



Loneliness and Solitude in Architecture: Estrangement and Belonging in the Existential Experience

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“Existential outsidership involves a self-conscious and reflective uninvolvedness and alienation from people and places, a homelessness, a sense of unreality of the world, and not of belonging.”¹
(Edward Relph)

“Works of art are of an infinite solitude.”²
(Rainer Maria Rilke)

We usually think of loneliness as a singular situational, social or mental experience of being detached from place, domicile, or other human beings. However, there are two modes of loneliness; one is due to external causes, while the second arises from internal mental causes. In all cases, loneliness is a subjective experience of feeling disconnected, un- and uprooted, and without interaction with the world. This understanding seems to be the implied meaning of the notion of “loneliness.” In addition to signifying structural, spatial and social exclusion, loneliness can also be a mental condition, a psychic incapacity to experience being placed and connected, and this could be called “mental homelessness.” Both cases are involuntary and undesirable detachments from the culturally and socially shared space. Place and placedness are fundamental conditions of human consciousness, as already Aristotle argued.³ Everything is necessarily always placed in the human world. Architecture structures and articulates the placedness of our experiential world.

The two modes of being alone

We usually regard loneliness as a solely negative condition, of the lack or loss of meaningful relationships and connections. But there is another, opposite and entirely positive manner of being alone, feeling a balance between the self and the world, though consciously withdrawing into oneself. This mode of being alone is conveyed by the English word *solitude*. It is a favourable and desired condition, a *conditio sine qua non* for creative work. As Rilke confesses in the motto of my talk: “Works of art are of an infinite solitude.” The artist, writer and poet, sculptor, composer and architect, as well as the scientist and philosopher, needs this specific solitude and emotive separation in her creative work. Solitude is the mode of being alone without feeling cut off, estranged, distanced or emotionally disconnected. It is significant that this solitude can be voluntarily interrupted. We could even say, paradoxically, that solitude is a strengthened way of belonging and being connected and, in some specific ways, the interaction with the world and lived reality is intensified. In solitude the world is an internalized condition, a fusion of reality and self. This condition energizes and focuses the sense of self and, especially, the creative mind. Sadly, today’s ways of life and values, and the obsessive desire to be connected, nihilates the value of solitude as a positive mental state.

Rooting and estrangement

Both conditions, loneliness and solitude, are reflected in environments and architecture, and our life world has a distinct role in the emergence of these experiences and mental states. Architectural and urban spaces can either strengthen or weaken

the sense of belonging, the meaningfulness of being, self-identity and self-esteem, which are all essential foundations of meaningful existence. An urban setting or atmosphere can alienate and disconnect us from the cultural, social and human context, or it can enroot us, and make us feel grounded, accepted and supported. With the word *enrooting*, I am consciously referring to the beautiful title of Simone Weil’s book *L’Enracinement*, which has been translated into English as *Taking Root*.⁴ I am currently publishing a book of my nine lectures delivered at the University of Arkansas in 2018 with the title *Rootedness*.

Simply, distinct properties and qualities of physical and spatial settings give specific contents and meanings to our sense of being, and make us feel participants, instead of outsiders or mere onlookers. We exist in a reality of our own making, not in an objective one, or anyone else’s.

“In the fusion of place and soul, the soul is as much of a container of place as place is a container of soul, both are susceptible to the same forces of destruction,” the American literary scholar Robert Pogue Harrison argues poetically.⁵ The fundamental task of art, architecture and urbanity is to mediate between ourselves and the world. This metaphysical and existential mediation has been the most essential task of architecture until the late modernity in the mid-twentieth century; the disappearance of this mediation began with the ultra-rationalist ideas of the Enlightenment, which saw architecture as a language of reason, and it continued in the International Style and paradoxically also in the post-modern eclecticism, which was a calculated and aestheticized manipulation of historically established architectural images. Today’s investment architecture is the final phase of this decline, in which architecture has lost its mental meanings, innocence and artistic autonomy, along with its fundamental mediating task.

The unity of the world and the mind

There is a constant interchange between our minds and our settings; as I enter a space, the space enters me. This fusion is immediate and almost solely unconscious, and, in fact, the world and the mind constitute a continuum. “I enter a building, see a room, and in the fraction of a second – have this feeling about it,” Peter Zumthor confesses. ⁶I have often used the intriguing image of the Moebius strip, the constellation that has two sides but only one surface and one edge, to describe this magical unity of the word and the self, the interplay of perception and consciousness. The experience of loneliness and isolation leaves the individual alone without an identification or interaction with the setting, whereas in the positive case of integration one feels accepted, supported and safe. Simply, we are fused with our settings and situations, and this unity supports the sense of self. However, the experience of integration, relatedness and harmony is rarely projected by modern cities and buildings, as architecture has turned self-centered and unable to mediate between the lived outer world and the mental inner world, the material and the experiential, the physical and the spiritual, and to project meaning to our existence.

