
Jeff Malpas

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)

“What is it to build?” (*Was ist zu bauen?*), asks Martin Heidegger in ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’¹. 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*, though 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 Harries’ 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, Harries rejects, or at least treats as secondary, the idea of architecture’s function as primarily aesthetic—and even as primarily utilitarian (assuming that the ethical and the *utilitarian* are indeed distinct). Although he never makes the point himself, the way Harries connects architecture, and so also building, to the ethical seems implicitly to involve a reading of the question of ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ that draws it into close proximity with Heidegger’s earlier ‘Letter on “Humanism”’.

The focus of ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ is on the relation between building and that mode of being-in-the-world that Heidegger refers to by the very ordinary German word *Wohnen* which is usually translated as ‘dwelling’, but which actually refers, not to any form of special poetic relation (which the term all too readily, if implicitly, evokes), but to that everyday mode of living in the world in which we also find a ‘home’ in the world, in which we attend to the world and to our place in it. The ‘Letter on “Humanism”’ addresses the question of the human and the relation between that question and the question of being. Fundamental to this latter question is the issue of ethics, but that question is itself understood in direct relation to the matter concerning the place of human being in the world, that is, to the question of *Wohnen*—or, to use the other term Heidegger uses here, of one’s *Aufenthalt*—one’s abode or ‘dwelling place’. Connecting the notion of ethics back to its Greek origins in the term *ethos*, Heidegger writes:

Ethos means abode [*Aufenthalt*], dwelling-place [*Ort des Wohnens*]. The word names the open region in which the human being dwells. The open region of his abode allows what pertains to the essence of human being, and what in thus arriving resides in nearness to him, to appear. [...] If the name ‘ethics’, in keeping with the basic meaning of the word *ethos*, should now say that ethics ponders the abode of the human being, then that thinking which thinks the truth of being as the primordial element of the human being, as one who exists, is in itself originary ethics.²

2 Heidegger 1998, pp. 269 and 271.

The ‘open region’ that is here identified with *ethos* is indeed the place to which human being belongs, and not only human being, but since this place is also the place of the truth of being (*Wahrheit des Seyns*), so it is the place in which any appearing, any coming to presence, is possible—it is the place that belongs to being—it is the *Ortschaft des Seyns* as Heidegger calls it elsewhere.³ What underlies both *wohnen* and *ethos*, then, is surely the idea of *place* or *topos* (*Ortschaft*, *Ort*, and sometimes *Gegend*⁴). Understanding the ethical function of architecture, which is to say its human function, is thus also to understand its topological function, but also its topological foundation, and with it, the essential relation between place and the human. The question as to what architecture is ‘for’ (which is, of course, not separable from the question as to what architecture ‘is’) is thus a question that cannot be answered apart from consideration of the placed character of the human and that question, in turn, depends on a clearer understanding of place itself. In that case, to understand architecture one must also understand place.

3 See Heidegger 2015, p. 202.

4 Heidegger uses several topologically-oriented terms throughout his thinking—*Stätte* and *Platz*, for instance, also occur—but *Ortschaft*, *Ort*, and *Gegend* are perhaps the most important.

Karsten Harries’ own investigations in *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, while they address place directly in one chapter in particular (Chapter Eleven—‘Place and Space’), do not make place a central focus of discussion. That is not surprising given that his approach is indeed one whose first concern is with a specific set of problems that belong to *architecture*, and inasmuch as place appears in the course of his development of that approach, it does so out of and in relation to that concern. Moreover, when place does appear, it is in a fashion deriving from an assumed view of place (most explicitly in Chapter Eleven) that, consistent with much contemporary discussion, treats place in a way such that the primary contrast and connection is with *space*. Place is thus associated with that which constrains and encloses, but which also shelters and affords intimacy, and so which offers a sense of home and belonging, whilst space is associated with freedom and openness, and also, therefore with the promise of the new as well as the challenge of the strange. The contrast between place and space can be expressed in the contrast of earth with sky, of tradition with the futural and the utopic, of security with hope. One of the key themes in Karsten Harries’ discussion is the need to negotiate between both place and space—for architecture to acknowledge “both the sheltering power of place and the indefinite promise of open space”⁵.

