

Space is only Words,

about the relationship
between literary works
and architectural design

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The text of E.T.A. Hoffman's short story "Councilor Krespel" conceals a design attitude which appears to full advantage to the position of a designer in contemporary culture. Instead of knowing what he wants to build as his new house, he lets four walls without door or openings whatsoever be erected. It is from this structure that he starts addressing the masonry man where to put the door, floor, interior-walls and windows. The result is a house with a rather awkward appearance from the outside, but *'once inside you were filled with a quite unexampled sense of wellbeing and comfort.'*¹

1. Poiein, a poetical attitude within architectural design.

Councilor Krespel's house is enveloped around the physical needs of the inhabitant; the dimension of the space, the entrance of the daylight, all derive out of the presence of the contemplator. No architect is in the position of first erecting the structure, and afterwards adapting it to the inhabitants needs. Therefore the architect must develop a poetical approach within the design phase. Like the writer who must consider the relationship between reader and narrative, the architect must consider the same relationship between the contemplator and space. Both in literature as architecture, empathy is important for the experience of the narrative or space. An experience which derives out of the constant dialogue between men's direct environment and their memory: *'poetically man dwells'*² like Martin Heidegger proposes.

By use of literature, we as architectural designers want to research spatial experience, experience that can become visible within literature. This leads us to the main question of this thesis: What is the contribution of the research into the relationship of the reader-narrative and the contemplator-space, for the development of a poetical attitude within architectural design?

The text of Hoffman introduces us with "Councilor Krespel", a builder who doesn't build upon pre-conceived images but studies his creation thoroughly. When he moves around his plot of land, walking back and forth the four walls and determines where to position the door, he is constantly measuring himself in relation to the build work. This measuring can be seen as the study of his creation, a study that is part of a poetical attitude.

Before we stress out why we prefer to use a poetic attitude within architectural design, we should have a look at the word poetic. An element of the word 'poetic' is the Greek verb 'poiein' which means as much as doing, create and produce. The French author and poet Paul Valery emphasizes this when instead of the French 'poétique' he introduces 'poïetique'. With this term Valery brings the poetic from poetry to the study which concerns the creation of works. *'Applied poetry is according to Valery the research into specificity of methods used in every domain in which man creates.'*³ The design process within architecture, the main topic of our interest, can within the words of Valery be seen as applied poetry

2. From the creation of man to the 'poetics of space';

When we as architects think about space, we do not solely think about the physical space. When we talk about space it is used in combination with an adjective in front; lived space, used space, empty space, religious space. The adjective places pace in relation to man, by describing its function, or showing its absence. The Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck argued that we use the wrong language when we speak about space because it excludes man out of its meaning. He suggested that we use place and occasion instead, for man dwells in these words.⁴

By including man in the terminology of space we address a phenomenological thinking of which Martin Heidegger makes a strong argument in his essay "...*poetically man dwells...*". Through the poem of

1 Hoffman, E.T.A. *Tales of Hoffman*. Penguin Classic: May 2004, p.161

2 Heidegger, Martin. *Philosophical and political writings*. Edited by Manfred Stassen. continuum. New york, London. 2003. p.265-278

3 Sevenant, Ann van. *Poetica van de architectuur*. Uitgeverij Hadewijch. Antwerpen-Baarn, 1994, p. 8

4 van Eyck, Aldo. *place and occasion*. Team 10 Primer. edited by Alis on Smithson. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968, p.101

Friedrich Hölderlin he argues that the 'dwelling of man' is not about the actual building conditions, but about that which comes before the building; the essence of dwelling. According to Heidegger the dwelling of Hölderlin is the "basic character of human existence"⁵ This means that dwelling becomes more than just a shelter that offers protection. It takes into account all the aspects of human life. But in order for man to understand his place on earth he needs to measure his existence, give it value. Here we find the role and meaning of the poetically; a "special kind of measurement"⁶, that allows man to measure him/her- self against the world. "This makes the poetic, the main condition for man to know his place on earth."⁷

When councillor Krespel is measuring himself in relation to the four walls he makes the poetic the main condition for his new home. By giving directions to the masonry man where to place the openings he complements the physical conditions with his own mental interpretation, a process that is highlighted in Gaston Bachelard's book 'The Poetics of Space'⁸. Bachelard emphasizes the poetic reading of space, a reading that evoke internal images from our memory and imagination which integrate themselves in our observation. From the poetic reading emerges a poetic image, an image that is not an external image or metaphor, but an internal image that presents itself among a physical relationship with space.⁹

