

# Between the thinking hand and the eyes of the skin: Pragmatist aesthetics and architecture

*Entre a mão pensante e os olhos da pele: estética pragmatista e arquitetura*

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**Abstract:** The built world, the architectural world, is, as John Dewey put it, “supremely expressive of human interests and values,” influencing the future, but also recording and conveying the past. It “records and celebrates more than any other art the generic features of our common human life.” Buildings, he writes, among all art objects come the nearest to “expressing the stability and endurance of existence. They are to mountains what music is to the sea.” I sketch some novel links between a pragmatist experiential aesthetics and the rich work of the Finnish philosophically sophisticated practicing architect, Juhani Pallasmaa. In his *The eyes of the skin* Pallasmaa takes up the theme of ‘architecture and the senses’ and fleshes out in the case of architecture a central Deweyan claim: the built world should be held to the measure of how well it is so constructed that we are activated on all these levels of our bodily being. Pallasmaa gives an architect’s ‘take’ on this with the help of different, yet complementary, philosophical tools. In *The thinking hand* he focuses on the heuristic fertility and exemplificational value of the ‘handed’ or ‘hand-guided’ processes involved in the creative design of the built world as opposed to privileged use of the computer. Pallasmaa sees the thinking hand as a kind of mediating device overcoming the divide, which Dewey also wanted to do, between the shaping and the automatic arts, allowing a central role for body-based imagination. Pallasmaa’s focus on the haptic dimension of perception and the ‘thinking hand’ is, like Dewey’s focus on “total organic resonance,” not just descriptive but normative. Their analyses and concepts are of universal relevance for our understanding not just architecture but the aesthetic dimension of life quite generally.

**Keywords:** Dewey. Pallasmaa. Haptic dimension. Total organic resonance. Thinking hand. Eyes of the skin.

**Resumo:** *O mundo construído, o mundo da arquitetura, nas palavras de Dewey, é “supremamente expressivo dos interesses e valores humanos”, influenciando o futuro, mas também recordando e transmitindo o passado. Ele “recorda e celebra mais que qualquer outra arte as características genéricas da nossa vida humana comum”. Prédios, ele escreve, entre todos os objetos de arte, são os que chegam mais próximo ao “expressar a*

estabilidade e persistência da existência. Eles são para as montanhas o que a música é para o mar". Eu traço algumas ligações novas entre uma estética pragmatista experiencial e o rico trabalho do arquiteto praticante finlandês e filosoficamente sofisticado, Jubani Pallasmaa. Em seu *Os olhos da pele*, Pallasmaa retoma o tema da 'arquitetura e os sentidos' e desenvolve no caso da arquitetura uma afirmação deweyana central: o mundo construído deve ser medido por quão bem fora construído de forma a nos ativar em todos estes níveis de nosso ser corpóreo. Pallasmaa proporciona uma "tomada" de arquiteto com a ajuda de diferentes, embora complementares, ferramentas filosóficas. Em *A mão pensante*, ele foca na fertilidade heurística e valor exemplificador dos processos "manuais" ou "guiados a mão" envolvidos no design do mundo construído em oposição ao uso privilegiado do computador. Pallasmaa vê a mão pensante como uma espécie de dispositivo mediador que supera o abismo, que também Dewey queria, entre as artes formativas e automáticas, permitindo um papel central para a imaginação baseado no corpo. O foco de Pallasmaa da dimensão háptica da percepção e a "mão pensante" é, como o foco de Dewey na "ressonância orgânica total", não apenas descritivo, mas normativo. Suas análises e conceitos são de relevância universal para a compreensão não apenas da arquitetura mas da dimensão estética da vida de forma geral.