5 Harries 1997, p. 175.

I can well understand why Harries uses these terms as he does, and yet I would also suggest a modification to his account. The contrast that he expresses as one that obtains between place and space is one that seems to me to obtain *within place itself* and this is because the openness that belongs to space is indeed only genuinely possible *within bounds*—something most clearly evident in the way the openness of the sky appears only within the enclosedness of the horizon. Indeed, the two dimensions of enclosure and openness are themselves already present in even the simplest of architectural forms—the hut, for instance, operates through an enclosing that also opens, since the boundedness of walls and roof is what makes possible the open room within. It is easy to think of enclosure and openness as if these were identical with interiority and exteriority: the open is that which expands outwards into the world and the bounded or enclosed that which contracts inwards towards, ultimately, the self. Yet the very contrast between interiority and exteriority arises only in relation to the bound or limit that itself belongs to place. If architecture must concern itself with both place and space, this is largely because space arises only within and with respect to place—just as time, which is the dynamic aspect of that openness that is also evident as space, also arises in the same fashion (and so there is properly no time nor space outside of place). At one point Heidegger, echoing a line from Georg Simmel, says that the human is “the one who walks the boundary of the boundless”⁶, and this not only captures something essential about human being, something clearly evident in Harries’ account, but it also exhibits the character of human being as essentially placed being, since to walk the boundary of the boundless is indeed to find one’s way in place.

Though the account offered here remains highly schematic, it nonetheless points the way towards that understanding of the character of place, and so of the placed character of the human, on which any understanding of architecture and its function must depend. It is an understanding that does indeed seem to be present in Harries’ account even though it is articulated in different terms from those I have used here. The interplay of the bounded and the open that is at issue here has a significance for human being that goes beyond the architectural alone: the very possibility of human knowledge and experience, which is to say, the very possibility of human openness to the world, arises only out of the singular finitude of human being, that is to say, out of its concrete situatedness, its placedness, its ‘being there’⁷. Perhaps most importantly from an architectural perspective, however, is the way in which the character of place—its encompassing of the bounded and the open, of the immanent and the transcendent, the sheltered and the free—carries over into the character of architecture and the built forms to which it gives rise. It suggests that what architecture *is for*, and what it *is*, is to be found precisely in the dynamic interplay of bounded and open that lies at the heart of place. This interplay is not merely an aspect of some one part of the world—the interplay of bounded and open that is the happening of place is indeed that out of which the world emerges. Architecture, and with it ‘building,’ is thus one

6 Heidegger, p.41; see also Simmel 1997, p. 170.

7 Malpas 2017, in: *Sophia* forthcoming.

of the means, perhaps even (if we think architecture broadly enough) the primary means, by which we engage with the world, and with the happening of world, as it occurs in and from out of place. Architecture does not make the world, nor does it properly make place, but in responding to place, in articulating the human mode of being in place, architecture participates in the world, becomes part of its happening, allows that happening to be revealed. Architecture is for nothing if it is not for this.

I began this brief discussion by reference to Heidegger, and much of what I have said can be taken as a thinking or re-thinking of place as it appears in Heidegger's later thinking—although it also, to some degree, involves wresting place from out of Heidegger's own grasp. Karsten Harries once said to me (so long ago, and in such a situation that I doubt he will recall it), that if we are to think the role of place in Heidegger we must attend more closely to the work of Meister Eckhart—a comment that opens up the perhaps unexpected question as to whether the thinking of this thirteenth-century mystic might be relevant to architecture also (at least so far as Heidegger is concerned). Heidegger's own engagement with Eckhart, though it often remains implicit, is surely at its strongest in the later thinking in which the focus on place is also clearest—at a point at which Heidegger has abandoned the existential analytic of *Being and Time* as well as the history of being that characterises his thinking during the 1930s and early 1940s in favour of what he calls the 'topology of being,' the thinking of the place of being.⁸ The 1959 volume, *Gelassenheit*⁹, which, although it does not mention Eckhart by name, invokes him by its very title, stands in an intimate connection to Heidegger's home town of Messkirch and the thinking that it sets forth is itself explicitly connected with the experience of place as given in that place (and especially in connection with the *Feldweg* that runs from the town into the nearby countryside).

Undoubtedly part of what is at issue for Heidegger in *Gelassenheit* is his own profound sense of indebtedness to the place of his childhood, the place to which he returned throughout his life, the place of which he himself talks as providing the sustaining ground of his thinking—precisely those aspects of place that Harries emphasises in contrast to space—and so the opening words of the 'Memorial Address' (the address in honour of the Messkirch-born composer Conradin Kreutzer with which the volume begins) are words of thanks to Heidegger's home town, to his 'homeland', to his *Heimat*. Part of what is at issue has thus to do with Heidegger's own place and personal affectivity, and if this were all that were at stake, then it would be of little consequence for the broader considerations that concern us here—although it might be thought to reinforce the common tendency to think of place as significant only in terms of such affectivity, and even as a tied to an introverted concern with past origins. Yet what emerges in *Gelassenheit*, both in the 'Memorial Address' and in the 'Conversation' that follows it, is a mediation on the nature and significance of place that goes beyond anything to do with personal affectivity or past origins alone.