We can conclude that this poetic image characterizes space through a lived body. A body that reads its mirror-image in all phenomena. The lived body is not solely a visual body, but knows its physical relationship with space, through its constant action since birth. A relationship that is supplemented by memory and imagination and opens up spaces of touch, sound or smell: "I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray. The odor of raisins! It is an odor that takes a lot of imagination to smell"¹⁰

When we design or analyze space, we can map and observe the physical space, since we can measure its size. But to measure a poetic image is difficult to do, since this image is the mental space which is personal for everyone. We cannot analyze or explain this subjective space, like we analyze the physical space. In order to come to a understanding of the lived space, Merleau-Ponty argues that we need to describe it. Because a description comes, unlike analyzes or explanations, before judgment¹¹. When we analyze an experience we abstract it, break it into smaller parts of information, but this way the essence will be lost. "I am not the outcome or the meeting- point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological make-up."¹² Merleau-Ponty argues. When we experience a phenomena, we do it with our entire body, all the senses at the same time. So in order to try to understand the lived experience, we need to present it as a whole.

To complement the physical space of architecture we read literature and poetry in order to understand and integrate a poetic image in the design process. The writer and poet possess a natural keenness for describing the poetic image. By their words the lived experiences are translated into a universal code; language which addresses our imagination and own experience, to rebuild the poetic image into our own.¹³

3. Space of literature

There are multiple examples of literary works that contain spatial experiments, for example the books of Mark Z. Danielewski who have to be turned into multiple directions making it possible to read. Or George Perec, one of the most active and creative members of Oulipo (Workshop of Potential Literature) who investigated the spaciousness of the novel in all of his works. In "La dipsparition" (translated into English as A Void, 1994) he never uses the most common French letter 'e', and in "Species of Spaces

5 Heidegger, Martin. *Philosophical and political writings*. Edited by Manfred Stassen. continuum. New york, London. 2003. p.266

6 Ibid. p.272

7 Leach, Neil. *Rethinking Architecture, a reader in cultural theory*, Routledge, London/New York, 1997 p. 109-119

8 Bachelard, Gaston. *The poetics of space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994

9 Bakker, Jan-Hendrik. *Tijd van Lezen, transformaties van de literaire ruimte*, Uitgeverij Doman, Best, 1999, p.86

10 Bachelard, Gaston. *The poetics of space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p. 13

11 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of perception*, Routledge classics. London, New York. p.ix

12 Ibid.

13 Havik, Klaske. *Paper for Space and Flesh: Intertwining Merleau-Ponty and Architecture*. Mississippi State University School of Architecture 2009

and other pieces" he continues to investigate the use and position of words and letters. Another contemporary author who is investigating the spatial boundaries of literature is Jonathan Safran Foer, who for his latest novel "Tree of Codes" literally cuts words out of his favorite book "The street of Crocodiles" by Bruno Schulz. In this way he is not only creating voids within the physical book but by taking away words he is actually stretching the narrative.

When we want to make use of literature within the study of creation we should consider the freedom of interpretation, a subjective approach that can strengthen our attitude. In the essay bundle 'Love's knowledge' the philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum argues that the reciprocity between a text and the reader is very important for the contribution of meaning to the text. Nussbaum believes that emotions, memories, imaginations and experiences are "actually there to be seen in the text"¹⁴. Not as seeing shapes in clouds and fire¹⁵, but a 'Deleuzian'¹⁶ way of seeing, in which there is no limit in what the reader can see. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze promotes this way of seeing without limitations, because now the text can become a hotbed of open possibilities.¹⁷ One of these possibilities is described by Bachelard who states that language can open up space. He attaches great importance to language and refers in his 'Poetics of space' manifold to literary works. To strengthen the relationship between language and space it is important to take a closer look at the concept of language.

