

The Nature of Dwelling: The Degenerate Noun and the Generative Verb seen through Anthony's Eyes

OF DWELLING:

'Dwelling can be un-poetic only because in essence it is poetic.'
(Heidegger 1975)

At the core of human existence, and by implication architecture, is the primal need to dwell. For Heidegger dwelling was a poetic act; it is only we, that hold the capacity to remove its poetic resonance. Furthermore, it is clear in Heidegger's paradigm that the *act* of dwelling (the verb) sits ahead of the *object* of dwelling (the noun).

This Paper will suggest that much contemporary architecture has become obsessed with the *object* of its praxis, and, as a consequence, that the *act* (the verb) of architecture has been sacrificed at the high-altar of these objects (the nouns). In our increasingly homogenised, fluid, horizontal world, images are transported across space and time eroding a sense of particularity of place, climate and culture.

Furthermore, the Paper will suggest that an a-priori engagement with the verb and a re-balancing of the verb/noun relationship provides a route into the core of existence and indeed, a paradigm for mediating between existential and pragmatic components of being, and thus architecture. Implicit within such an ambition is the potential to reclaim ideas of particularity in counterpoint to the Universalist ambitions of globalisation.

'Being active confrontations and encounters, all basic architectural events have a verb-form rather than noun-form. Architecture is essentially an art of actions not forms'
(Pallasmaa 2005)

These ideas are developed from the writings of Juhani Pallasmaa, a constant source of inspiration. He has consistently interrogated that which occupies the core of architecture within our contemporary context.

At this point I will depart from postulation and move into the realm of observation. These ideas will be viewed through the lens of a child, perhaps allowing us access to the core of what we may post-intellectualise as architectural ambition, delivered via the simple act of engaging with embodied memory, in the process of making place.

OF ANTHONY:

'The roots of our understanding of architecture lie in our childhood, in our youth; they lie in our biography.'
(Zumthor 2006)

Anthony is the four-year-old nephew of my wife. He and his two sisters came to stay for a weekend and after two full days of laughter and adventures; he sat on the sofa and quietly asked me, 'Uncle Roger, can we build a den?' My reaction? Well of course we could. As an architect and teacher of architecture my 'den-ness' knew no bounds. However, as I soon learnt, Anthony (and not me) was in charge.

He began by surrounding himself with cushions, building them higher until he had disappeared within. He had made *refuge* but it was unsatisfactory because he had lost all relation with that which surrounded him and I guessed, that was in some way threatening. How could he defend himself from his sisters, if he was unaware of their approach? Almost immediately the cushions were abandoned, scattered across the floor in frustration.

'What else can we use Uncle Roger?' he demanded. I suggested bath towels; we could hang them between sofa-back and dining table providing a roof. We did just that, and Anthony gathered his cushions and took them in under his roof.... giggling. Some cushions were seats, others became walls but he had, in the simplest possible way defined dwelling as both *refuge* and *prospect*. Yet something was missing..... "Uncle Roger, will you be a Lion?" Happy to oblige, on all fours I prowled around roaring, which had the effect of making Anthony's giggles uncontrollable. His 'dwelling' was complete; *refuge*, *prospect* and what I term *reason*; the reason why refuge and prospect are required¹. The *reason* to dwell became was the Lion.

Anthony was driven by the verb. The actuality and materiality of the object were secondary to his pursuit of the *act* dwelling. He made place from available material and space. What was clear to me was his innate desire to retreat, make place and in the sense that Heidegger would understand; *to be*.

'Poetry builds upon the very nature of dwelling. Poetry and dwelling not only do not exclude each other; on the contrary, poetry and dwelling belong to each together, each calling the other. "Poetically man dwells".'
(Heidegger 1975)

Anthony dwelt poetically. Certainly his pragmatic needs were met. He had *refuge* and of course *prospect* and, albeit as an afterthought, *reason*. Here was a young man in control, holding a real sense of *being* in the Heideggerian sense of that term. He had some control, territory and refuge, paradoxically in the most benign and invented context. He had through his act inhabited the verb and formed the noun.