⁸ See Malpas, 2017 in: *Heidegger-Jahrbuch*, forthcoming.

⁹ Heidegger 1966.

Heidegger emphasises the importance of human being as grounded in a 'homeland', but in the 'Memorial Address', he also points to the way in which, "for a truly joyous and salutary human work to flourish, man must be able to mount from the depth of his home ground up into the ether"¹⁰. Human beings thus find their place in the world "between heaven and earth"¹¹—which can itself be understood to mean between the open and the bounded. The groundedness of human being—which is a grounding in 'earth' as well as in the 'between' of heaven and earth—is something that Heidegger argues is threatened by the contemporary dominance of "planning and calculation, of organisation and automation"¹², that is, by the dominance of modern technology. Heidegger proposes that the path to a way of being-in-the-world that will enable us to find a ground in the face of such technological dominance is that of *Gelassenheit zu den Dingen*—releasement towards things. Such releasement is coupled with what Heidegger calls "openness to the mystery"¹³—openness to the happening of revealing and concealing (what Heidegger elsewhere calls the happening of truth) to which we are already given over. Significantly, the *thinking* that belongs with such releasement and openness is a thinking that is itself grounded in its own place (understood again in terms of both the 'earth' and the 'between'): "It is enough if we dwell on what lies close and meditate on what is closest; upon that which concerns us, each one of us, here and now; here, on this patch of home ground; now, in the present hour of history"¹⁴. In the 'Conversation' that follows, *Gelassenheit* is again drawn explicitly in the discussion (though with the *caveat* that it is not to be thought "as within the domain of will, as is the case with old masters of thought such as Meister Eckhart [...] From whom, all the same, much can be learned"¹⁵), and much of the 'Conversation' can be understood as an extended meditative dialogue on the nature of the *Gelassenheit* invoked in the 'Memorial Address.'¹⁶

The way the 'Memorial Address' characterises human being as "between heaven and earth" can be seen already to gesture towards the character of place as it encompasses both the bounded and the open, but in the 'Conversation', the idea of *Gelassenheit* is itself explored, along with ideas of willing and of thinking, in terms of our relation to, or participation in, what Heidegger calls the 'region' or 'regioning' (*Gegend/Gegnet*), and which he also refers to as 'open' or 'abiding' expanse (*verweilende Weite*). This 'region' is not merely one region among many, but "the region of all regions [...] the region"¹⁷, which, in virtue of its very character as a region, is both bounded and open, but is thereby also understood precisely as a drawing together and setting apart, a nearing and distancing, a movement and a rest:

The region gathers, just as if nothing were happening, each to each and each to all into an abiding, while resting in itself. Regioning is a gathering and re-sheltering for an expanded resting in an abiding. So the region itself is at once an expanse and an abiding. It abides into the expanse of resting. It expands into the abiding of what has freely turned towards itself [...]. Because that-which-regions gathers all, gathering

10 Heidegger 1966, p. 47.

11 Ibid.

12 Heidegger 1966, p. 49.

13 Heidegger 1966, pp. 54–55.

14 Heidegger 1966, p.47.

15 Heidegger 1966, pp.61–62.

16 Although it is the 'Conversation' that is the earlier piece, originally composed in 1944–45. What appears in *Discourse on Thinking* (and so in the volume titled *Gelassenheit*) is only part of the original 'Conversation', the full version of which appears in Schüssler 1995 and Heidegger 2010. In its original form, the 'Conversation' has appended as 'supplements' (*Beilagen*) several quotations from Eckhart under the headings "On Letting Go of Things" and "Being of Great Essence", of which the first reads: "Where I will nothing for myself, there wills instead my God [Wo ich für mich nichts will, da will statt meiner Gott]" (*Country Path Conversations*, p.103)—perhaps, in the light of the 'Conversation' that precedes this line, we should not overlook the "wo" and the "da."

