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ACADEMY OF NEUROSCIENCE FOR ARCHITECTURE

# Empathic and Embodied Imagination: Intuiting Life and Experience in Architecture

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Architectural projects are products of imagination. In addition to a projective imagination, an empathic and embodied imagination is needed to grasp the experiential and emotive qualities of the designed spaces, as well as their resonance with life. The designer place herself in the imagined setting in the role of the future occupant.

## 1. EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Contemporary architecture is often accused of emotional coldness, exclusive and restrictive aesthetics, and a distance from life. This criticism suggests that architects have adopted a formalist attitude instead of tuning their buildings with realities of life. Architectural spaces are not lifeless frames for human activities; they guide, choreograph and stimulate actions, interests and moods, or in the negative case, stifle them. They also give our experiences of being specific perceptual frames and horizons of understanding. Every space, place and situation is tuned in a specific way, and it projects an atmosphere promoting distinct moods and feelings. We live in resonance with our world, and architecture mediates this very resonance.

There are two levels of imagination; one that projects formal and geometric images, and another that also simulates the actual sensory, emotive and mental encounter with the projected entity. The first category projects the material object in isolation, the second as a lived reality in the life world.

True qualities of architecture are not formal or geometric, intellectual or even aesthetic properties; they are existential, poetic, and emotional experiences, and they arise from our embodied encounter with the work. Artistic images are not "pure" formal configurations, they are images that are embedded in the soil of human historicity, memory and imagination. Poetic images are new and ancient, at the same time. Like the archetypes, architectural images evoke recollections, feelings and associations. Existentially meaningful architectural spaces are not mere formal inventions, as they need to echo our mental world, and thus artistic experiences are essentially exchanges. They are not metaphors or symbols of something else; they are a reality in their own right.

A talented architect constructs the entire edifice in her imagination; every great building has thus been built twice, first in the immaterial realm of imagination, and then in the material world under the laws of physics. Every profound building has been imaginatively inhabited by its maker. It is usually understood that a sensitive designer imagines the acts, experiences and feelings of the occupant, but human empathic imagination does not work that way. The designer places herself in the role of the future dweller and tests the validity of her ideas through this imaginative exchange of roles and personalities. Thus the architect is bound to conceive the design essentially for herself as the momentary surrogate of the occupant. Without being aware of it, the designer also turns into a silent actor.

The design process is a vague and emotional process, alternating between internalization and projection, thinking and feeling, trial and error, which eventually becomes increasingly concrete and precise. The projected reality is internalized, or "introjected", and the self is simultaneously projected out into the space. A gifted architect feels and imagines the building, its countless relationships and details as if it where part of, or an extension of her own self and body. The designer does not project the building into her current reality of life, she imagines the future reality of the building and places herself there.

The most ephemeral and complex of these subconscious mental simulations is the instantaneous grasping of the entire atmosphere, ambiance, or mood of the space. This imagination of ambiance is demanding, because an atmosphere or ambiance is not an object, but something suspended between the setting and the subject. Imagination can rightly be named our most human and important mental faculty. Neurological and philosophical investigations have established that imagination is crucial even for the processes of perception, thinking and memorizing. It is high time, indeed, to give imagination its due role in our mental lives, self-understanding and education. I propose the topics of imagination, empathy and empathic imagination as a course in architectural education, as well as a subject matter for research in the neurosciences. Altogether, we create the world in which we live through our imaginative capacities, and it

is evident that we could not even have an ethical sense without being able to imagine the consequences of our alternative choices and actions.

## 2. AUTHOR BIO

**Juhani Pallasmaa** (b. 1936), Architect SAFA, Hon. FAIA, Int FRIBA, Professor Emeritus, Helsinki, has practised architecture since the early 1960s and established his own office Juhani Pallasmaa Architects in 1983 after having collaborated with a number of architects during twenty years. In addition to architectural design, he has been active in urban, exhibition, product and graphic design.

He has taught and lectured widely in Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia, and published books and numerous essays on the philosophy and critique of architecture and the arts in over thirty languages.

Pallasmaa has held positions as e.g. Professor and Dean at the Helsinki University of Technology (1991-97), State Artist Professor (1983-88), Director of the Museum of Finnish Architecture (1978-83), Associate Professor at Haile Selassie I University, Addis Abeba (1972-74), and Rector of the Institute of Industrial Arts, Helsinki (1970-71).

He has held visiting professorships at The Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. (fall term 2011); University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign (fall term 2010); the Washington University in St. Louis (1999-2004); University of Virginia (spring 1992) and Yale University (spring 1993), and taught and lectured in numerous universities, conferences, and symposia around the world including around fifty universities and architecture schools in the US.

His thirty-five books include: *Encounters 2: Architectural Essays*, Helsinki 2012; *Understanding Architecture*, London 2012 (in collaboration with Robert McCarter); *The Embodied Image: imagination and imagery in architecture*, London 2011; *The Thinking Hand: existential and embodied wisdom in architecture*, London 2009; *Alvar Aalto Through the Eyes of Shigeru Ban*, co-editor, London 2007; *Raimo Utriainen – The Resonant Line*, Helsinki 2007; *Encounters: Architectural Essays*, Helsinki 2005; *The Aalto House*, Helsinki 2004; *Juhani Pallasmaa: Sensuous Minimalism*, Beijing 2002; *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema*, Helsinki 2001 and 2007; *Alvar Aalto: Villa Mairea*, Helsinki, 1998; *The Eyes of the Skin*, London 1996 and 2005; *The Mies van der Rohe House*, London 1996; *Animal Architecture*, Helsinki 1995; *Maailmassaolon taide [The Art of Being-in-the-World: essays on art and architecture]*, Helsinki 1993; *Alvar Aalto Furniture*, Helsinki/Cambridge, Mass. 1987; *The Language of Wood*, Helsinki 1987, and; *Alvar Aalto 1898-1976*, co-editor, Helsinki 1978.

Pallasmaa has received three honorary doctorates: University of Industrial Arts, Helsinki, 1993 (in the arts); Helsinki University of Technology, 1998 (in technology), and; Estonian Academy of Arts, 2004 (in the arts). He is also Academician of the International Academy of Architecture, 2012, and member of the Pritzker Architecture Prize Jury, 2008-.

Pallasmaa has received several Finnish and international awards: Dean's Medal, Washington University in St. Louis 2012; Alfred Kordelin Prize for Lifetime Achievement, Helsinki 2010; Arnold W. Brunner Prize for Architecture, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York 2009 (USA); Silver Plaque of the Museum of Finnish Architecture, 2006; Finland Prize, 2000; The International Union of Architects' Award for Architectural Criticism, 1999; Fritz Schumacher Prize (Germany), 1997; Russian Federation Architecture Award, 1996 (Russia); Helsinki City Culture Award, 1993; Finnish National Architecture Award, 1992.