

ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: ARC2013-0586

Athens Institute for Education and Research

ATINER



ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ARC2013-0586

The Belly of Architecture

Renato Bocchi

Full professor

University IUAV of Venice

Italy

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN 2241-2891

1/10/2013

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Bocchi, R. (2013) **"The Belly of Architecture"** Athens: ATINER'S
Conference Paper Series, No: ARC2013-0586.

The Belly of Architecture

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Abstract

A key-word shared by art, architecture and landscape is the word space.

The privileged interest for space outlines a distance in respect of the objectuality of architecture and highlights on the contrary its topological, experiential, relational and use items.

Space –among things – is essentially logos, relation, connection; it inheres process and kinetics, referring to time and movement.

This architecture of relations marks the relationship with the living experience of an user: i.e. it is linked to perception and use, in a wider sense than “function”.

An investigation on the evolution of contemporary art is enlightening these subjects and puts it in strict relationship with architecture and landscape.

Besides it is important to investigate those artistic experiences which work on sensorial items, linked to light, sound, colour, tactility, motility, clearly connected to all the spatial and architectural researches influenced by the phenomenology of perception.

Certainly the reflection on haptic realm in art, architecture and landscape is an important chapter of the contemporary conception of being in a space.

It is important to open a dialogue among different disciplinary approaches about the definition of “space” inside”” as a fundamental matrix of the present attention to the interpretation of contemporary architecture and landscape.

The paper investigates these issues analysing works of artists and architects in the contemporary framework.

Keywords:

Corresponding Author:

The Matter of Void

Referring to the Japanese Taoist and Zen tradition, Giorgio Pasqualotto reminds us that the *void* (*wu*) is always presented with a dialectic connotation.

‘*Wu* points to a determined absence, in the sense of “something lacking”, or to a determined void, in the sense of “what, in something, there isn’t” ..., that is it always underlines the presence and the effectiveness of the void-of-something’¹.

The suprematist 'black square on a white ground' by Malevich, illustrating in a certain way a similar concept ('form of non-objective sensibility'- Malevich calls it) can be considered at the origin of the research on space in contemporary art.

De-occupied Space

Haiku No.1 - An empty circle shines among the stones. There is still reflected immobile the sky

The ‘experimental purpose’ of the Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza clearly refers to Malevich, as well as an archetypal form much older: the Basque Neolithic cromlech.

‘What is the true nature of the cromlech? - Oteiza asks² and answers to himself: - It’s a purely metaphysical, symbolic and spiritual construction..., so it means the purest and highest creation that you can conceive and determine in an aesthetic language ... The man, in our Basque tradition, stands at the edge of the circle and out of it ... and the circle does not respond much to a geometric symbolism as a metaphysics of existence’.

Oteiza’s sculpture, following the revolution of painting by Malevich, ‘wants to pass from the traditional mass-statue to the energy-statue of the future, from the heavy and closed statue to the super-light and open statue, i.e. the trans-statue’³.

To obtain this result, Oteiza implements a process of *de-occupation* of space, similar to that generated by the Neolithic circle of cromlech.

‘The void, the emptiness - he writes - is something that you get (as in physics, the vacuum does not exist). It is an aesthetic response related to the phase of spatial 'de-occupation'. The vacuum is to be the presence of an absence. The empty space as spiritual apartment, as receptivity (a term which is opposed to that of expression, in the same way in which the concave relates to convex), the empty space as a barrier and thus neutralization or defense from the exterior aggression of expressiveness and kinetism, in favour of man’⁴.

¹Pasqualotto, G. (1992). *Estetica del vuoto. Arte e meditazione nelle culture d'Oriente*. Venezia: Marsilio, p.6.

²Oteiza, J. (1963). *Quousque tandem...! Ensayo de interpretacion estetica del alma vasca*, San Sebastian.

³Oteiza, J. (1947). ‘Del escultor Oteiza, por el mismo’, *Cabalgata*, Buenos Aires.

⁴Oteiza, J. quoted in: Catalan, C. (2001) *Oteiza. El genio indomable*. Zaragoza: Ibercaja, p. 26.

The 'receptive' empty space, as defined by Oteiza - that one gets at the end of this process of 'emptying' and 'de-occupation' - is meant to be then a static space, calming and contemplative, a place of refuge.

'If the current sculpture - the author explains - tends to imagine the movement and produce it, mingling with the nature or the man himself, I search instead, for the statue, an empty loneliness, an open spatial silence, that man can occupy spiritually'.... 'I need - adds yet - to break the connection between time and space, i.e. to transform the space of the external reality in a space of inner reality, in an immobile spatiality, which means capable of living outside of time'¹.

Specifically, Oteiza's process works decomposing the virtual Platonic solids (cylinder, cube, sphere) through their section by two-dimensional planes, which the author calls - it's not a coincidence - *Malevich unit*. Through these two-dimensional units the empty space is 'de-occupied', emptied, and somehow immobilized, made visible in its static 'emptiness'.

The 'experimental process' is therefore a *dynamic* process, surely near to the Soviet avant-garde constructivist methods, which yet aims to a final state of rest.

Oteiza's empty space is ultimately an immobile space, obtained by (geometric and abstract) construction through that process that he calls 'spatial de-occupation', a 'process of creating the pneumatic vacuum'.

The empty space is - as the Neolithic cromlech - a room artificially and geometrically constructed, prone to static, metaphysic contemplation.

