

Department of Architecture

Fall 2014 Public Lecture Series

Speaker: Juhani Pallasmaa

Lecture Title: Empathic and Embodied Imagination: intuiting life and experience in architecture

Date: 16 December 2014 (Tuesday)

Time: 18:30 - 20:00

Venue: KB419, Knowles Building HKU

### **About the Speaker:**

Juhani Pallasmaa (b. 1936), architect, professor emeritus, Helsinki.

He has practiced design first in collaboration with other architects, and in 1983-2012 through his own office in Helsinki. He has held a number of positions, such as Rector of the Institute of Industrial Design, Director of the Museum of Finnish Architecture and Professor and Dean of the School of Architecture, Helsinki University of Technology. He has had several visiting professorships in the USA and taught and lectured in numerous universities in Europe, North and South America, Africa, Asia and Australia.

Pallasmaa has published 45 books and 350 essays, and his writings have been translated into over 30 languages.

He is honorary member of SAFA, AIA and RIBA, Academician of the International Academy of Architecture, and has received several Finnish and international awards and five Honorary Doctorates.

### **Lecture Synopsis:**

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

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

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

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

A talented architect constructs the entire edifice in her imagination; every great building has thus been built twice, first in the immaterial realm of imagination, and then in the material world under the laws of physics. Every profound building has been imaginatively inhabited by its maker. It is usually understood that a sensitive designer imagines the acts, experiences and feelings of the occupant, but human empathic imagination does not work that way. The designer places herself in the role of the future dweller and tests the validity of her ideas through this imaginative exchange of roles and personalities. Thus the architect is bound to conceive the design essentially for

herself as the momentary surrogate of the occupant. Without being aware of it, the designer also turns into a silent actor.

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

The most ephemeral and complex of these subconscious mental simulations is the instantaneous grasping of the entire atmosphere, ambience, or mood of the space. This imagination of ambience is demanding, because an atmosphere or ambience is not an object, but something suspended between the setting and the subject. Imagination can rightly be named our most human and important mental faculty. Neurological and philosophical investigations have established that imagination is crucial even for the processes of perception, thinking and memorizing. It is high time, indeed, to give imagination its due role in our mental lives, self-understanding and education. I propose the topics of imagination, empathy and empathic imagination as a course in architectural education, as well as a subject matter for research in the neurosciences. Altogether, we create the world in which we live through our imaginative capacities, and it is evident that we could not even have an ethical sense without being able to imagine the consequences of our alternative choices and actions.

\*\*\*\*All interested are welcome\*\*\*\*

For further information, please visit our website <http://fac.arch.hku.hk/>

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