With a real sense of humility I realise that Anthony taught me much that day. I had pontificated for years regarding the essence of architecture, intuitively having a sense of the importance of 'the core', yet not knowing how to articulate that intuition. In that afternoon, a four-year-old boy had exposed to me the essence of my subject.

It was not that the noun was unimportant, but that it was the verb drove the making of noun. It became clear that the essence was delivered by the a-priori value of the verb informing the development of the noun. For Anthony, the issue was not the actuality of the material nature of the noun, but how, when focused upon the verb, the noun fell into place. It became clear to me that the issue was not verb v noun, but how they might conjoin.....poetically.

'Dwelling is both process and artefact'
(Oliver 2007)

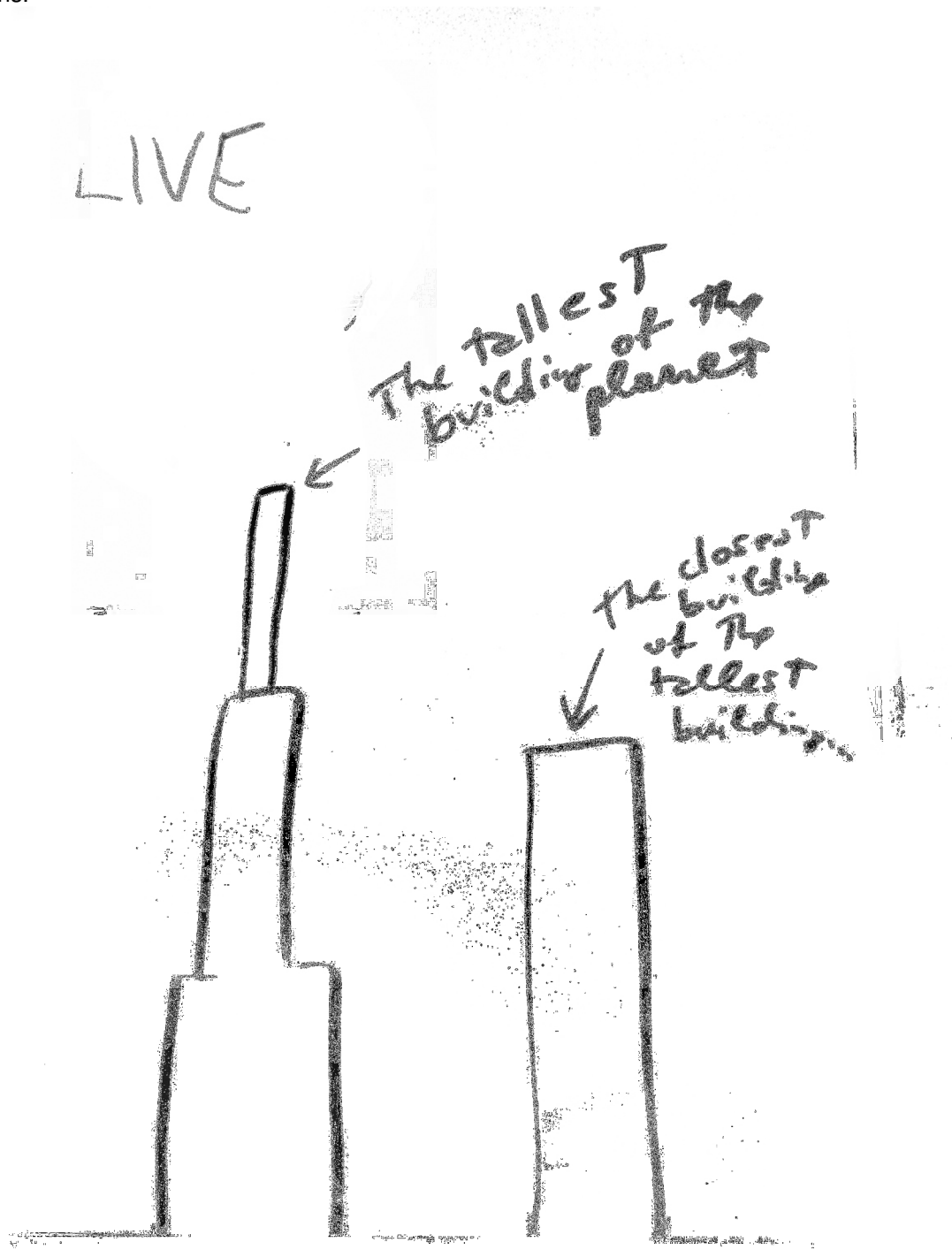
To rebalance the verb/noun relationship, I propose a grammatical shift in architectural discourse, from the current overwhelming preoccupation with the noun towards the fertile potential of the verb.