Throughout early history until the Renaissance era, architecture sought to express a unity, all the way to “The Music of the Spheres,” the cosmic harmony. In fact, throughout its history, until the modern age, architecture has been a mediating and relational art; it has mediated between the world and ourselves, microcosm and macrocosm, or “Gods and mortals,” to use an expression of Martin Heidegger. Architecture has been fundamentally about human existence in the world, and understanding existentially this relationship. “We come not to see the work of art, we come

to see the world according to the work,” Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes wisely, but this is no longer the orientation of architecture or art in today’s world.⁷ This is a very significant point, which has been disregarded in architectural theorizing, education, as well as practice. Even early modernism depicted a new utopian world, and our relationship with it, which included the new space-time concept of the physical world as well as the new understanding of perception and the layered mind, as expressed in Cubism and later developments in artistic thinking and representation.

The dehumanization of art

In his significant book *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture and Literature* of 1925, José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosophical writer (I use this definition, as his writings are philosophizing essays rather than methodical philosophy) makes the thought-provoking suggestion that after the Renaissance art moved from representing “things” to representing “feelings,” and eventually representing and being “ideas.”⁸ Whether one agrees with Ortega or not, this view of art – and I would suggest architecture as well – as gradually distancing from the lived world and projecting the internal world of the artist’s mind, is quite thought provoking. In our era of surreal materialism, consumption and quasi-rationality, architecture has lost its relational and descriptive essence, and it has turned into a self-sufficient, groundless, calculated, and often even autistic visual composition and aestheticization. In turning into aestheticization, architecture has lost its mediating capacity, innocence and echo in the world as well as in human life. “Why is it that architecture and architects, unlike film and filmmakers, are so little interested in people during the design process? Why

are they so theoretical, so distant from life in general?” the Dutch filmmaker Jan Vrijman asks.⁹

We have been left alone with our built structures that are incapable of projecting meaning, value and dignity to our existence. How could mere aestheticized techno-economic structures project human value and metaphysical meaning? From where could such a meaning arise? Architecture has also made us ultimately homeless by turning homes into marketable property and investment, instead of creating nests for human occupation. This has weakened the meaning of the act of dwelling and left us alone by making us mere visual observers instead of dwellers. The loss of our capacity to dwell is one of the key messages in Heidegger’s lecture “Building Dwelling Thinking.”¹⁰

Reality, sense and existential experience

The ties between us and the world are primarily sensory, and secondly mental and cerebral. Since the invention and mass application of Johannes Gutenberg’s great invention of printing in the mid 15th century, writing and reading have had a significant role in us turning into visual creatures, as Walter J. Ong convincingly argues in his book *Orality & Literacy*.¹¹ Historians tell us that until that period, humans primarily used their senses of hearing and smell, and vision came far behind these two senses in importance.¹² As numerous scholars and thinkers, most notably Merleau-Ponty have declared, we are multi-sensory creatures and also our sense of reality is fundamentally multisensory. “My perception is not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once,” Merleau-

Ponty declares emphatically.¹³

Yet, as architects we are consciously using only one sense, vision, and consequently, more than half of the human sensorium has been rejected or censored in Western architecture. How could we feel a sense of belonging, having been cut off from our full sensory relationship with the world?

A dramatic loss in our built surroundings is the disappearance of unconscious tactility mediated by vision. In his influential book *Towards a New Architecture* Le Corbusier calls this quality *modénature*, the soft rounding of the moulding.¹⁴ We sense the world through all our senses simultaneously, and especially through the unconscious touch, and this indirect sensation makes us participants in architecture. It makes us fuse with “the flesh of the world,” to use a notion of Merleau-Ponty.¹⁵ I wish to repeat my view; the exclusively visual architecture of our time makes us outsiders and onlookers. Instead of integrating us with our existential reality, it leaves us alone and it projects an air of loneliness.

As we all know, architecture is taught, evaluated and practiced as a visual reality. Yet, vision is not the most significant sense in our experience of being, due to essentially multi-sensory nature of our reality experience. Besides, our lived reality is not objectively out there, as it exists primarily in our experience. The reality experience is as much a mental phenomenon as it is a concrete condition in the world.

