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**Light as a Metaphor of Dwelling:  
A Few 20th Century Examples**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore a few interior concepts, which appear in early twentieth century architecture, which express an idea using light, objects that produce light and pictorial representations of it as a particular metaphor underlining the ethical consideration of dwelling and its cosmic dimension. In this context we can find, among other examples, almost identical architectural expressions in the work of Gaudi and Taut, using old symbols regarding cosmic dimension of eternal circulation of light or *lux perpetua*. This and other consideration of light as the central idea of dwelling and family life, reflects on social values of a particular ethical understanding of architecture developed on the threshold of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in Germany. It is interesting that in the examples which will be presented this idea becomes the essential one, and it finds many other parallels in the Post-Modern architectural concepts of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Key words:** Light, Metaphor, Dwelling

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, the ideas regarding new concepts of European architecture emerged through particularly important discussions on a variety of issues transforming also the entire approach to the historical reflections in the art of building. The particular importance of this issue refers to the process which generated new social and cultural meanings of architecture, reflecting the ongoing transformation in European societies at that time. Between Futurist's and Constructivist's absolute rejection of historical impact on architectural ideas and practice, and simulating vernacular historicism of the Bottcherstrasse project in Bremen on the other side, we can indicate a number of approaches which more or less reflect on architectural concepts and forms developed in previous centuries. However, the touch of historical reflections was rather in the domain of metaphorical narration than in the field of uncritical application of forms and concepts. Even the project of Bottcherstrasse, executed by Hoetger, Runge and Scotland, as an experiment in the search for German national identity in architecture, was in a particular way guided by avant-garde ideas of psychological time and space distortion and film montage (Mako, 2009). It emphasizes a particular character, or in better words, observer's capacity in the empathic response to the mixture of recognizable and new aesthetic components, developed through the process of the previously cultivated taste and expectations for experiencing something not yet seen.

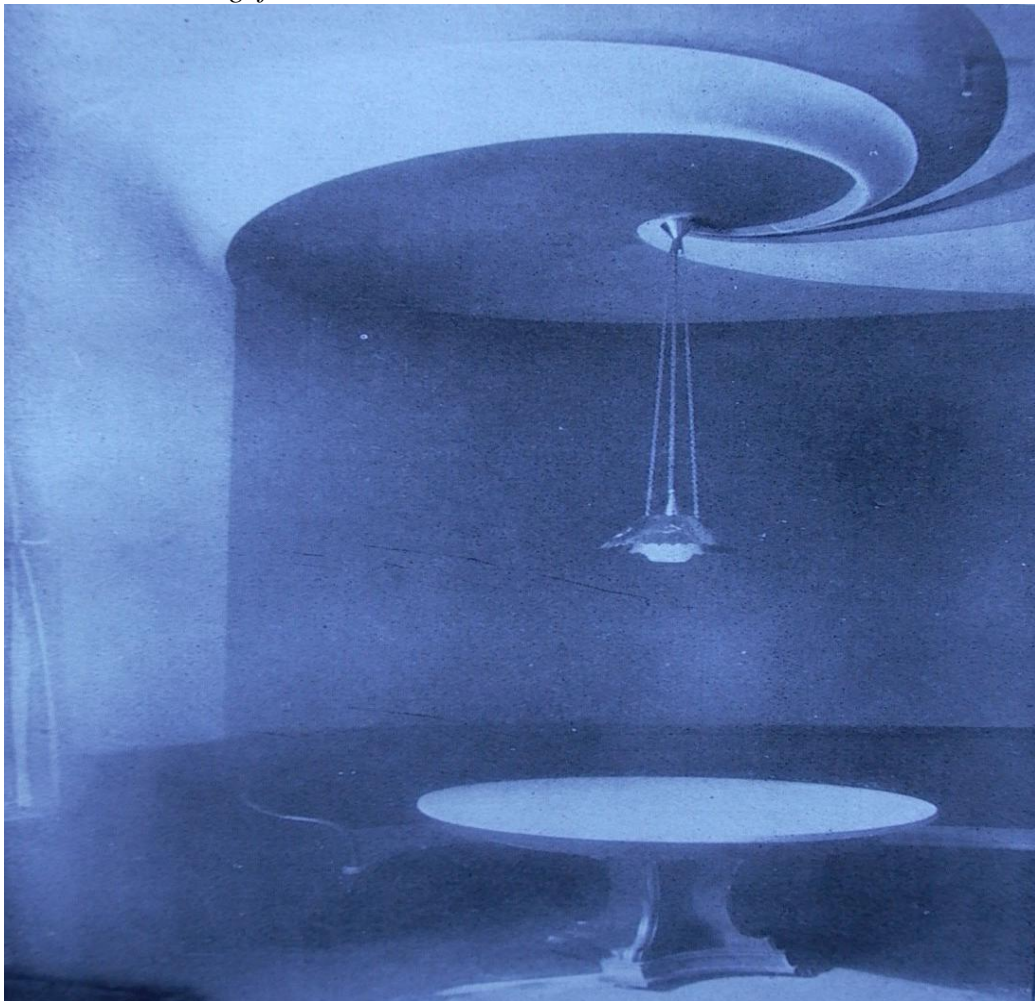
Similar to this example, the use of Doric columns on the façade of the building at Michaeler Platz or as a basic form in the project of Chicago Herald Tribune, both by Loos, metaphorically communicates the character of firmness and stability, rather than to be a pure eclectic approach to the historical architectural element. Regarding the analyzed examples, it seems that it was not so strange for avant-garde architects on the beginning of the twentieth century to use metaphor regarding historical reminiscences in order to emphasize particular contemporary ideas.