**Palavras-chave:** Dewey. Dimensão háptica. Pallasmaa. Mão pensante. *Olhos da pele*. Ressonância orgânica total.

## 1 Perceptual Matrices

John Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics as developed in his *Art as Experience* (1934; hereafter cited as *AE*) offers indispensable analytical tools for our understanding and evaluation of architecture and its generative processes and their place in human life.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Direct and diverse links to the topics and figures of this paper can be found in: Alberto Pérez-Gomez, *Attunement: architectural meaning after the crisis of modern science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), Sarah Robinson and Jubani Pallasmaa (eds.), *Mind in architecture: neuroscience, embodiment, and the future of design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), Richard Sennett, *Building and dwelling: ethics for the city* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018). Steen Eiler Rasmussen's classic *Experiencing Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1959) is still richly rewarding, especially in light of his remark that the book "is about how we perceive things that surround us and it has proved difficult to find the right words for this," a task he carried out with a sure hand. Some profoundly insightful "right words," rooted in the concerns of a broad and humane pragmatism, are to be found in classic essays on cities and the urban environment by the recently deceased John McDermott in *Streams of experience* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) and *The Culture of Experience* (New York: New York University Press, 1976). Much of the content of these volumes has been collected in John J. McDermott, *The drama of possibility: experience as philosophy of culture*, edited by Douglas R. Anderson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007). I have also treated many of the themes and background conditions of this paper in various places and from different angles. Of especial relevance are three chapters in my *Pragmatism and the forms of sense* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002) on "Technics and the Bias of Perception: The Tacit Logic of Embodied Meanings," "Pragmatist Aesthetics as

The built world, the architectural world, is, as Dewey put it, “supremely expressive of human interests and values” (AE: 225). It influences the future. It records and conveys the past. It informs the present. For Dewey, architecture “records and celebrates more than any other art the generic features of our common human life.” It is the fusion of *building* and *dwelling*, as Heidegger wrote, a theme taken up in a different way by Richard Sennett (SENNETT, 2018) that marks humanity’s universal activity to make a place for itself and *ground* itself *on* and sometimes *in* the earth. Dewey writes that buildings come the nearest to expressing “the stability and endurance of existence. They are to mountains what music is to the sea” (AE: 234).

Dewey does not claim that architecture is the highest art form. He leans for various reasons toward the priority of literature and painting. But the designed and built world exists all around us. It engages us on all levels in our everydayness and exemplifies and confirms in the highest degree Dewey’s assertion that aesthetic experience is first and foremost a matter of *perception* in the fullest sense, including imaginative perception. It involves, at the ideal limit, a ‘total organic response.’ The products of architecture and its subsidiary and connected arts of design (door knobs and handles, light fixtures, furniture of all sorts, tea kettles and beer glasses) are universally accessible without our having to go to museums and concert halls. We can test the aesthetic status and import of architecture and the built world by measuring their perceptual and symbolic richness without going to museums.

*Art as Experience* is deeply critical of much, but certainly not all, architectural practices, especially in the United States, in that period of industrial capitalism. Dewey writes (AE: 346):

As long as art is the beauty parlor of civilization, neither art nor civilization is secure. Why is the architecture of our large cities so unworthy of a fine civilization? It is not from lack of materials nor from lack of technical capacity. And yet it is not merely slums but the apartments of the well-to-do that are esthetically repellent, because they are so destitute of imagination. Their character is determined by an economic system in which land is used—and kept out of use—for the sake of gain, because of profit derived from rental and sale. Until land is freed from this economic burden, beautiful buildings may occasionally be erected, but there is little hope for the rise of general architectural construction worthy of a noble civilization.

In this passage, written in the time of the American depression, Dewey offers not just a descriptive but also a multi-levelled normative framework for an analysis of architecture. It is, however, not principally a social and political normative framework concerning the tension between use values and exchange values or between the well-to-do and those dwelling in slums. For Dewey, the social and political critiques are themselves based upon a kind of ideal of ‘aesthetic rationality,’ rooted in the body as the matrix of our encounter or rather

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Critique of Technology,” and “Form and Technics: Nature, Semiotics, and the ‘Information Revolution.’ See also my paper, ‘America as an Assemblage of Placeways: Toward a Meshwork of Lifelines,’ *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31/1: 40-62.

intertwining with the world.<sup>2</sup> About this intertwining Dewey writes that it is “an act of perception [that] proceeds by waves that extend serially throughout the entire organism” (*AE*: 59). Living in the built world affects us ‘all the way’ down—and, of course, all ‘the way up’ to the symbolic level. Architectural practices of design and building, on Deweyan principles, must be carried out not just with full recognition of the perceptual *effects* of its products. Dewey and, as we shall see, the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa have foregrounded the perceptual *roots* of the formative factors of the processes of *design and production* which enter into and inform these effects.