The loss of time

A fundamental lack in the built settings of our time is the catastrophic loss of the temporal dimension, the lacking experience of layered time and cultural continuity. Our experiential time is

constantly accelerating, and the urbanist-philosopher Paul Virilio even suggests that the most important product of the current societies is speed.¹⁶ Contemporary urban settings make us dwell outside of time, outside of the mentally seminal continuum and duration of time.

One of the most shocking urban experiences for me was to walk in the streets of Doha, the capital of Qatar, amidst brand new buildings designed by many of the leading international star architects of today, and feel a shocking absence of the sense of place, history and meaning. This experience attacked my sense of self violently, I began to doubt my own identity and very existence. Architects are usually only concerned with the human need to feel rooted spatially and materially, but we have an equally fundamental need to dwell in a continuum of culture and time. To feel one's existence in the continuum of time, history and culture is a seminal requirement of identity and mental balance, as well as of the act of dwelling; we need to dwell in time as much as in space. Karsten Harris, professor of philosophy at Yale University, makes a significant remark: "Architecture is not only about domesticating space, it is also a deep defence against the terror of time. The language of beauty is essentially the language of timeless reality."¹⁷ The philosopher uses the expression "the language of beauty," but the impact of today's architectural aestheticization is often forcefully manipulative, restricting and estranging. Instead of projecting human meaning, it eliminates meaning, which always has to be existentially grounded; existential meaning cannot be a subjective invention. Real beauty is a miracle and gift, not an object of deliberate fabrication.

True cities, buildings, and places structure our experiences of time through giving the measureless and endless natural time

a human measure, scale and meaning. When we sense the past, we can also have confidence in the future, and not feel deserted and abandoned. Isn't this a mental satisfaction that strengthens our sense of life, the reason why we love to visit old cities, towns and settings? Even old objects strengthen the experience of time and duration. The Finnish writer Jarkko Laine writes of the things on his window ledge:

"I like looking at these things. I don't seek aesthetic pleasure in them... nor do I recall their origins: that is not important. But even so, they all arouse memories, real and imagined. A poem is a thing that arouses memories of real and imagined things... the things in the window act like a poem. They are images that do not reflect anything... I sing of the things in the window."¹⁸

Such environments place us in the continuum of time, making it conceivable for us. The historicity and duration of the material world, with its processes of aging, wear and patina, turn into instruments of experiencing, measuring and understanding time. Just think of the deep pleasure of walking on the paved streets of old European towns, say in Split on the Dalmatian Coast, carved through centuries by human and animal feet and the wheels of carriages, or rising a stair of marble steps moulded by countless footsteps. You do not look at the erosion of form as a defect, but rather you imagine the endless number of people who have used those steps before you. And when you touch a centuries old bronze door pull, you touch the hands of hundreds of generations. You are accompanied by time and people of the past. Referring to contemporary nowness, T.S. Eliot regrets our culture "in which the dead hold no shares."¹⁹

Contemporary cityscapes and settings have become increasingly self-centered, autistic and unable to mediate between the world and

ourselves, or between now and the past. Our cities of concrete, steel and glass have lost their secrets, shadows and narratives. “When walking in the streets, have you noticed that some of the buildings speak and a few, rare ones, sing?” Paul Valéry asks in his wonderful dialogue *Eupalinos, or The Architect*.²⁰ Has anyone of you recently encountered a building that sings? The experiences of belonging, sharing and identification are fundamental human needs. We need to add, that it is really a biological need, as we have recently read several amazing reports of the limitless networks of mushrooms and the communication systems and chemical languages of the smells of plants and trees. In accordance with one research project, the studied plants possessed 800 “words” and even local “dialects” could be identified.²¹

Space and psyche

Art, architecture and urban planning possess the power to unite and separate us, to make us belong to a shared reality, or feel rejected and isolated. They utilize our mental capacities of mirroring, empathy, and identification. Consciously and unconsciously, we internalize atmospheres, moods, and human situations and fates. For me, it is almost impossible to look at Titian’s painting *The Punishment of Marsyas*, also titled *The Flaying of Marsyas*, in which the Satyr is skinned alive in the revenge of Apollo, as I unconsciously lend my skin to the Satyr and feel that it is cruelly torn off my body. “Be like me” is in Joseph Brodsky’s view the command of poetic works.²² Unnoticeably, we mimic and internalize artistic images of paintings, poetry, music, dance and architecture. I feel the deep melancholy and solitude of Michelangelo’s Laurentian Library, and tears come to my eyes. Between the gigantic columns of the Karnak Temple

in Luxor, I have simply lost my sense of self and fused with the sublime metaphysical space. I felt myself part of the universe, not a human individual. But we also internalize large entities such as landscapes and cities, which either invite, calm and stimulate us, or reject us, making us feel abandoned, suppressed and lonely.

