

At once intimate and immense

Robert McCarter, *The Space Within: Interior Experience as the Origin of Architecture* (Reaktion, 2016)

REY CONQUER

There are many buildings which, lauded for their looks, turn out to be unfit for use. 20 Fenchurch Street – “the Walkie-Talkie” – is a particularly famous, and extraordinary, case (with headlines such as “‘Death Ray’ Skyscraper Melts Sports Car”). A less dramatic, and more personal, example is Norman Foster’s Philological Library – “the Brain” – at the Freie Universität in Berlin, which becomes crowded, every winter, with buckets, and carpeted in polythene sheeting because of extensive leaks; Foster + Partners’ secondary school designs, in Nottingham and London, allowed for notoriously poor control of temperature – and, worse, noise. In each case the widespread response is bafflement: surely the first question an architect ought to ask themselves is what it will be like to live or work in and around a given building. Of the schools, “it looked like they hadn’t given it any thought at all”; Viñoly’s building is “a daily reminder never to let such a planning disaster ever happen again.”

We should welcome, then, Robert McCarter’s *The Space Within* (2016), a meditation on “interior experience” in architecture, and an appeal on behalf of this experience as “the only appropriate way to evaluate architecture”. Gathering together (mostly twentieth-century) architects and theorists McCarter challenges what we might, using Martin Jay’s term, call an “ocularcentric” approach to architecture: quoting the architect and architectural historian Wilfried Wang, he opposes the “cultivation’ of the media” through which “the majority of images of architecture that are received are determined by their degree of photogeneity; that is, the degree to which an image of a designed phenomenon can be reduced to a recognizable icon.” (We can think here of the nicknames – “Brain”, “Walkie-Talkie”, and so on – that these sorts of buildings – or their publicists – encourage.)

The argument weaves the spatial “discoveries” of three “early Modern” architects (Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier) together with ideas from architectural theorists, such as Dom Hans van der Laan and Adrian Stokes, philosophers who also wrote on architecture (Heidegger, Walter Benjamin), examples from literature (Rilke, Malaparte) and the writings and buildings of further modernist architects – Alvar Aalto, Louis Kahn, Peter Zumthor, Carlo Scarpa – illustrated by McCarter’s own sketches, to create a

dense and compelling portrait of a particular history of thinking about, and making, buildings.

This is the history of recognising architecture as an art that requires its practitioners to think about an integrated, bodily human life, “the actual lived experience of those who inhabit the interior spaces of architecture—the ultimate purpose of the discipline”. He cites August Schmarsow, a late nineteenth-century German art historian read more widely in English since Harry Mallgrave’s translation (1994) of his lecture “The Essence of Architectural Creation”; Stein Eiler Rasmussen (*Experiencing Architecture*, 1959); Kenneth Frampton (whose talk “Seven Points for the Millennium: an untimely manifesto” was intended as a similar sort of intervention in design practice), as well as Juhani Pallasmaa, with whom he collaborated on a previous book, *Understanding Architecture* (2012), also focusing on experience. There are other similar interventions McCarter doesn’t discuss—Bernard Rudofsky, whose exhibition on “non-pedigreed” (i.e. vernacular) architecture, *Architecture without Architects*, and its accompanying catalogue, acquired cult status in the 1960s, or Charles Moore and Kent Bloomer’s *Body, Memory and Architecture* (1977), for instance. Moreover, as he frames this as a modern problem with an “ancient” solution, I would have been interested to see how the intervening periods fit in (there is a brief mention of Alberti, but nothing else from before the 1890s). And, while continued pleas seem, unfortunately, necessary, the future may well be slightly brighter for all of us who do have to live and work in buildings and can’t just stand outside taking photos of them, as there have been a number of books in the last two years making a similar case for concrete, lived, bodily experience: Henry Plummer’s *The Experience of Architecture* (2016), as well as Sarah Williams Goldhagen’s *Welcome To Your World: How the built environment shapes our lives* (2017). Goldhagen, along with the Harry Mallgrave in his most recent work, turns in this book to cognitive neuroscience, a field which, at its best, can give important and detailed answers to the questions that an approach regarding embodied experience raises.