It is interesting that a few of examples of this kind of metaphorical language we can find also in Bruno Taut's projects. However, it seems that Taut was emphasizing his architectural ideas on a more complex level of historical reminiscences. As the discussion will show, he was rather using metaphors deeply rooted into man's universal feeling coming from experiencing well known phenomenon, than literal application of recognizable architectural elements. In that context, Taut was one of the protagonists of the idea of exploration and use of man's primordial aesthetic sense, supported by the power of empathy and its primal emotional capacity (Mako, 2007).

The example which actually arouses the interest in the issue under discussion, is by the way how it communicates the basic idea, somehow in the field of a hidden well known historical metaphor. In his design for the Clubroom in the Ledigenheim Lindenhof, Berlin-Schöneberg, from 1919-21, Taut was using a spirally mowed ceiling with the chandelier in its Centrum. (Figure 1) The whole image wouldn't be from such an importance that just a few years earlier Gaudi didn't use almost the same image on the ceiling of the main salon in his Casa Batlló. (Figure 2) Knowing Gaudi's attachment to

religious standards and particularly to the Gothic structuralism and art, it is not so difficult for the middle age metaphor of *Lux Perpetua*, or of ‘light in constant cosmic movement’, to be recognized. (Figure 3) It’s placement into the heart of the family gathering, the main salon, reflects the immanent meaning of the importance of the family life in the strict catholic society. In a few other secondary used images in the same building, Gaudi applied the named motif and its variations emphasizing the spiritual importance of domestic life. However, it is a puzzling question: what was the guiding idea by which Taut used the same recognizable metaphor in his project. In the context of our discussion it is certain that the religious feelings were not crucial in Taut’s understanding of the social importance of architecture. However, his interest in the metaphor of the cosmic dimension of creativity and by this also of architecture cannot be put on test. There is also a dominant role of social issues concerning Taut’s understanding of architecture as a powerful tool for improvement of the collapsing ethics and not so brilliant general condition of the German nation on the beginning of the twentieth century.

**Figure 1.** *Bruno Taut, Ceiling in the Clubroom in the Ledigenheim Lindenhof, Berlin-Schoneberg, from 1919-21*



**Figure 2.** *Antonio Gaudi, Ceiling in the main salon, Casa Battlo, Barcelona, 1904-06*



**Figure 3.** *Lux perpetua, Romanesque relief from the Church of St. Pascal, Rome*





It is certain that Taut's philosophy of architecture proves to be a very complex system in which all mentioned aspects merged into a unified sense. If not religious, his ideas have been founded on believe in the existence of the cosmic spirit, on the mystical power which unifies all important aspects in the quest for new ethical dimensions of human existence and creativity. As emphasized in one of his Cristal Chain letter, for Taut cosmos was equalized with religion, or in better words with the philosophy of life (Whyte, 1985). In this context, the role of the architect and architecture was to mediate between society and the higher nature, the cosmic spirit (Whyte, 1982).