Yi-Fu Tuan, a cultural geographer, writing in his *Space and Place* (1977), has a passage bearing upon the perceptual matrices of this problem:

Building is a complex activity. It makes people aware and take heed at different levels: at the level of having to make pragmatic decisions; of envisioning architectural spaces in the mind and on paper; and of committing one’s whole being, mind and body, to the creation of a material form that captures an ideal. Once achieved, architectural form is an environment for man. How does it then influence human feeling and consciousness? The analogy of language throws light on the question. Words contain and intensify feeling. Without words feeling reaches a momentary peak and quickly disappears. Perhaps one reason why animal emotions do not reach the intensity and duration of human ones is that animals have no language to hold emotions so that they can either grow or fester. The built environment, like language, has the power to define and refine sensibility. It can sharpen and enlarge consciousness. Without architecture, feelings about space must remain diffuse and fleeting. (p. 106-7).

The contours of the experiential side of this phenomenon are also engaged by E. V. Walter in his *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment* (1988), which is devoted to the development of “topistics” (from Greek *topos*, “place”). Walter writes: “Human experience makes a place, but a place lives in its own way. Its form of experience occupies persons—the place locates experience in people. A place is a matrix of energies, generating representations and causing changes in awareness” (p. 131). The idea of a place “locating” experience in people is a provocative one, as is the contention that “the energies of place flow through its meanings” (p. 12). These meanings are not just in or addressed to the ‘head’ but are materially embodied and become ‘located’ in our bodies. Dewey writes as to ‘location’ (*AE*: 217; my emphasis): “*Space* is inane save as occupied with *active volumes* [...] *Extension* sprawls and finally benumbs if it does not interact with *place* so as to assume *intelligible distribution*. *Mass* is *nothing fixed*. It contracts and expands, asserts itself and yields, according to its *relations* to other spatial and enduring things.” The relations of form, rhythm, balance, and organization, Dewey points out,

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2 I have treated the issue of aesthetic rationality in Innis (1983) and with reference to Dewey in chapter 5, ‘Pragmatist Aesthetics as Critique of Technology,’ in Innis (2002).

following Peirce, are present as *qualities* in perception, giving it a distinctive ‘tone’ or *quale*. Joseph Grange, in his book *The City: An Urban Ecology* (1999), writes that there is a “certain tone of feeling that pervades a particular urban region, structure, or event” (p. 97).<sup>3</sup>

Dewey’s philosophical naturalism strongly affirms our essential rootedness in the material world in all its dimensions. Dewey sees the surroundings that humans have made or are forced to live in arising from large scale industrialization as offering meager fulfillments and eliciting repulsions of an unprecedented order. He sees in the midst of the great depression the continuing effects of the ‘Satanic mills’ of modern industry and of an unregulated economic system of production for private gain at public expense that John Ruskin, independently of the analyses of Marx, subjected to devastating aesthetic criticism. Still, Dewey writes:

There are, however, certain considerations that should deter one from concluding that industrial conditions render impossible an integration of art in civilization [...] Every well-constructed object and machine has form, but there is esthetic form only when the object having this external form fits into a larger experience. Interaction of the material of this experience with the utensil or machine cannot be left out of account [...] There is something clean in the esthetic sense about a piece of machinery that has a logical structure that fits it for its work, and the polish of steel and copper that is essential to good performance is intrinsically pleasing in perception [...] The external architecture of city apartments remains box-like but internally there is hardly less than an esthetic revolution brought about by better adaptation to need. (*AE*: 344).

This need is an aesthetic need in the broadest sense. Dewey writes that the “organism hungers naturally for satisfaction in the material of experience [...] The hunger of the organism for satisfaction through the eye is hardly less than its urgent impulsion for food” (*AE*: 345). It is not just the eye, but the living body in its full reality that hungers. As Dewey writes (*AE*: 127):

It is not just the visual apparatus but the whole organism that interacts with the environment in all but routine action. The eye, ear, or whatever, is only the channel *through* which the total response takes place. A color as seen is always qualified by implicit reactions of many organs, those of the sympathetic system as well as touch. It is a funnel for the total energy put forth, not its well-spring. Colors are sumptuous and rich just because a total organic response is deeply implicated in them.

