

Re:reading Heidegger

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Why read Heidegger?

This seems a fair question to ask in a school of architecture. We study architecture, not philosophy, right? Heidegger's topics, often ontologically bound, do not translate directly into architectural praxis; the writing, especially in English, is dense; the words, opaque and often loaded with specific yet obtuse meaning, are not exactly floating through contemporary architectural discourse. In an architectural journal with the theme "build," please allow me the possibility that Heidegger's lecture, "Building Dwelling Thinking," might offer something to the conversation. In the following essay, I propose to discuss the three main themes of the Heidegger's lecture title – building dwelling thinking – and attempt to unravel a few of the lessons learned from the text that may help to understand what it means to build and, perhaps, for building.



Heidegger delivered his now well-known lecture, "Building Dwelling Thinking" on 05 August 1951 at the Darmstädter Gespräch (Darmstädter Talks) – the "Ted Talks" of post-War Germany. Although no YouTube evidence exists, we do have the transcript of his lecture as well as a wealth of secondary scholarship around the text. By all accounts it was very well received. Contemporary critics noted that the audience even remained silent through the entire reading! The work was written in the later half of Heidegger's career. His masterwork, *Being and Time* (Sein und Zeit, 1927) had been written almost twenty-five years earlier and his much-discussed allegiance to the National Socialist party through the 1930s in Germany all but removed him from consideration for an academic position in post-war Germany. Although ambivalent he resigned from his politically appointed post as rector in Freiburg after only one year – Heidegger's involvement in politics undoubtedly overshadowed his teaching career and has surely affected the reception of his work. Perhaps more important to Heidegger's thinking than academic posts and political interests, the 1930s was also the time in which the manner by which Heidegger thought shifted. It is at this time, known as "the turn," that Heidegger's thinking shifts to exegesis and etymology. The topics of his writing continued to be focused on the nature of being, but he did so by carefully unpacking history – philosophers and poets alike – and more specifically, language. This mode of thinking is especially evident in his lecture at Darmstädter

Wohnen / Dwelling

Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build (Heidegger, 361).

Heidegger begins the lecture by asking two questions: What is it to dwell? How does building belong to dwelling? To answer the question he looks to language, to the words themselves, and finds that building and dwelling are etymologically related. Heidegger claims that the depth of meaning in the word *bauen* (building) has been lost and he argues that by understanding the fullness of the word, we may recover some sense of *wohnen* (dwelling). Ready? In early German, the word for dwelling, *baun*, meant to remain, to stay in one place. The word is related to the contemporary word for neighbor, *nachbar*. Heidegger explains the connection by noting that "the *nachbar* is the *nachgebur*, the *nachgebauer*, the near-dweller, he who dwells nearby." Then, by way of a series of verbs, *huri*, *büren*, *beuren*, *beuron*, *bauen* is related to the verb to be, *ich bin* (I am) and *du bist* (you are). He continues. *Bauen* (building) also implies other meanings: to cherish, to preserve, and to cultivate. In this way, Heidegger connects

"building" to "being" by way of "dwelling." In other words, building is dwelling, but we do not build to dwell. We build, rather, because we dwell.

For Heidegger, dwelling is different than living. We are inherently situated in what he terms the fourfold: earth (saving), sky (receiving), divinities (awaiting), and mortals (initiating). Each is connected and it is not possible to conceive of one separate from the others. For Heidegger, our world is not first conceptualized but is, rather, given. This is what he names as the earth. The sky shows the temporal nature of the earth. The seasons change; the sun vaults over the horizon; the stars dance across the night sky. The timelessness of this refers to the divinities. It is mortals, and not divinities, that die. We are the mortals. Dwelling is the active, rather than passive, recognition of the fourfold. Such recognition initiates a saving – not preserving, but "bringing into presence" – the earth, receiving the sky, and awaiting the divinities. While these terms may seem to our modern ear a bit mystical, perhaps even hokey, it is exactly this order that architecture once was able to reconcile. The remaking of our world through architecture is seen across time and place. Think of early ritual centers such as Nabta Playa, ideal cities such as Wangchen, stupa complexes like Sanchi, the temples at Karnak, the Haram al-Sharif, even the gothic cathedrals scattered around Paris. Each "building" situated the culture that built the work. Each building is also grounded within a defined worldview.

