but to avoid being on the wrong side of this system, when walking about, the islanders paint their body to make sure that each person’s correct