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3 I have developed this theme in more detail in my ‘America as Assemblage of Placeways: Toward a Meshwork of Lifelines’ (INNIS, 2017), incorporating important materials and notions from the work of the anthropologist Tim Ingold.

## 2 Thematic intersections

There is ample support in our own experiences and life contexts for Dewey's valuable observations and demands. Dewey's guidelines, as well as those of Tuan and Walter, point us toward the 'pressure points' where a pragmatist aesthetics, especially in Dewey's mode inspired by Peirce's theory of quality and James's theme-field-margin schema of experience, comes into contact with the omnipresent pressing reality of the built world in all its variety.

These pressure points are foregrounded in the work of the philosophically sophisticated practicing Finnish architect, Juhani Pallasmaa. Pallasmaa offers novel links to, and extensions of, Dewey's pragmatist experiential aesthetics and its bearing upon architecture. In *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* Pallasmaa (2005; cited in text as *EOS*) 'fleshes out' in the case of architecture a central Deweyan descriptive and normative claim: *The built world should be held to the measure of how well it is so constructed that we are activated on all levels of our bodily being.* In *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (2009; cited in text as *TH*) Pallasmaa confirms and illustrates the 'handed' or 'hand-guided' generative matrix of processes of organizing energies that are involved in the creative design of the built world. Pallasmaa sees the hand as the key to the processes of architectural design that respect the contribution of embodied imagination to the realization of the 'haptic' dimension. This dimension, he claims, is central to taking the measure of architecture's reaching of its goal. Works of architecture are designed and produced and dwelt in as repositories of existential meaning that 'touch us' and evoke the 'total organic response' that Dewey sees as integral to 'having an experience' and not just passing through it.

I want to illustrate three links between Dewey and Pallasmaa: (a) the foregrounding of the 'handedness' of design, (b) the relation between feeling and materiality in architecture, and (c) architecture as the articulation of an existential space of meaning.

### *On design and the hand*

A passage in *Art as Experience* anticipates Pallasmaa's account of the thinking hand.

Writer, composer of music, sculptor, or painter can retrace, during the process of production, what they have previously done. When it is not satisfactory in the undergoing or perceptual phase of experience, they can to some degree start afresh. This retracing is not readily accomplished in the case of architecture—which is perhaps one reason why there are so many ugly buildings. Architects are obliged to complete their idea before its translation into a complete object of perception takes place. Inability to build up simultaneously the idea and its objective embodiment imposes a handicap. Nevertheless, they too are obliged to think out their ideas in terms of the medium of embodiment and the object of ultimate perception unless they work mechanically and by rote. Probably the esthetic quality of medieval cathedrals is due in some measure to the fact that

their constructions were not so much controlled by plans and specifications made in advance as is now the case. Plans grew as the building grew. But even a Minerva-like product, if it is artistic, presupposes a prior period of gestation in which doings and perceptions projected in imagination interact and mutually modify one another. Every work of art follows the plan of, and pattern of, a complete experience, rendering it more intensely and concentratedly felt (AE: 58).

Pallasmaa goes further and deeper than Dewey in specifying the lessons of architectural practice and not just its results. He sees in modern architectural design's dependence on the computer a gross undervaluing of the "tacit understanding of the body in the making of architecture" due to the "quasi-rationality and arrogant self-consciousness" of today's culture. For him—and also for the Finnish tradition in which he has lived and worked—architecture is a "product of the knowing hand. The hand grasps the physicality and materiality of thought and turns it into a concrete image. In the arduous processes of designing, the hand often takes the lead in probing for a vision, a vague inkling that it eventually turns into a sketch, a materialisation of an idea" (TH: 16-17).