This idea of our situated-ness had already been developed in Heidegger's earlier, and I might argue more phenomenological, writings. As early as *Being and Time*, we find the development of *befindlichkeit*, often translated as "attunement," that grounds the idea of the perhaps more mystical sounding "four-fold." Think of it this way. We wake up in the morning and the world is given. The sky is above; the ground is below. The sun rises and sets. Even after the clear conception of the world from Descartes and Newton to Einstein and Hawking, we do not need to first conceptualize the way in which we walk down a set of stairs, or the way we drink coffee from a cup prior to walking or drinking. Our hand moves from cup to mouth; we drink and place the cup back down on a table without, it seems, even thinking. We are, as beings, situated; we are oriented in our world, before conceptual thought. Indeed, even as the mapping of our DNA may be "truthful," such knowledge does not reconcile our lived experience or ever lead to self-knowledge. The ramification of such thinking to architecture, then, may not be to produce yet another empty formalism, or to nostalgically attempt to remake a shared order, but may in fact be

to allow us to become aware of our own place within the world. Within the recent fascination in architectural discourse with all things digitalia, such a perspective seems as radical as it does naïve. Heidegger's text opens up to the possibility that we consider the way in which a building frames our experience and allows us to understand the fullness inherent in being and in place. The question remains, however, in our world, one that lacks a common worldview, can architecture still recognize the fourfold?

Perhaps a few examples will help.

One looks at the sky differently after experiencing a sky space by James Turrell. The relation between the sky and the ocean is made elusively clear in the courtyard of the Salk Institute. The Unité in Marseille draws a thick line between the ocean and the mountains most clearly seen from the roof garden. Sitting (but not standing) in the main room of Taliesin West frames the moment when mountains meet land. Standing in the Rodin Crater the land catches one's shadow in the face of celestial phenomena, some of which will not be made visible for another few centuries. There are many, many more examples. In each of the examples above, "place" is privileged over "space." And each demonstrate what Heidegger referred to as a *versammlung* "gathering" of the fourfold. Another idea that relates each is that the view "from" the building is just as important, and perhaps even more so, than the view "of" the building. One might argue, however, that all building situates and further, all architecture contains both a view "of" and a view "from." The window in your apartment, that shiny new entry to Beatty Hall, and even the seating in Blount hall orients you in a particular way and can be looked "at" as well as looked "from." Indeed, all architecture is experienced and all architecture situates. What then makes one building better than another? Heidegger might argue that better architecture is *maieutic*. It reveals what was already there but not yet known. This is dwelling.

Bauen / Building

The essence of building is letting dwell (Heidegger, 361).

Here, Heidegger is clear. Inhabitation, lodging, space planning, simplicity of maintenance, relative expense, openness to air, light, and sun, is not building. What then is building? There are technical skills that must be learned for one to be called architect. Indeed it is just this ability to know how an arch or beam works and how to represent and communicate this that makes one an architect and not a doctor, for example. The thoughtful architect understands and works through this

knowledge. Architecture, however, is not simply a technical endeavor, but rather one that, as Heidegger points out, requires technē. As one of the four forms of knowledge known to the Greeks, technē was not something specific only to builders but was understood to be a way of making, for builders, poets, doctors, and politicians alike. It was a quality of making that required an understanding inherent within and expressed through the specifics of each craft. Those doctors, poets, politicians, and builders who understood their craft through technē could make well.

Hans-Georg Gadamer discusses technē along similar terms. He describes the Greek understanding of technē in the “Apologia for the Art of Healing,” which differentiated, for the first time, the doctor who understood how to apply a universal knowledge to achieve a specific result, from the medicine man who held mysterious powers. (Howard Roark, that fountain of many headaches, is certainly more medicine man than doctor). Although Gadamer was discussing physicians and health, the analogy could easily be applied to architects and the well-being of a building. He explains: “[the] Greek concept of technē does not signify the practical application of theoretical knowing, but rather a special form of practical knowing. Technē is that knowledge which constitutes a specific and tried ability in the context of producing things. It is related from the very beginning to the sphere of production, and it is from this sphere that it first arose. But it represents a unique ability to produce; one, which knows what it, is doing, and knows on the basis of grounds” (Gadamer, 1996).