The task of education and growth is to connect us with the characteristics and qualities of culture – to enculturate us – to provide us simultaneously with the sense of citizenship and personal independence. But a creative capacity is centered on the sense of self. Only a person who can focus on herself and embrace her world can possess a creative capacity. Indeed, this relationship can be problematic and painful, but an active relationship is necessary. “Why do you want to shut out of your life any uneasiness, any misery, any depression, since after all you don’t know what work these conditions are doing inside you?” Rilke advises in his remarkable book *Letters to a Young Poet*.²³ However, our current culture and educational philosophies do not acknowledge the significance of the sense of self, as education has become identical with information. Art has the power to make us identify ourselves with the collective, as in a rock concert, but – perhaps even more importantly – art makes us sense our own being and existence in an amplified manner. As we look at a masterpiece of art, our sense of the surrounding space and other people is weakened or eliminated entirely, and we enter a closed interaction or dialogue with the work and the imaginary world that it depicts. The work addresses me in my splendid and privileged solitude, in which I identify myself with the art work and its making. I look at masterpieces in total silence projected by the artwork itself, and the masterpieces silence the world and speak to me alone.

Solitude in art

Significantly, Luis Barragán used to quote the line “Art is made by the alone for the alone” by the English literary critic Cyril Connolly.²⁴ When you visit a Barragán building in Mexico, you encounter it experientially alone, regardless of the presence of others, in the same way that you encounter a poem, a masterpiece of painting or music alone. You are alone with the work as you locate it in your own private experience and consciousness. Barragán’s sublime and dreamlike buildings do not seem to reflect qualities of a normal dwelling; the serene and unearthly beauty of his houses appears to be beyond life, as if they were dwellings for the mind and the soul rather than for embodied mortals. They are dwellings as rituals, stages and altars of serene beauty and of a purified and spiritual existence. Our ordinary lives in well-functioning utilitarian and technological houses, without a glimpse of another reality or a spiritual and transcending dimension, appear dissatisfying.

A visit to a Barragán house feels like of a dream or an experience of faith. Regardless of the possible presence of others, you experience the dwelling and space totally alone; it seems to be built for you alone in your personal silence, regardless of the fact that it is someone else’s home. In the same way, a book which you just read and a painting you just admired have become yours. And you are correct in your possessive feeling, as you have re-created the poetic reality of the piece through your own experience; the poem is just words on paper and the painting only paint on canvas. This is the same mysterious solitude and silence that we confront in the paintings of the Metaphysical painters, Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà. In de Chirico’s paintings the silence and sense of having been left behind is emphasized by the smoke and imagined sound of the departing train. Everyone else has already left.

Solitude and silence

Art and architecture sensitize our relationship with the world. “Paul Cezanne’s paintings make us feel how the world touches us,” argues Maurice Merleau-Ponty.²⁵ Indeed, art sensitizes our skin, our boundary with the world. The author Salman Rushdie makes a significant comment on the meaning of this boundary: “Literature is made at the boundary line between self and the world and during the creative act this borderline softens, turns penetrable and allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist to flow into the world.”²⁶

The experience of solitude and self is related with silence, as in the music of the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, which is often silence itself addressing the listener. In a recent book *Silence: In the Age of Noise* the Norwegian explorer Erling Kagge tells touchingly of his solitary walk across the ice and snow covered continent of Antarctica to the South Pole over a period of fifty days without any connection to any other persons – he even intentionally removed the batteries of his radio.²⁷ He did not see a living creature during this entire time. The theme of solitude and its relations with silence also brings to mind *The World of Silence* by the Swiss philosopher Max Picard.²⁸ Our current cultural codes and habits make it increasingly difficult for us to even tolerate silence and solitude. Blaise Pascal, who theorized boredom in the 17th century wrote: “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”²⁹ This is truly alarming, as it implies that in our world of noise we are losing the very core of our self, embedded in silence and solitude.

Nowadays, we have a strong desire to be connected, but even more through electronic communication than physical presence.

But a recent study revealed shockingly that young children, who had been using smart-phones since an early age, have a weakened recognition of human faces and are unable to read emotions on faces. Are we going towards a world of aliens, alienated from each other?