According to Merlin Donald, language is the conceptual tool that has given man the means to organize its lived space. It is the spatial position of our body, a position that is situated in mental world of memory and imagination as well as in the direct physical reality, that has created the terms and conditions of our multilingualism. Language developed itself as an expression of our spatial position, it connects the physical reality of our direct environment to the mental reality of memory and imagination. Therefore language is not only about narrative space, but it creates physical space as well. The literary imagination is not language-immanent but reaches further than language and gives us a place within the world. The possibility of creating a physical space through the reading of printed characters on paper comes forth from the recognition of the described reality through our lived body. A body that remembers not only what it has seen, but what it perceived through all its senses. Therefore the linguistic and sensorial worlds are no separate entities: language is an extension of the body, a tool with which it can reach beyond itself in the past and into the imagined future.¹⁸

Because language derived out of physical experience, words have a function within the physical syntheses that Heidegger and Bachelard consider as an essential feature within the experience of space. Language opens our mental reality, allowing words to create space the way our sense-organs would normally do. These sensory qualities of language are not direct, but reflexive and therefore able to act as an extension of our bodies. Words open memories that trigger mental reality, spaces that recall lived experience.¹⁹

Literature offers an alternative against the abundance of images that present themselves externally upon ourselves, because literature makes use of the memory and imagination of the reader. The images that literature raise, arise out of the internal relationship between the printed text and the experience of our own body. While reading we relate the black alphabetic characters on the white paper with our own baggage of experience, memories, interest and imagination. All these relationships we use when shaping the internal image. No matter how much this image is being influenced by social and cultural developments, including all those images that reach us externally, it remains a controllable image. An image with physical and mental qualities that has the possibility to be crystallized.

14 Nussbaum, Martha C. *Love's Knowledge. Essays on philosophy and literature*, New York: Oxford university press, 1992. p.9

15 Ibid

16 E. Romein, M. Schuilenberg, S. van Tuinen, 2009, *Deleuze compendium*, Amsterdam: Boom, I borrow the term 'deleuzian' from Michel Foucault, who predicted that this era would become a deleuzian period.

17 Ibid, p.304

18 Bakker, Jan-Hendrik. *Tijd van Lezen, transformaties van de literaire ruimte*, Uitgeverij Doman, Best, 1999, p.71-81

19 Ibid. p. 85

4. Literature to space; spatial quality of literary works

Within our architectural projects literature has formed a part of the study of creation, a poetical process that brings together the physical and mental reality. An example of the use of literature in an architectural design, is a project based upon the book *'House of leaves'* from Mark Z. Danielewski. The book is based up around different layers; story lines run disorderly through each other, the layout strengthens the spatiality of the descriptions and the borders of fiction and reality are stretched. The architectural design translates these layers into routing, position and spatial relations. But the reason that makes this book essential for this architectural design is its main subject; the descriptions of the experiences within a house which grows larger from the inside, but not at the outside.

After the appearance of a closet between two bedrooms, anxiety strikes the characters in the book. The appearance of an impossible space becomes a violation to the safety of the home. It becomes a house that confronts the inhabitants with the unknown. In order to give the new space meaning, and to understand what is happening, the inhabitants try to measure the space in any possible way. Out of these attempts to measure, five explorations follow into the unknown and impossible spaces. There are rooms which leaves no possibility for man to measure himself in. They cannot relate themselves to the space. Some rooms are so immense that you cannot light the walls and ceiling from one point. Others even mock all rules of physics, like the stairs that takes days to descend but weeks to ascend: *"Then as the stairways starts getting darker and darker and as that faintly illuminated circle above – the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel – starts getting smaller and smaller, the answer becomes clear. Navidson is sinking . . . Or the stairway is stretching, expanding."*²⁰

The absence of any human references or possibility to measure, is what alienates these spaces. Describing them and describing the actions of the characters, calls forth an image of anxiety, desolation and darkness. It are these poetic images that help to understand the fear of becoming blind. An experience which cannot be physically measured or mapped, but only described.

The architectural design is based on the descriptions which call forth the fear for the unknown and un-measurable. It houses a training center for blind people, who have difficulties accepting their disabilities and fear the situation they are in. In order to even try to understand that fear, the descriptions in the book are used to emphasize in the anxieties of the unknown. Three rooms are specially designed to challenge the blind person and confront them with their disability. Working with spatial illusions which are based on the extreme spaces from the book, the blind needs to find their way inside this labyrinth. But this is not a story of the confronting of fears, but of acceptance. And just as the house in the book is not a house of horror, so are the spaces in the design not a labyrinth. They unfold after the blind person accept the disability and takes the space as they are.