However, this Taut's idea was not isolated at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many of his close friends shared the same idea. Emphasizing the importance of architecture and its social mission Adolf Behne wrote that the creative power of architect should establish 'an ultimate statement of unity' between man and man, man with nature, man with the cosmos (Whyte, 1982). One of his comrades in the Cristal Chain group, Wassili Luckhardt, wrote that the goal of creativity is to evoke 'an image of the cosmos in architecture' (Whyte, 1985). Emphasizing the importance of the perception of the 'law of movement', Luckhardt seems to justify Taut's use of the spiral image of the vortex of cosmic light in the clubroom ceiling.

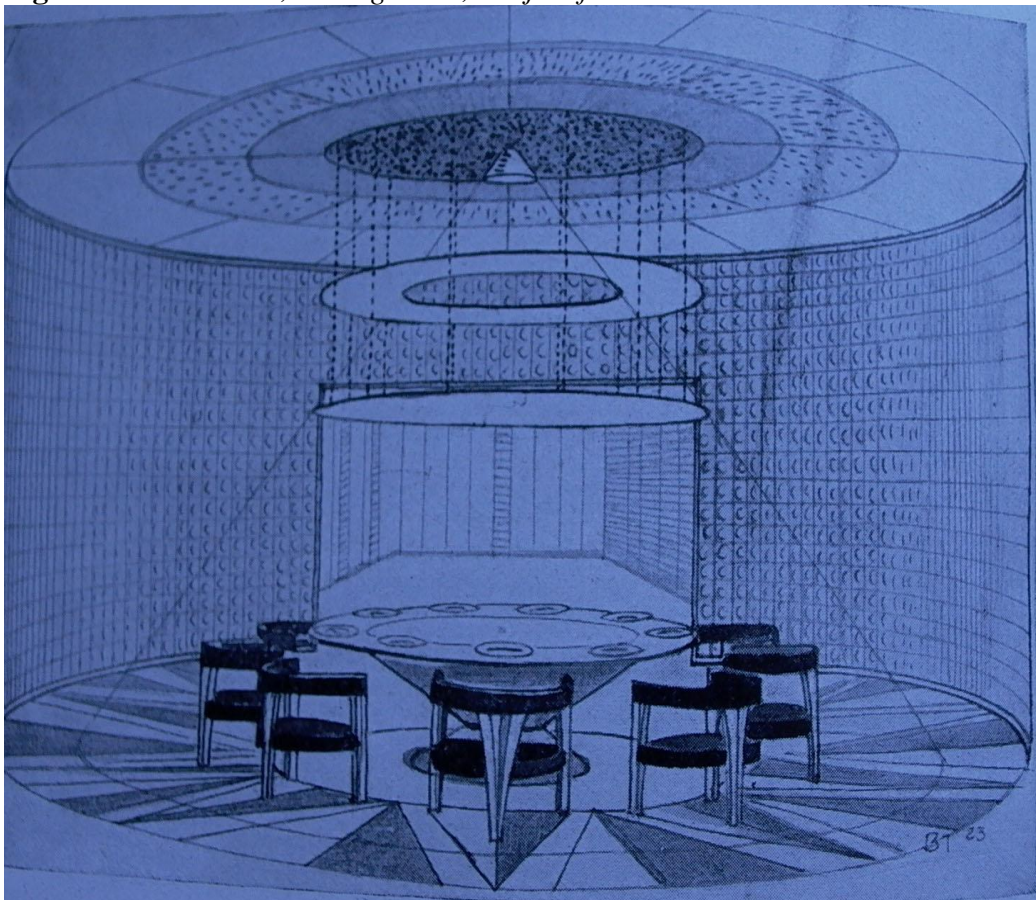
However, was it really possible that such a complex idea regarding the manifestation of cosmic spirit in architecture was expressed through a single detail, despite the fact that it is based on a recognizable mediaeval symbolic form? It is well known that expression of metaphysical ideas was for many avant-garde architects and artists a usual approach in their process of exposing the ultimate nature of creativity and its universal power. In that sense we can emphasize the work of, for instance, Malevich, Itten, and Steiner. However, in his work Taut intended to rationalize his idea and to transform the notion of the cosmic spirit into creative force capable to interact with real social and ethical issues of the society.