Edward Relph has introduced the alarming notion of “existential outsidership” in reference to the growing loss of the sense of belonging, interiority and domicile. “Existential outsidership involves a selfconscious and reflective uninvolvement, an alienation from people and places, a homelessness, a sense of the unreality of the world, and of not belonging,” writes Relph in his book *Place and Placelessness*.³⁰

The notion of homelessness normally refers to the condition of not having a home, a personal refuge for living, whereas existential homelessness implies the mental incapacity to feel placed and rooted in the world, its physical settings, culture, and society. Such a person is an “outcast” in the most dramatic sense of the word, cast outside of her own life world. In his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking,” Heidegger presents the idea of dwelling as a specific “skill,” and he suggests that the modern man is unable to dwell because she/he has lost this essential skill.³¹ Only a few decades after the philosopher’s argument, we can even suggest that our very ability to be is being lost, as we have become consumers of our own lives.

In addition to homelessness, the lack of a physical place to dwell in, a new mental homelessness, the mental inability to dwell, is growing. This second type of homelessness is more alarming, because it arises from a mental and emotional incapacity, a defect that condemns the individual to permanent loneliness and outsidership. These thoughts also bring to mind Richard Sennett’s seminal book

The Fall of the Public Man, which suggests yet another dimension of estrangement and loneliness as a consequence of the weakened institutions, practices and attachments that create the “public man.”³² Regardless of all the new modes of communication, we are becoming increasingly lonely. In fact, the new fantastic modes of communication underline our loneliness and mental separation. These ideas and concerns would, however, expand the subject matter beyond the topic I have chosen for this lecture.

I wish to end my talk with a simple but profound call by Aldo van Eyck, who in the 1960s introduced anthropological structuralism into architecture: “Architecture need do no more, nor should it ever do less, than assist man’s homecoming.”³³

Notes

1. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1986), 51.
2. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York: Random House, 2014), 23.
3. As quoted in Jeff Malpas, “Place, truth, and commitment,” in Pekka Passinmäki and Klaske Havik (eds), *Understanding and Designing Place – Considerations on Architecture and Philosophy*, Datutop 38 (Tampere: Datutop), 13.
4. Simone Weil, *L’Enracinement* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949).
5. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 130.
6. Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments – Surrounding Objects* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006), 13.
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as quoted in Iain McGilchrist, *Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2009), 409.
8. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).
9. Jan Vrijman, “Filmmakers Spacemakers,” *The Berlage Papers* 11 (January, 1994).
10. Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Martin Heidegger:*

Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 320. The quote is the title of one of Heidegger's three lectures in the early 1950s included in the book: "Building Dwelling Thinking," "The Thing," and "Poetically Man Dwells."

11. Walter J. Ong, *Orality & Literacy – The Technologizing of the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

12. See, for instance, Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 437.

13. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Film and the New Psychology," in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 48.

14. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (London: The Architectural Press, 1959). *Modénature* is here translated into English as "contour and profile," 5.

15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," in *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 146 and 248.

16. Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotex, 1991).

17. Karsten Harries, "Building and the Terror of Time," *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* issue 19 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982).

18. Jarkko Laine, "Tikusta asiaa", *Parnasso*, 6 (1982), 323-324.

19. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays*, New edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964).

20. Paul Valéry, "Eupalinos, or The Architect," in *Dialogues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 131.

21. Mikko Puttonen, "Tutkimus: Kasvit vinkuvat, kun niitä piinataan," *Helsingin Sanomat*, 10.12.2019.

22. Joseph Brodsky, "An Immodest Proposal," in *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Starus and Giroux, 1997), 206.

23. Rainer Maria Rilke, op. cit., 93.

24. Cyril Connolly, *The Unquiet Grave: A Word Cycle* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).

25. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanné's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 9.

26. Salman Rushdie, "Eikö mikään ole pyhää?" [Is Nothing Sacred?] *Parnasso*, 1 (Helsinki, 1996), 8.

27. Erling Kagge, *Silence: In the Age of Noise* (New York: Pantheon, 2017).

28. Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Washington: Gateway Editions, 1988).

29. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), 37.

30. Eduard Relph, op. cit., 51.

31. Martin Heidegger, op. cit.

32. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of the Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

33. Aldo van Eyck, "Building a House," in *Aldo van Eyck*, ed. Herman Hertzberger, Addie van Roijen-Wortmann, and Francis Strauven (Amsterdam: Stichting Wonen, 1982), 65.