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What is Architecture For?

At stake is our own understanding not just of art but of our own place in the world. (Karsten Harries 1997)

Abstract

“What is it to build?” – “*Was ist zu bauen?*” – asks Martin Heidegger in ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’. The question is one whose echoes can be heard in the title, as well as the text, of Karsten Harries’ *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, although as the title has it, the question at issue is not so much immediately directed at building, but at the closely related practice of architecture – “what is architecture for?” – and Karsten’s answer is that what architecture ‘is for’ (it’s “for the sake of which”, to use the language of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*) is something ethical, which also means something concerned with the human. In this, Karsten rejects, or at least treats as secondary, the idea of architecture’s function as primarily *aesthetic* (and even, perhaps, as primarily *utilitarian*). Although he never makes the point himself, the way Karsten connects architecture, and so also building, to the ethical involves a reading of the question of ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ that draws it into close proximity with Heidegger’s earlier ‘Letter on “Humanism”’. It is in the latter essay that Heidegger himself first draws the connection between the question concerning what is usually translated as ‘dwelling’, *wohnen*, which is the notion that draws both building and of architecture into play, and the question of the human and so of the ethical, the latter understood in direct relation to *ethos*. What underlies both *wohnen* and *ethos* here is surely the idea of *topos* – of *place*. Understanding the ethical function of architecture, which is to say its human function, is thus also to understand its topological function, and with it, the essential relation between place and the human. The question as to what architecture ‘is for’ is thus a question that cannot be answered apart from consideration of the placed character of the human.

Keywords

Architecture, Ethics, Place, Space, Bounded, Open, Heidegger, Gelassenheit (releasement), Eckhart