In order to explain the creative relationship between the general idea and architectural detail, such as the symbolic image of the spiral of cosmic light, we should analyze Taut's own discussion on this issue. It seems that the essence of his idea can be understood through his definition of the notion of ornament. At the beginning of his previously mentioned Cristal Chain letter, Taut said how the question of ornament refers to the existence of a 'sign-language' which should be 'the hieroglyph myself'. Actually he emphasizes that 'from here the ideas on building develop' (Whyte, 1985). It seems that for Taut ornament can be equated with the symbolic image which contains the essential idea which generated the character of the building itself. In his book *The New Dwelling*, Taut further explains his idea regarding ornament. He says that ornament should be considered with great care because the ornament is a symbolic language which cannot be questioned. This language is based on the general human understanding and is not a result of personal invention (Taut, 1923). By this statement Taut actually justified the use of well known symbolic image of *Lux Perpetua* in his project, applying it to new social and cultural conditions of the time. However, it seems that Taut undoubtedly believed in the

energetic force of such an image and its power to generate primal aesthetic sensibility in the observer.

In the context of Taut's writings, we can understand that the used symbolic image of vortex of light in the clubroom in Ledigenheim Lindenhof, actually carry the essential idea of the importance of home gathering, especially by the fact that it is designed for single people. It counts on the feeling how important the meeting point is and it reflects on the cosmic dimension of social life. The whole image and its meaning complete the use of strong colors in this design, which scheme was prepared by Franz Mutzenbecher. The importance of color and colored light in Taut's work and in the art of his friends emphasizes the words of Adolf Behne, by whom 'every pure color is like a note sounded by the universe, something final and decisive...' (Penth, 1979). Repeating Behne's statement, Taut also directs our attention on the melody of colors concerning the ultimate harmony which can be reached through them (Taut, 1927). Color was imagined to be the visible manifestation of light reflecting on its psychological power to influence human feelings and the quality of perception. In a way, color helped Taut to emphasize the ethical and aesthetical dimension of his ideas regarding spiritual purification of each individual and the society in general.

**Figure 4.** *Bruno Taut, Dining room, Project from 1923*



In his project for a perfect dwelling developed in the 1923 and published in his book *Die Neue Wohnung*, Taut particularly emphasized the idea of immanent symbolic power of light as the core of domestic life. A dining room shaped as a circle and build from glass prisms, is illuminated with bright light coming from the ceiling designed as a system of concentric circles. (Figure 4) It seems that in this image Taut summarized almost all, for him important elements of contemporary building. By using glass, strong light, and circular form, he was also expressing particular symbolism rooted in ethical principles of aesthetic dimension of architecture of dwelling and its social importance.

To explain this idea, we should turn back to writings of Paul Scheerbart, who influenced Taut by the statement that new architecture will generate new culture, and consequently new society. In his book on Glass Architecture, Scheerbart particularly emphasized how the character of architecture can influence the human culture, and if one wishes to change that culture it is necessary for our build environment to be transformed. By using colored glass for new architecture 'new light will undoubtedly emanate' and one would be able to claim 'that nature appears in another light' (Scheerbart, 1972). However, it seems that in this context the used notion of light reflects on the cultural and ethical dimension of the society, and not on light as natural phenomenon. Nature and environment that he was talking about identifies the cultural and social domain of human life. That was the reason why he was able to conclude that trough glass architecture 'the new environment, which we thus create, must bring us a new culture' (Scheerbart, 1972).

It seems that in his design for new dwelling Taut was exactly following Scheerbart's statement. However, as Pehnt emphasized, Taut added to it his cosmological view, so that glass become a 'material in which mind and matter were reconciled'. In that sense, glass and light become aspects of new culture and new morality (Penth, 1979). Actually, Taut's new quality of dwelling particularly expressed in the design of the dining room represents the immanent force of bringing up new culture and by this the ethical purification of the whole society. The bright light directed to the place of family gathering symbolizes the ethical quality of transformed individual and collective social spirit. That design which Taut used for the dining room was from a great importance in the analyzed social context proves his drawing for the bedroom in the same project. Circular shape, upper windows providing light and fresh air, and the ceiling with concentric circles, repeat the design scheme, and probably its ethical and social message.