The Space Within is laudable for insisting that architects put these questions at the centre of their practice, and for encouraging discussion of movement, of touch, of how bodies interact with space. But for all this emphasis of the concrete, there is nonetheless something very abstract about these exhortations. We might compare McCarter’s vagueness with Goldhagen’s (sometimes flatfooted) detail: having explained that “to navigate our bodies through space, our brains nonconsciously imagine a hexagonal lattice of points, and locate the place of our body with reference to two objects in space, forming triangles within their hexagonal grid”, Goldhagen directs us to Frank Lloyd Wright’s house for Paul and Jean Hanna, in which he

eschewed the simple rectilinear grid [...], employing an unconventional geometry of equilateral triangles arranged into a hexagonal field. He believed that because these shapes echo those in natural forms such as honeycombs and soap bubbles, people would find them intrinsically—in

other words, nonconsciously— appealing. Perhaps. But it is likely that Wright adopted the hexagonal grid also because he intuited that people would be drawn to spaces arranged according to hexagonal geometries because they are consonant with the dictates of human visual perception: they facilitate a more effortless spatial experience.

We might also point out that architectural narcissism can disguise itself as attention to certain, haptic, details—**detail for detail’s sake**. Or, we might side with Jonathan Meades in seeing buildings like the church of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp, designed by Le Corbusier—“that great, **ethically dicey**,—megalomaniacal, atheistic architect”—as morally damaging despite the skill and sensitivity with which Le Corbusier handles precisely those ideas of space and light that interest McCarter. (Meades **suggests** that this is akin to “a morally delinquent vegan designing a marvellous abattoir,” which seems to me an infelicitous comparison—a marvellous abattoir, one assumes, even if designed by a vegan, would still slaughter animals with efficiency and style.) McCarter talks at a number of points about “appropriateness”, and quotes Kahn approvingly: architecture “is not the filling of areas prescribed by the client. It is the creating of spaces that evoke a feeling of appropriate use,” and “I teach appropriateness. I don’t teach anything else.” But appropriate to whom? to what? At no point in McCarter’s book does he ever think in particular about the sorts of buildings he is discussing, or the sorts of people who might interact with them—and while I can see that it is against his project to think about something so mundane as function (which in any case ought to be evoked by the buildings themselves, if we follow Kahn, or come about, as Wright might suggest, through interaction itself) this leaves things all unhelpfully unspecific. Meades’s point—and I’m not sure I agree—is that however suggestive the management of space, when egomaniacal atheists design places of worship, buildings whose very purpose is utterly alien and inaccessible to them, cracks are opened through which the specificity of their role is allowed to seep away, with the result that these buildings become temples to empty aesthetic brilliance, sites of architectural, not religious, pilgrimage. Pallasmaa, by contrast, has written convincingly of a sacredness to all architecture, not just that of buildings dedicated to prayer—something that has been argued from the other side, as it were, by the Dutch Catholic architect M. J. Granpré Molière, among others.

Pallasmaa has also described in more optimistic terms the effect of the numinous that even atheist architects can perceive and bring about; as Le Corbusier once wrote, “I am not conscious of the miracle of faith, but I often live that of ineffable space, the consummation of plastic emotions.” But McCarter does not think to address the question of faith at all; he doesn’t consider, for instance, the fact that Dom Hans van der Laan was, as his title suggests, also a Benedictine monk, nor is it mentioned that while just under half of the buildings in McCarter’s sketches are private houses, the rest are churches—or else museums or public buildings (which can inspire their own kind of quasi-religious faith). While we would have to have an impoverished understanding of the idea of dwelling or inhabiting to limit it to private

houses or flats, a person's experience of public places, and especially places of worship, will differ in kind to that of their home.

The one mention of the particular kind of experience that a person might seek or find in a church is tucked away in a caption to a sketch of Alvar Aalto's Heilig-Geist-Kirche in Wolfsburg, and is worded unfortunately: "The interior experience of the worshippers shapes the space, structure, natural light, acoustics and orientation of the sanctuary." This can't be meant literally, as if it were some sort of elaborate piece of interactive art; and while it is of course true that a person's interaction with their environment is, in fact, interactive, one of the desired features of a place of worship is surely a sense of surrender, if not to God then to some secular version of the divine. One assumes this is somewhat different in museums, certainly today with the emphasis on 'hands on' designs, not to mention family homes.

The idea of bilateral "shaping" is put forward a number of times but, again, is frustratingly un-fleshed out. McCarter quotes Paul Valéry's dialogue *Eupalinos; or, the Architect*:

When I design a dwelling... I confess, however strange it may appear to you, *that it seems to me my body is playing its part in the game...* [It is through their body that people] participate in what they see and what they touch... They touch, they are touched. [ellipses McCarter's].