Gadamer’s “practical knowing” is found through making and not through some sort of divine right. He continues to state that, “The true art of healing, which involves authentic knowing and doing, thus requires the capacity to distinguish between the particular constitution of the organism in question and what is actually compatible with that constitution” (Gadamer, 1996). This echoes Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, understood to be meaningful through the situated-ness of circumstance. Can we then ask: what is the particular technē of architects? Architects do not make buildings; we make representations of buildings. This may take many forms – from the objective construction documents produced in professional practice to the inter-subjective musings of what is often referred to as “paper architecture.” The work of Piranesi, Lequeu, Boullée, Gandy, Malevich, Lerup, Libeskind, Darden, and Brodsky + Utkin, to name a few, comes to mind. It is clear, however, that neither the contract document nor imaginary proposal is fully capable of rendering the wholeness of our architectural

experience but that both contribute to the same. Both also require technē more than technique, or theory, alone.

Denken / Thinking

But that thinking itself belongs to dwelling in the same sense as building, although in a different way, may be attested to by the course of thought here attempted (Heidegger, 362).

Although thinking is the final word in the essay’s triumvirate, Heidegger does not discuss the word at any length. This may seem a curious omission, however a closer reading reveals that the act of thinking is embedded in the structure of the lecture. Repeatedly, Heidegger asks questions to the audience. At my count, he asks at least twenty questions in the body of the text. The questions are discussed, but not answered directly. In this way, Heidegger raises the issue of a criterion of judgment. How does one decide? How does one test? How does one choose? How does one judge? In essence, how does one think? How do you know, when proposing a project in studio, for example, which is the best option? In other words, what model of knowledge should guide the making of architecture?

Is architecture to be understood as a service practice in which business, profit, and client interests guide making? While the development of a professional architect is certainly one goal of a professionally accredited school of architecture, it is also clear from the recent housing collapse, for example, that profit-based decision making may lead to disastrous results for many and wealth to only a select few. Furthermore, the actual percentage of built work completed under the guidance of an architect, or any of our allied fields, is so minor compared to the enormity of our built environment that one might, rather, begin to question our professional model. A second model claims architecture as a cultural practice in which the example of the humanities determines the discourse. This, too, is one of the aims of an accredited school of architecture and the relationship between architecture and culture is longstanding. All cultures, for example, build, and all cultures tell stories. It is clear that architecture has always been about more than shelter alone. Taken too far or seen in isolation, however, this model may lead to either the referential labyrinth or the autonomous sphere as described so precisely by Manfredo Tafuri. Neither is completely fulfilling, and, it is hard to live in a house made of paper. A third model sees architecture as an applied science in which decisions are made based upon measurable, reproducible, idealized, and generic outcomes. This pseudo-scientism in architecture by way of “performance” is getting the most press lately and, in the

face of a global environmental crisis, it is hard to argue that architecture need do much else. Our shared fascination with all things technological may, however, not be the answer to a timeless architecture. Dare I propose that “timeless” is perhaps the most environmentally appropriate approach? If anything, history has shown that all modes of scientific progress eventually become normalized and are folded into building codes. Advances such as electricity, plumbing, and fire safety, once understood as novel technologies, for example, have become the norm. This, too, will most likely be the fate of our technological responses to the global crisis. (Can you guess who might LEED the way?) In the end, perhaps it is better to ask both what the building does and what the building means. While none of the above models wholly address the way in which one thinks about architecture, they are each, in some part, essential.

It is, hopefully, clear that Heidegger’s essay cannot be read as an instrumental guide to building. Rather, the import of the essay is in the awareness that the act of building is inherently related to the act of thinking. Both thinking and building require that we recognize our capacity to dwell. Thinking is not a cognitive act, but is rather a letting go. It is an opening up to phenomena rather than a reduction to abstraction or conceptualization. This may be the most important lesson in the text. Heidegger, often seen as somehow abstruse or abstract, was in fact most interested in the concrete realities of our existence. The lessons are, however, open and ask that you propose your own response.

So, what do you think?