The second project that involves a literary approach starts from a piece of literature; *'The Theatre and its Double'*, by Antonin Artaud.²¹ Artaud makes a radical statement in his text, when he compares the functioning of the theatre with the plague, the disease that in medieval Europe cost millions of lives. With this comparison he wants to point out that in situations when lives are at stake and humanity is being pushed to its limits, we become aware of our bodily being, but most of all of our possibilities towards action. It is only through a certain cruelty that man becomes conscious of its being. That is why Artaud opts for a theatre of cruelty, a theatre that makes man conscious of themselves and of his contact with the world. This is translated into the project of an institution that houses patients who suffer from

Locked-in-Syndrome. These patients have become completely paralyzed, except for their sensorial activities. Vision, sound and smell are the patients only contact with their surroundings while memory and imagination is their only possibility of movement. These patients conditions, combined with the theories of *'The Theatre and its Double'* resulted in the design of an institution that explores our sensorial capacities through its architecture.

The condition of a L.I.S.-patient can be seen as the cruelty within the design. This is because through the patient's condition, being almost completely paralyzed, we become aware of the bodily existence, an existence where all our sense are open to the world, ready to trigger memory and imagination. In an attempt to discover the patient's ability for free movement within memory and imagination, and the stimuli that trigger these travels the writings of Jean-Dominique Bauby²² and Xavier de Maistre²³ are used. Jean –Dominique Bauby was a L.I.S. patient himself, who with the blinking of his left eye converted his daily experiences into a book. In this book titled, *'The diving bell and the butterfly'*, Bauby describes his body as a heave diving bell while his travels within memory and imagination have the freedom of a butterfly. A similar approach in describing the dialectics of the body and the mind is described by Xavier de Maistre. In his writings he talks about the soul and the beast, where the beast stands for his body with all its limitations and the soul for the absolute freedom and control over the beast. De Maistre derived these thoughts when he got locked inside his own apartment for 40 days. All the travels de Maistre made in these forty days are described by himself in *'A voyage around my room'*.

These two books by Bauby and de Maistre show us not only an insight into the patient's condition and their daily routine, they describe the working between the senses, memory and imagination. This working is important and has been acknowledged by Artaud in the theatre of cruelty; *'One does not separate the mind from the body not the sense from the intelligence, especially in a domain where the endlessly renewed fatigue of the organs requires intense and sudden shocks the revive our understanding'*.²⁴

The capacity of our contact with the surrounding is the central theme in the *'theatre of cruelty'* and this theme are projected on the architecture of the L.I.S. institution. The shape of the building, its smell, the orientation, the openings, all the architectural elements are derived from the writings of Bauby and de Maistre. We have brought their experiences and travels into a building where the reality of imagination and dreams will appear on equal foot with live.

21 Artaud, Atonin. *The Theatre and its Double*, Grove Press, 1994

22 Bauby, Jean Dominique. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, HarperCollins Publisher, 1998

23 de Maistre, Xavier. *A voyage around my room*, new directions publishing corporation, New York, 1994

24 Atonin Artaud, *The Theare and its Double*, Grove Press, 1994, P.86

5. Space is only words:

Within architectural theory the concept of language has always been about the relationship between observer and architecture. A relationship that concerns both the physical reality as well as the mental reality. Within the process of design, characterizing an architecture that considers the physical and mental relationship between observer and the proposed building remains a difficult assignment that often stays within the visual metaphors.

The first step towards a poetic attitude starts with the research into the relationship of reader-narrative and contemplator-space. A study that fits the 'poïetique' concept of Valéry, applied within the creation of architecture. Before we can further define the poetical attitude we need to look at the relationship reader-narrative and the contemplator space. Since language has its origin in the mediation between physical reality and mental reality, literature becomes an expression of our own spatiality. When we read the black characters printed on the white background, a sensorial relationship arises of which the mental reality forms an important part. This sensorial relationship in which the mental reality appears on equal footing with the physical reality is the foundation of the poetic approach within Heidegger and Bachelard's concept of space.

Although spatial research can not be enveloped around immediate experience, literature can provide the tools to establish a relationship between physical and mental reality. Literature can be used to characterize space, which forms an important aspect within the stimulation of creative solutions. It does this by intertwining common human conditions with the spatial conditions of architecture. This makes literature a starting point for architectural experience, a conceptual tool that can create a poetical approach within the creation of architecture.

A poetic precision of architectural perception can only be reached when we change our attitude regarding the translation of build assignment into architectural solution. Do we have a preoccupied image in our mind that we adjust to the assignment? Or do we study architectural experience, that by using imagination can evolve into an idiosyncratic work? According to Italian writer Italo Calvino we can divide two sorts of imaginative processes: *"the one that starts with the word and arrives at the visual image, and the one that starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression"*²⁵. We try to use the imaginative process that starts with words, words that connect the physical reality with the mental reality, the starting point for architectonic experience, the basis of our study in the architectonic assignment.

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