Pallasmaa has serious reservation about the ascendance on the computer at the initial stages of designing or imagining an architectural work as a complex whole. Computer imaging in his conception involves a flattening of the design process's active multisensory and synchronic imagining of the emerging architectural idea, turning the process into a "passive visual manipulation, a retinal journey" (EOS: 12). But it is not, in his opinion, only flattening. His claim is that the computer creates 'distance' between the maker of a design and its object. Drawing by hand and working with physical models, analogue procedures *par excellence*, have a 'haptic' dimension that is absent from the abstract mathematized and digital space of the computer model that is taking form in front of the architect who chooses from a continuum of pre-given points that are then subject to easy manipulation. They leave no 'trace' in the literal sense of being grounded in the prior groping with charcoal, pen, or pencil to find the 'feel' of appropriate form on paper. In the processes of manual drawing the object to be created that is taking shape in the imagination is, Pallasmaa argues, "held in the hand and inside the head" (EOS: 12-13). This is, Pallasmaa holds, the source of the necessary *empathy* and *compassion* that allows us to project ourselves into the space to be filled by and determining a structure in which life and movement are to be situated and take place.

### *Feeling and materiality*

As to the relations between feeling in the broadest sense and materiality, Pallasmaa makes the contentious claim, which we should all reflect upon depending on the built-environmental situations in which we each live, that "modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless" (EOS: 19). The impact of modernist design on the experience of architecture, Pallasmaa claims, has been profound. For Pallasmaa authentic architectural experiences do not consist

in apprehending a façade, or a constellation of façades, in a formal manner, as if that were a building's essence and the ground of its relations to other buildings, something that many of us do or are inclined to do. Pallasmaa recognizes rather that we move *into*, *in*, and *among* buildings. The building or building complex is approached and entered, but not as if we are entering contemplatively into the world of a painting or a stage set, although there are certainly many successful instances of this such as my beloved Piazza Sant'Ignazio in Rome or the quite different Piazza del Popolo. Indeed, Gernot Böhme (see BÖHME, 2017a, 2017b) has shown how the 'art of staging' is a heuristic clue to an aesthetics of atmospheres, including those atmospheres that define and are embodied in buildings as distinct felt spaces.

In the paradigmatic case of a single domestic building, Pallasmaa argues, although the point is quite general, we have to think in *verbal* forms. It is the act of *entering*, and not simply the visual design of the door or gate, the act of *looking* in or out through a window or along a perspective, rather than the window itself as a material object to be merely seen in relation to other windows (and that are primarily looked at from the outside as part of the building's surface), or the feeling of *occupying* a sphere of warmth, whether physical or 'atmospheric.' *Entering*, *looking*, *occupying*: do these not also correspond to our engagement with the Baroque *sceneggiatura* of Piazza Sant'Ignazio or the Neoclassical reconfiguration of the space encountered entering through the Porta del Popolo, the Porta Flaminia of ancient Rome. As Pallasma puts it: "Architectural space is lived space rather than physical space, and lived space always transcends geometry and measurability," even if it respects it and relies upon it. (*Eyes of the Skin*, Kindle 1295-1298). The lived geometry of Piazza Sant'Ignazio differs radically *in feel* from that of the Piazza del Popolo just in the case of Boston, São Paulo, New York, Chicago, Rome, Buenos Aires, although we do not need such 'famous' exemplars to illustrate the point.

Pallasmaa argues that in the design process the architect must first of all imaginatively *feel* himself or herself into the space, internalising

[...] the landscape, the entire context, and the functional requirements as well as his/her conceived building: movement, balance and scale are felt unconsciously through the body as tensions in the muscular system and in the positions of the skeleton and inner organs. As the work interacts with the body of the observer, the experience mirrors the bodily sensations of the maker. Consequently, architecture is communication from the body of the architect directly to the body of the person who encounters the work, perhaps centuries later. (*EOS*: 66-67).

Looked at this way, the 'meaning' or 'significance' of a building—or built and occupied space framed by buildings—is not merely conceptual or a function of being constructed according to some set of coded elements or 'orders.'<sup>4</sup>

A passage in *Art as Experience* goes further in foregrounding the bodily materiality of a building—or configuration of buildings that make up a village, town, city, or even region.

4 They can also be illuminated and understood in this way as semiotic approaches to architecture have shown, although not without criticism.