However, the analyzed statements are raising an important question. How Taut and the architects in his circle imagined the possibility of applying such an idealistic statement to concrete social needs? Do they really believed in the suggestive power of perceptual qualities of glass, color, and light to be able to transform the condition of moral life and social values? Once again, it seems that Taut's writings are offering the concrete answer. Developing his ideas on new dwelling, Taut explains the role of Utopia as a powerful tool in changing social conditions, and consequently in architecture of dwelling. However, so defined the social power of Utopia can be activated if there is a longing for

social change and cultural transformation. It works together with the possibilities that fantasy as a creative impulse finds its meaningful mach in the contemporary culture. At that moment Utopia becomes a practical possibility in architecture, and it can be incorporated into the totality of social existence (Taut, 1923). In this context, it should be emphasized that other architects from the Taut's circle, for instance Behne, appreciated fantasy as a true form of architecture which 'inhabits a higher stratum of human consciousnesses (Whyte, 1982). It enters into practice trough mystical intuition.

It seems that in this context Taut defines Utopia as the 'form for sensation', which is the prerogative of any cultural transformation in a particular time (Taut, 1927). Linking Utopia with the feeling for new architecture, Taut actually contextualized the notion of empathy as the key element in the process of practical actualization of his fantasy on new architecture as the power which will bring to the cultural and social transformation. The influence of Lipps and Kandinsky in this context cannot be questioned. At the moment when Taut developed theoretical approach to new dwelling, the understanding of empathy as an aesthetic capacity by which each personality developed the sense of World-Me continuum has been already established (Jarrombek, 2000).

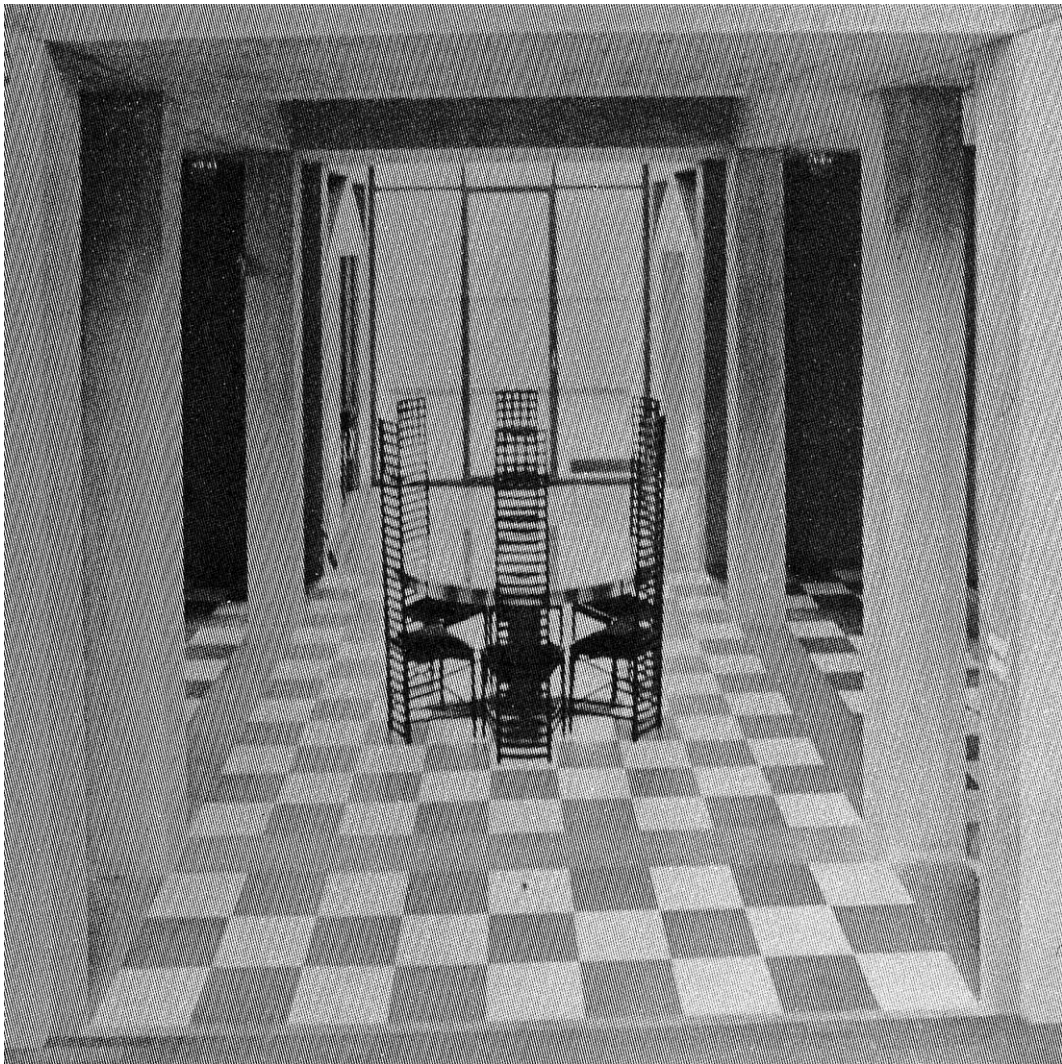
There is a great possibility that Taut counted exactly on this aesthetic capacity that empathy provided. For him the aesthetic capacity of man was not separated from practical needs (Taut, 1923). They where united into one harmonious whole which refers to the cultural needs of man as a social being. It seems that the notion of empathy supported by the theory of subject-objectification, as emphasized by Jarrombek, provided Taut with a tool for promoting architecture of glass, color, and light as the metaphor of new dwelling. In his opinion, it was possible for people through their aesthetic capacity of empathy, to recognize this metaphor and to accept it as a new reality of purified ethical standards.