Distort Windows:

Notes

1 For more information on the postdigital, I highly recommend the writings of artist Mel Alexenberg (<http://www.melalexenberg.com>).

Distort Windows, its companion piece Diffuse Globes and the Glass Cast research project as a whole were a huge undertaking that wouldn't have been possible without the help of numerous individuals:

Project Team:

Wes McGee of Matter Studio Design and Cathlyn Newell of Alibi Studio with Aaron Willette, Lucy Olechowski, Brandon Clifford

Fabrication Team:

Grant Weaver, Simon Rolka, Patrick Ethen, Maciej Kaczynski, Etienne Turpin, Andrew Stern, Brian Muscat, Chuck Newell

Consultant:

Steve Karnowski

The work was graciously funded by:

Research Through Making Grant | Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning
Office of the Vice President of Research | University of Michigan

For more information on Distort Windows, please visit www.pixelwhore.com

Re:reading Heidegger:

Postscript

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While I do not speak German, I do notice a curiosity in the translation of Heidegger's text from the original German to English. In the translation, all three words in the title are gerunds. The title is not "to build, to dwell, to think" but rather "build-ing dwell-ing think-ing." To each word, the suffix "-ing" is added and each becomes active. Germans, however, do not use a suffix to imply a non-finite verb. This function is served by a nominalized infinitive (*das Rauchen, das Sprechen*). The verb turns into a noun. In everyday speech, one does not use the nominalized infinitive. It is simply understood that the action is continuing. To say, for example, "I am thinking of you" (*Ich denke an dich*), the word *denke* is the present form of *denken*. As mentioned, in Heidegger's essay, the German infinitives "*Wohnen Bauen Denken*" are translated into English as the gerunds, "Building Dwelling Thinking." What might this mean?

In the prelude to his wonderful study on music theory, *Musicking*, Christopher Small discusses the shift in the representation of musical performance. He notes that the score of a performance was, for many years, written not before, but after the piece was performed. Now, however, classical music is often performed in strict adherence to a particular score and the value of the piece is in reference to that score. The title of Small's book, *Musicking*, creates a gerund from the noun "music" to describe the way in which music was understood prior to the transformation from performance to representation. Music was an event, not a document. If one considers the translation of the title in Heidegger's essay, perhaps there is the possibility to think of building, dwelling, and thinking as events, as performances. With all the press that the nature of performative design is getting in architectural discourse these days, can we ask what is the nature of architecture-ing?

Re:reading Heidegger:

Notes

1 For a more "architectural" reading, see Karsten Harries, "In Search of Home," *Bauen und Wohnen / Building and Dwelling*, Martin Heidegger's Foundation of a Phenomenology of Architecture, Ed. Eduard Führr (Münster: Waxmann, 2000): 101-120.

2 Victor Farias ignited a long dormant controversy with his *Victor Farias, Heidegger et le nazisme* (Paris: Éditions Verdier, 1987). The book offers a wealth of primary sources, however, the interpretation of those sources has been hotly contested. Students of Heidegger, notably Hannah Arendt, supported the philosopher who, oddly, did not ever issue an official response to his involvement in National Socialism.

3 David Leatherbarrow develops this theme, architecturally, in a series of essays. See, for example, Leatherbarrow, David. "Landings and Crossings." and "Practically Primitive." *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009).

4 The word *technē* and its specific relation to technology is discussed further by Heidegger in his essay, "Question Concerning Technology" *Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Tr. William Lovitt. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

5 See, Tafuri, Manfredo. *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*. Tr. Pellegrino d'Acerno and Robert Connolly, (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1980).

6 For more on the idea of thinking as letting go, see, Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, Tr. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, (New York, Harper & Row: 1966).

References

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "Apologia for the Art of Healing." *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*. Tr. Jason Geiger & Nick Walker. (Stanford: Stanford UPress, 1996).

Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, Tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971): 145-61. The German text originally appeared in Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Günther Neske Verlag, 1954): 145-62.

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Tr. John Stambaugh, (New York: SUNY Press, 2010).

Martin Heidegger, "Question Concerning Technology" *Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Tr. William Lovitt. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

Chris Small, *Musicking: the Meanings of Performing and Listening*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UPress: 1998).