The trait that characterizes architecture in an emphatic sense is that its media are the (relatively) raw materials of nature and of the fundamental modes of natural energy. Its effects are dependent upon features that belong in dominant measure to just these materials. All of the “shaping” arts bend natural materials and forms of energy to serve some human desire [...]. Compare buildings with other artistic products and you are at once struck by the indefinitely wide range of materials it adopts to its ends—wood, stone, steel, cement, burnt clay, glass, rushes, [...] as compared with the relatively restricted number of materials available in painting, sculpture, poetry. (*AE*: 233-234).

Can we not think of architecture and the built world as a kind of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, part of the staging of the human opera of life? Architecture takes up the natural energies of gravity, stress, thrust as well as the perceived qualities of these materials to express what Dewey calls the “enduring values of collective human life.” Or—in the case of much ‘monumental architecture’—the enduring disvalues and contradictions, too, as the contentious debate on the status of Confederate monuments in the United States has shown, already anticipated by Dewey’s remark about the “esthetic vulgarity” of “our terrible civil-war monuments” (*AE*: 173).

### *Architecture and the articulation of the existential space of meaning*

As to the relation between architecture and the articulation of the existential space of meaning, Dewey thinks of the ‘representational’—or semiotic—dimension of architecture as encompassing the “memories, hopes, fears, purposes, and sacred values” (*AE*: 230) of those who dwell in and act in the different types of structures—palaces, fortresses, temples, domestic dwellings, public fora, law courts, museums, prisons, and so forth. This dimension is what Langer (1953) called the ‘ethnic domain.’ It is the *pattern of relations* between these types of structures that a critical pragmatism (and a pragmatist semiotics) must attend to. There is no reason to assume that there cannot be severe contrasts and tensions between those who interact and engage one another within the contexts of the social, political, and cultural forces located in and symbolized by these structures, whose material quality or degree of aesthetic value are indicative of social relations. A building, such as a prison, does not have an inevitable connection with just engineering, but with power, especially the power to control and constrain human affects and the occupation of preferential spaces. Dewey sees aesthetic values in architecture—or the lack thereof and the presence of other ‘values’—as “peculiarly dependent upon meanings drawn from collective human life” (*AE*: 242), but we must hesitate to always think of ‘aesthetic’ here in a laudatory sense. There is an aesthetics of control and power that *encloses* just as there is an aesthetics that engages us in or furthers the *open* play of embodied meaning.

Clearly, however, if we tried to respond with full attention to every perceptual detail of the enviroing built world we would be paralyzed, although we can also be both enriched as well as paralyzed against our will by the prevalence

of tacit apprehensions of our surroundings. Nevertheless, we can still agree with Pallasmaa's contention, which mirrors Dewey's own position as well as those of Tuan and Walter:

In memorable experiences of architecture, space, matter and time fuse into one singular dimension, into the basic substance of being, that penetrates our consciousness. We identify ourselves with this space, this place, this moment, and these dimensions become ingredients of our very existence. Architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation takes place through the senses. (*EOS*: 72).

This penetration occurs in many ways 'behind our backs' or at least without any thematic action on our part by means of the tacit assimilation of the 'affordances' found in the environmental array that we do not focally attend to but embody ourselves in. Architecture and the built world are not concerned with mere 'visual aestheticisation', functioning as a kind of veneer on something that would putatively perform its function without it. Architecture's power is rooted in the deep structures and processes of *aesthesis* quite generally, as Böhme has convincingly argued.

Pallasmaa ascribes to architecture a higher calling even if it is permanently situated in an 'aesthetic' matrix. Architecture in his view is most fundamentally a "mode of existential and metaphysical philosophising through the means of space, structure, matter, gravity and light. Profound architecture does not merely beautify the settings of dwelling: great buildings articulate the experiences of our very existence" (*Thinking Hand*, p. 19). They 'articulate' in the sense of 'make manifest' or 'exemplify' or 'materially' embody these experiences and their constitutive conditions. We can authentically dwell in them to the degree that they, as Polanyi puts it, "integrate, or effect the integration of, the diffuse aspects of our existence in time into a felt unity" (POLANYI, 1975, p. 75) and function as symbols to which we surrender ourselves.