17 Heidegger 2010, p.65.

18 Heidegger 2010, p.66 & p.86.

everything together and letting everything return to itself, to rest in its own identity... Then that which regions would be nearing and distancing [...] That-which-regions itself would be the nearness of distance, and the distance of nearness.”¹⁸

What is at issue in Heidegger’s talk of ‘region’ and ‘regioning’ is that ‘happening’ of place that is the happening of world as well as the happening of thinking. *Gelassenheit* is a releasement to this region or regioning, but in being thus *Gelassenheit* is releasement to that to which it already belongs—to which thinking and human being already belong:

19 Heidegger 2010, p.73 & p.82.

Releasement comes out of that-which-regions because in releasement man stays released to that-which-regions and, indeed, through this itself. He is released to it in his being, insofar as he originally belongs to it. He belongs to it insofar as he is appropriated initially to that-which-regions and, indeed, through this itself... releasement consists in this: that man in his very nature belongs to that-which-regions, i.e., he is released to it [...]. Not occasionally, but [...] prior to everything¹⁹

The way in which, in Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* involves a releasement to that to which we already belong could be said to reflect the analogous way in which *Gelassenheit* in Eckhart also involves a return to God as the ground of our being. It is because we always already remain in an essential relation to God that the turn back to God—the “rebirth of God in the soul”—is both possible and necessary.

20 See Malpas 2017, in: *Sophia* forthcoming.

Eckhart does not use the same topological language that one finds in Heidegger, although one might well argue that some such topology is implied even in Eckhart (it may well be an inevitable feature of all thinking or understanding²⁰). The very language of ‘release’ (*gelassen*), for instance, is hardly to be grasped without a sense of the open in which such release is possible and into which something is let. Moreover, the way Heidegger himself connects *Gelassenheit* and place as region itself seems to depend and to draw upon the sense of released involvement that one finds in any genuinely self-aware being-in-place. To be in place is to grasp one’s own being-somewhere as a belonging-to and an apartness-from. Moreover, these very elements are indeed already presaged in the idea of place as both bounded and open. Quite distinct from any way of grasping place that takes place as the object of possession or as the mark of exclusive proprietorship—which is really the assertion of subjectivity over place and so is exactly the sort of ‘willfulness’ that *Gelassenheit* is not—the thinking that gives priority to place is one that is also necessarily a relinquishing of will and so a giving up of claims to possession, determination, or exclusivity. In the simplest of terms, *Gelassenheit* is a releasement to that to which we belong and in which our being is grounded—it is a releasement to our own being-placed—and as such, *Gelassenheit* captures something essential to such being-placed and so also to place itself.²¹ It also, one might add, indicates the way which any genuine *ethics* does in-

21 On the relation between place and releasement, though from a very different perspective, see also Malpas, pp.45–62.

deed have its own origin in place and may even be understood as itself a releasement towards place.

What might any of this have to do with architecture? Quite simply, because architecture is a mode of thinking, as well as of making, that concerns itself with the places in which we find ourselves as these are worked out and articulated in and through concrete 'built' forms. 'Building,' as Heidegger emphasises, arises out of 'dwelling', but also for the sake of dwelling'²²—so building is that by means of which our living in the world is worked out, by means of which it takes on a certain form. Building is itself a bounding that opens, even though it is always dependent on, and so properly understood, must be responsive to, the more originary bounding in which the very possibility of architecture no less than human being is itself opened up. Architecture functions inasmuch as it allows our own releasement towards that originary bounded open, as it allows its own such releasement. The danger for architecture is that it becomes dysfunctional through a refusal of that releasement—to the holding on to place, to the bounded and the open, as if it were indeed that which remains in the possession of architecture, as if it were the 'gift' of architecture, as if it were 'made' by architecture. But we do not possess, do not have in our gift, do not make that to which we already belong. Precisely because of the need to remember that prior belonging, so must there always be a sense in which attentiveness to place will take the form, as it does so often in Heidegger, and especially in *Gelassenheit*, of a return to a certain sort of 'origin,' more specifically, of a turn back to place as that in which we first find ourselves, as a 'coming near' or 'into nearness'²³, even as a return home (although to a home that is itself revealed as uncertain and even uncanny). The open and the free do not emerge in an already boundless realm, nor in some place that is still beyond us, but always and only here, now, in this place. The function of architecture, what it is indeed 'for', must always be to return us to this place in a way that is attuned to that place and to the many differing ways in which it reveals itself as well as to the possibilities that may emerge in and from it—it is, moreover, a return to that place that occurs only in and through *this* place—whatever its own singular character. In this way, and only thus, can architecture remain attuned to its own origin in the belonging-together of the bounded and the open; only then can architecture fulfill the genuinely *ethical*, which is to say, *human*, function that, as Karsten Harries so rightly argues, is proper to it.

22 See Heidegger 1976, pp.145–161.

23 At the end of the 'Conversation, Heidegger invokes a word from Heraclitus (Fr.122) to characterise the path that the 'Conversation' traverses: *Agchibasie* (ἄγχιβασίη), "coming-near" or "moving-into-nearness."

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