It does, I think, still "appear strange" and quite how this works is unfortunately often elided, as, for instance, in the (very suggestive) section on memory. Winston Churchill is quoted via the anthropologist Edward Hall, saying, "We shape our buildings and they shape us"; but something more metaphysical seems to be in question in the main body of McCarter's text—that is, not just that we arrange our own furniture and wear our own hollows and grooves and scuff-marks but that the "embodied memories" of our experiences of a certain room, or a sense of extension from body to space within it, actively alter what that room is or is like. Churchill was referring to proposed changes to the layout of the Commons Chamber, suggesting that to replace the confrontational rectangular plan with a semi-circle or horseshoe would radically change how the country was governed (probably, we might now say, for the better). This sort of claim seems fairly commonsensical, and it is in the fine detail of these sorts of psychological and social effects that Goldhagen is interested. This is also very much what Meades is getting at in his digs at modernist churches: change the layout, do away with the separation of nave and chancel, and you do away with the idea of worship at all, is his claim, and one that is currently finding favour with a younger generation of Christians in revolt at the embarrassing liberalism of their parents and grandparents.

The closest McCarter gets to a proper discussion of the sacred is in presenting the twin ideas of "intimacy and immensity", particularly with regard to spaces that are literally or psychologically "nested", his first example being St Jerome's study in the **painting by Antonello da Messina**. This, the push and

pull between close and expansive—mirrored in the liturgy in the alternation between kneeling and standing, for instance, and in the architecture of priories and monasteries, particularly charterhouses—is profoundly spiritual, and his argument would have benefited from an acknowledgement of this, as there seem useful distinctions to be made between the kind of ambiguously intimate and immense spaces that Le Corbusier was creating at Ronchamp and La Tourette and those of Kahn in the Assembly Building of the National Parliament House in Bangladesh. The example of St Jerome is particularly well chosen, and yet he could have made more of it, as the architect Alison Smithson does in her short essay, “Saint Jerome: The Desert... The Study”, for, as Smithson points out, in the early Renaissance, a depiction of St Jerome in one of these “habitats” implies the other: “both alternatives are present in a re-vitalising role”. Intimacy balances immensity; outside is implied by inside, nature by man-made edifice and vice versa.

More pressure could fruitfully have been applied to a similar tension that arises between “nothingness”, “emptiness” and so on, which are the positive, sculpting forces of architectural creation, and “nowhere”, which is the result of a de-contextualised, “de-natured”, globalised style that retains no connections to a given place or its particular ecology. This is the opposite, it would seem, to the Renaissance depictions of St Jerome in the desert, where the desert is clearly only a mile or so from a well-proportioned town; we have instead turned our towns into deserts, featureless and barely habitable. (Rowan Williams makes this point in his book about the early Christian desert monks, *Silence and Honeycakes*: “[The desert] looks like nowhere in particular; yet you go into it so as to become more particular than ever. In the modern context, you could compare it with the other sort of non-place we are familiar with—[...] the airport lounge, the fast-food outlet, places designed entirely for individuals looking for repeatable experiences.” That there might be something comforting, and moreover, spiritually enabling, about such places, is a possibility that McCarter does not acknowledge.)

There is a sense in which *The Space Within* is an example of its own argument (which would explain, too, the lack of specificity), in that it suggests the possibility that even understanding the ways in which architecture is, and must be considered, an “interior experience” requires a different aesthetic education to the one that we currently give ourselves. He mentions the “artist and educator” Josef Albers who took Bauhaus principles to Black Mountain College in the US, and who, influenced by Kandinsky, stressed in his teaching how poorly trained the visual and spatial memory were in contemporary culture, saying that, “while most people could easily recall a tune they had recently heard, very few could remember ‘the extension of space and volume’ of a space they had been in. If McCarter is right that this “societal blindness to interior space” has not improved since the 1930s, then if we feel affected by a space at all, it is likely to be, as Goldhagen puts it, “nonconscious”, and not something that we might be able to put into words. Moreover, this mutual influence, sketched out by Heidegger in a set of etymological manoeuvres

linking “bauen” (to build), “buan” (Old High German, to dwell) and “bin” (I am), suggests that if we don’t know how to build, then we don’t know how to live. This was put particularly forcefully by Bernard Rudofsky (who once gave a lecture with the title “How Can People Expect to Have Good Architecture When They Wear Such Clothes?”): “Part of our troubles results from the tendency to ascribe to architects [...] exceptional insight into the problems of living when, in truth, most of them are concerned with problems of business and prestige. Besides, the art of living is neither taught nor encouraged in this country [i.e. the US].” *Architecture without Architects* is, he writes, “the vehicle of the idea that the philosophy and know-how of the anonymous builders presents the largest untapped source of architectural inspiration for industrial man. The wisdom to be derived goes beyond economic and esthetic considerations, for it touches the far tougher and increasingly troublesome problem of how to live and let live, how to keep peace with one’s neighbors, both in the parochial and the universal sense.” If by calling for an increased appreciation of interior experience in architectural design McCarter does in even some small way encourage “industrial man” to get better at the art of living—in its richest sense—his book will be worthwhile.