While Pallasmaa clearly is thinking of 'articulation' as something positive, clearly any building or conglomeration of buildings also can 'articulate' experiences that lack the 'quickening' power of 'profound' architecture or built surroundings by being either functionally transparent or 'deadening.' Like Dewey, Pallasmaa recognizes this negative side of architecture. "Architectural ugliness or existential falseness can make us experience alienation and weakening of the sense of self, and finally make us fall mentally and somatically ill" (*TH*: 133). Is this not, as in the case of the United States and clearly others near and far, a by-product of slums or racially segregated communities, egregiously decrepit public housing projects, prisons, public offices and so forth, one of the 'architectural' sources of the increasingly wide-spread politics of resentment and anger and the widespread ruling of our lives by negative comparisons. Pallasmaa argues that we need an architecture "that makes us experience the world rather than itself" (*TH*: 133). A work of architecture, he says, "places itself directly in our existential experience [...] Architecture does not invent meaning; it can move us only if it is capable of touching something already buried deep in our embodied memories" (*TH*: 135-136)—or fail to move or touch us in some positive fashion because something else is buried deep and is reinforced by the material circumstances of our lives.

Societies, and different groups within them, have structured, or been forced to structure, and live in different existential spaces that ground their collective identities and senses of togetherness or apartness. Pallasmaa is right, as is Dewey, to affirm that it is the essential purpose of architecture, whether monumental or not, to structure and articulate the existential flesh of the world that makes up our exosomatic bodies and gives it specific meanings. “Architecture turns the soulless physical world into a home of man. We know and remember who we are and where we belong fundamentally through our cities and buildings, our constructed world, the human—architecturally humanised—microcosm” (*TH*: 128)—or, as the case may be, architecturally dehumanised.<sup>5</sup>

Pallasmaa’s approach to architecture may seem to focus inordinately on ‘aesthetically remarkable’ architecture and forms. But his concern for hapticity and the all-aroundness of our perception and indwelling in the environment is central to the critical ‘bite’ of his analyses and proposals. They bear upon the wide theme of the ‘politics of architecture’ and its philosophical import. Pallasmaa cites a rather startling statement of Wittgenstein from his *Culture and Value*: “Work on philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)” (1984: 24).

What does one expect of the self-work of an architect? For Pallasmaa an architect is first and foremost a craftsman attuned to the demands of the materials that support his or her work and, most importantly, is attuned to the demands of those for *whom* one is working and *where* one is working (see Sennett 2009 for wide-ranging examination of the matrices of craftsmanship, including especially the social). The architect must have the kind of knowledge of the lived contexts of building that, for example, a skilled athlete has in operating in a “field inhabited by a ‘knowing body’” (*TH*: 124). Just as musician pours himself or herself into the music, so the architect has also, at least ideally, poured his life and existential knowledge into what he has built — or has failed to do so for various reasons: political, economic, technical.

The authentic or ideal architect, Pallasmaa argues, “needs to internalise the client, the other, and develop the design for his altered self” (*TH*: 125), that is, so to design that a truly habitable ‘existential space’ is constructed for whom it is intended. Indeed, “the architect needs to create his/her ideal client in the process of design” (*TH*: 125), not by imposing a rigid philosophical schema on the evolving structure but by following the culturally diversified lived logics of being in space and place and of coming to dwell in a locus where one’s energies are organized and one comes to rest in place, being-at-home-in-the-world—whatever that world

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5 Pallasmaa cites a passage from Wittgenstein, who famously designed a dwelling for his sister that was incompatible with the living logic of domestic space: “Architecture immortalises and glorifies something. Hence, there can be no architecture, where there is nothing to glorify” (p. 74 in: *Culture and Value*, 1998). In such circumstances, loss of the ideal dimension of life implies architecture’s disappearance – even at the most pedestrian level. What Pallasmaa calls ‘meaningful buildings’ “arise from tradition and they constitute and continue a tradition” (2009, p. 146). They ‘articulate’ a tradition both positively and negatively and in this way perhaps stand as a permanent measure of what we have to live up to or try to escape from.

should be. Not every work of architecture or habitat need be or can be profound. One needs a background matrix, with its own distinctive quality, that informs and frames one's everydayness, but one also needs forms of buildings and lived spaces that embody and activate not just one's individual and collective memory but point toward ideals that should bind us together and not tear us apart. For Pallasmaa as for Dewey "architecture provides our most important existential icons by which we can understand both our culture and ourselves" (*TH*: 147). The architect must "defend the enigma of life and the eroticism of the life world" (*TH*: 148)—in the face of existential emptiness and erotic or sensuous impoverishment.