The noun objectivises architecture, and through the seductive image, anchors that objectivisation. As Pallasmaa suggests the image provides, a perceptual immediacy; but in semiotic terms, that immediacy is all too often, an empty sign. Our contemporary world is increasingly dominated by the power of the image and nowhere is that clearer than in architecture. Magazines, websites and TV set the image in front of us, providing a seemingly immediacy of understanding. Yet both literally and metaphorically, all those images are filtered through many lenses, each lens having a particular intent.

The sheer volume of such visual exposure ascribes an apparent absolute authority to the image, to the extent, where our desire to understand what informs what we see, evaporates. This encourages a level of superficial understanding that resides only within the image of the object and encourages ever more, again literally and metaphorically, retouching; in search of

¹ A term drawn from John Robert's Paper '*Thrills, Views and Shelter: Prospect, Refuge and Hazard Symbolism in Utzon's Images*' published elsewhere in this Book.

a perceived perfection. This trend is of course a self-perpetuating mythology but, in turn, encourages a shift towards the superlative domain of architecture; biggest, tallest, longest..... I saw this image in a gallery in Dubai. It is filled with ironic signifiers of the superlative condition. Yet, inhabited simultaneously by the hollowness and paucity of empty signs.



'Yet how are we to achieve this wholeness in architecture at a time when the divine, which once gave us meaning, and even reality itself seem to be dissolving in the endless flux of transitory signs and images.'

(Zumthor 2006)

In contrast, part of the value of the verb is that it is indeterminate. It does not presume outcome in terms of object, merely acknowledges the desire to develop an object. It focuses upon process, act and being. The verb is, by definition, devoid of a pre-determined architectural solutions and invites speculation upon possibility rather than prescribing outcomes.

The verb demands a response to the human condition and that in turn informs the development of the noun. With the verb we are forced to interrogate all that which sits in front of the noun, and is implicitly responsive to the diverse range of human needs, aspirations and potentials. To encourage the verb we need to develop points of resistance to the apparently absolute authority of the noun.

These points of resistance are provided through paradigmatic study of those who have in terms of theoretical positioning and/or the process of the synthesised design, clearly engaged with the potential of the verb. Immediately one would reference the Nordic spirit of Aalto, Fehn, and, of course Utzon in understanding such concepts and praxis. Outside of this geographical realm, designers such as Louis Kahn, Carlo Scarpa, Richard Leplastrier and Peter Zumthor and others describe through their praxis and writings clear speculation regarding the core of existence. Additionally the phenomenological agendas of Juhani Pallasmaa, and Stephen Holl represent a particular strand of engagement with the act of being. The philosophical strand (at least in modern history) reaches back to Heidegger with additional sediment and dimension supplied by Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and Sartre.

However, within the creative realm of architecture the verb/noun relationship should not be considered as linear but rather providing two points between which the creative act may oscillate. What is clear in the theoretical position and praxis of those defined as exemplars (above) is that this process of oscillation between the verb and noun results in sublime design solutions that resolve the 'design problem' at metaphysical and physical levels of existence.

As Anthony showed me, the inner construction of the act of dwelling holds an embodied resonance that connects us all at some primal level of our common, and perhaps universal, existence. Yet, as individuals our particular interpretations will be unique, predicated upon our particular experiences; what Zumthor describes as 'our biography'.

The potency of the verb encourages dialogue with act, being, and, what for want of a better term, we might call 'the poetic'.

Albeit eventually expressed as a noun.

'Postmodern life could be described as a state in which everything beyond our own personal biography seems vague, blurred and somehow unreal. The world is full of signs and information that stand for things that no one fully understands because they, too, turn out to be mere signs for other things. Yet the real thing remains hidden.'

(Zumthor 2006)

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