Dynamism trough movement is another important feature of analyzed metaphoric images used by Taut. By these characteristics they belong to a wider group of examples from the beginning of the twentieth century, developing architectural design according to the impulse of new industrial era generating the feeling of society and culture in constant transformation. It is a well known avant-garde approach to new aesthetic dynamism and its experience trough the empathic capacity of the observer. In Taut's examples it was used to concentrate our feeling on the importance of the expressed metaphorical meaning. However, we can indicate this idea also in other examples of that particular period of European architecture. For instance, in the Hoetger's design for the staircase in the Haus Atlantis in Bottcherstrasse in Bremen, completed in 1931, we can feel the same dynamic attitude provided by the spiral form, the tube of light and colored glass. It is interesting that this staircase is leading to the Hall of Heaven, a metaphorically designed gathering place on the top of the building, materialized with colored glass vault ceiling full of light and tranquil harmony. Despite the fact that this Hall was not build for family gathering purposes, it shows how similar metaphorical language was

used as the reflection on at that moment accepted ideas what new architecture should carry as its essential meaning.

With the metaphorical meanings of architecture, reestablished by post-modern theory, we can follow again the idea of the cosmic importance of dwelling and family life. In their *Maison Tonini*, Reichlin and Reinhardt despite of the strong reminiscence on renaissance architectural tradition are recalling on the previously analyzed ideas developed at the beginning of the twentieth century (Jencks, 1980). Positioned in the Centrum of the house, dining place with the round table, circular opening on the ceiling and glass wall trough which light strongly illuminates the interior, could be reflection on Taut's metaphorical approach to the cosmic dimension of family gathering. (Figure 5) It seems that this design from early seventies of the last century gives a strong possibility for establishing an idea of continuity in particular metaphorical interpretation of dwelling in European twentieth century architecture.

**Figure 5.** *Maison Tonini, Reichlin and Reinhardt, 1974*





In this context, we can also discuss the importance of ideas developed by Jencks in his Thematic House. Placing the Cosmic Oval in the entrance area of this house, and surrounding it with the images of greatest philosophical and scientific minds of the European culture, Jencks refers to the light of knowledge, an philosophical illumination by the human intellectual capacity as the carrier of profound life and dwelling. (Figure 6) Confirming the idea by a similar metaphor, Jencks introduced the notion of summer room in the same villa, using the image of radiating sun light, again incorporated into philosophical statements regarding the importance of family life and its architectural core. By Jencks' own words this architectural narrative had the purpose to establish a critical attitude towards universal aesthetic aspects in the architecture of modernism (Jencks, 2002).

However, even this kind of latte and maybe unconscious interpretation of the idea of cosmic significance of human life and dwelling developed in modern times by Gaudi and Taut can suggest the existence of very similar narrative solutions in the twentieth century architecture. This can also suggest that similar ideas even if developed in a longer period of time, can be expressed by very close and recognizable metaphoric matrix. If that means that the human capacity for metaphorical expression in architecture correlates with the archetypal images even in the time of higher science and technology, then our understanding of empathy and metaphor as aspects of the primal aesthetic sense can reach more complex levels in the research of contemporary architectural creativity.

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