Pallasmaa thinks of architecture as opposing the speeding up of things that marks modernity—and of those that seek in vain to catch up to it. But it is hard in light of a world in turmoil with the spreading of the clamor of megalopolises to find a way for architecture "to slow down experience, halt time, and defend the natural slowness and diversity of experience [...] to maintain and defend silence" (p. 150), clearly a Nordic preference, but perhaps best thought of more as a dimension than as a predominant frame for lived existential space and time. A city or urban conglomeration is not a monastery. If the duty of architecture in the broadest sense, as Pallasmaa conceives it, is to "to survey ideals and new modes of perception and experience, and thus open up and widen the boundaries of our lived world" (p. 150), it must become an art form—and the generative core of a life form—of "eye, the hand, the head and the heart" (p. 147), both in its construction and in our existential indwelling in it.

### 3 Concluding remarks

Pallasmaa's phenomenology of the eyes of the skin and the thinking hand is deeply pragmatist and adds nuance and detail grounded in architectural practice to Dewey's comprehensive experiential aesthetics. Dewey writes that art—and by extension architecture—as a "unique transcript of the energy of things of the world" operates by "selecting those potencies in things by which an experience—any experience—has significance and value," that is, "act upon us and interest us" (*AE*: 189). Dewey's aesthetic approach is far from focusing on the monumental. It encompasses all the forms of everydayness in which we live out our lives and which we both assimilate and are assimilated to in the formation of habits.

Around all the objects, situations, and events that determine and inform the affective, actional, and conceptual fields making up the existential space of our lives, is found a Jamesian margin or aura of resonances that mark the infinite iridescences of consciousness that are bound together by a defining quality. The art of life is played out in all the forms of experiencing. Dewey writes that "in every experience, there is the pervading underlying qualitative whole that corresponds to and manifests the whole organization of activities which constitute the mysterious human frame" (*AE*: 200). We are located in dynamic fields of experiencing growing by its edges. Dewey and Pallasmaa recognize that the seemingly arrhythmic "bustle and ado of modern life" present special problems for architects and for all of us who must live in a primarily built and designed world marked by a profusion of materials and activities that seem to run on their own with no concern for us and pull us in. But it is incumbent on us, following Dewey and Pallasmaa, to attempt to construct an

environment composed rhythmically, marked by orders exemplifying a ‘rationality among qualities’ (AE: 174), an aesthetic norm that transcends art in the strict sense.<sup>6</sup>

A pragmatist approach to architecture, following Dewey and Pallasmaa, sees every structure, whether important or not, as, in Dewey’s words a “treasury of storied memories” or a “registering of cherished expectancies for the future” (AE 230), and also as a present existing repository of affective, perceptual, and symbolic valences. We need to see and measure them through the eyes of the skin, recognizing that no perceptual occasion ultimately leaves us indifferent or unchanged. They operate behind our backs and often against our will. We should see the multiform structures of architecture, like literature, working with what Dewey called “loaded dice,” their materials “charged with meanings they have absorbed through immemorial time” and presenting the values of collective life (AE 249). It is up to us to determine whether the meanings and values embodied in these structures enliven or deaden us and whether they exemplify and further the ideals of a life worthy of living in all its dimensions—and, if not, why not.

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6 These objects, situations, and events display what Susanne Langer called ‘gradients.’ This notion is of capital importance for a phenomenologically adequate reflection on the sensory factors of our lived experience. Langer points out that “gradients of all sorts — of relative clarity, complexity, tempo, intensity of feeling, interest, not to mention geometric gradations (the concept of ‘gradient’ is a generalization from relations of height) — permeate all artistic structure” (Langer 1967: 211) – including the built world and the play of forms in nature as a whole. Such gradients run through them and make up their rhythmic quality (1967: 212).

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