It is - I think I can say, again invoking the Zen aesthetic - an experience, similar, for the use of a process of emptying, to the transcendental meditation.

Not surprisingly, in Oteiza's words: 'The greatest invention in sculpture and in all artistic research, as spiritual goal, is not the movement, but the quietness, conceived as a totem-silence'².

The search for this 'open spatial silence' - as elsewhere he calls it - is repeated in the experience of architectural design that he makes first with Saenz de Oiza in the competition for a chapel of Santiago and then with the Catalan Roberto Puig in 1959 in the competition for a memorial to the statesman José Batlle y Ordoñez in Montevideo.

This project consists of three *easy pieces*: a prism, a flying beam and a platform (or a slab).

'We demand - he writes in the design report³ - that there isn't a centre of gravity but rather a field of gravitation, one closed into the building and the other open and defined by the platform, which is a horizontal floating and dark plate... with an empty feeling, horizontal and receptive ... almost a funerary stele which emphasizes the silence of a place of prayer and meditation'.

¹Oteiza, J. 'Hacia un arte receptivo' (1959), in: (2000) *Espacialato.Oteiza*. Pamplona.

²Oteiza, J. quoted in: Pelay Orozco, M. (1978) *Oteiza, su vida, su obra, su pensamiento, su palabra*. Bilbao, p.194.

³Oteiza, J. (1956), quoted in: Moral Andrés, F. *Oteiza. Arquitectura desocupada. De Orio a Montevideo*, Pamplona: UPNA.

It's very interesting to see how - in the model of the latest version of the project - Oteiza claims to represent a virtual cubic space over the platform of black stone, a tangible demonstration of its intent to show how the empty space is the real raw material of the project and therefore the most accurate way of perceiving the sacred space of the memorial, projected - as the cromlech - towards a cosmic dimension.

We could associate it in some ways to the search for virtual volumes of light in some of the early works by James Turrell or the equally cosmic search developed later in his *skyspaces* and his megalithic work at the Roden Crater.

The theme of the great empty platform appears again in the last architectural scheme by Oteiza, with the architect Daniel Fullaondo, in 1986: the competition for a mythical Basque cemetery in San Sebastian, developed - in his own words - in the form of a 'de-occupied airport runway'.

But such a process of 'de-occupation of space' can somehow be traced in other works of contemporary architecture.

Some 'roofless space and oriented in a privileged way to sky', designed by Alberto Campo Baeza - the empty patios of his single-family homes or the glass case of the council of Castilla and Leon offices in Zamora, up to some of his recent buildings' platforms, as the house in Zahara, can be easily related to this conception.

I think also to the dilatation of some spaces, again in the horizontal dimension of the platform, designed by Souto de Moura, as in Matosinhos waterfront or in the house at Moledo, or to certain authentic 'emptying process', with which this author works to reconfigure existing buildings, like the monastery of Santa Maria de Bouro or even more the transport museum at the Customs of Porto.

Frozen Space

Haiku No.2 - Between my eyes and your face a wall of light. The winter has frozen snowflakes in the air.

Returning to Jorge Oteiza's work, I will introduce now a second interpretation of the empty space that is provided by a lesser-known chapter of his 'experimental process': I mean his search about the so-called *pared-luz*, i.e. 'a blank surface in which several two-dimensional and floating elements move, composed by the superimposition of flat or curved glass with formal units of polychrome paper, variously illuminated'¹.

In Oteiza's words, it is a wall in constant expansion, which 'summarizes a hyperspace compound, bounded by an ideal front wall and another one closer to the rear', in which 'the elementary forms live alone into the void ... as a frozen space where these forms take origin as matrices of a new spatial medium'².

¹Alvarez, S. (2003). *Jorge Oteiza. Pasion y razòn*. San Sebastian: Nerea.

²Oteiza, J. (1957) *Proposito experimental 1956-1957*, IV Bienal de Sao Paulo.

The *pared-luz* therefore propose an empty space as a *gelatinous* matter, able to embed into itself fragments of solid matter, in a sort of reversal of cards: no more an empty space revealed by two-dimensional devices partially enveloping, as in the most famous sculptures by Oteiza or in the ancient cromlech, but rather a solid empty space, so to speak, able in turn to contain forms, as the empty space in the absence of gravity.

This *light-wall* has strong similarities – in my opinion - with devices such as the lighting crystal case-wall used in the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe or the greenhouse-wall used by Mies himself in the Tugendhat house as a diaphragm between the living room and the outside, although with no such strong symbolic meanings as we can find in the sculptural works by Oteiza.

But above all in contemporary architecture this type of gel or frozen space, able to contain forms floating inside, has found fertile ground in many architectural experiments: I am referring to the competition entry for the library of France by Rem Koolhaas or to certain ‘evanescent’ projects by Toyo Ito, starting with his proposal for the Jussieu library in Paris, where a ‘neutral’ prism envelops floating bodies. A search continued - again within Japanese experiments – by the complete transparency of the Atami house by Kengo Kuma or the fade volumes of many Sejima’s projects, like the proposal she presented for the expansion of the IVAM museum in Valencia.

However, perhaps the interpretation most directly linked to the research on the *pared-luz* by Oteiza, may be found - albeit with a bit bold hazard - in the whole space inside the museum ‘box’ designed for him by the architect Francisco Javier Saenz de Oiza in his Foundation-Museum in Alzuza, which can be interpreted precisely as a gelatinous body that incorporates within it, as ‘three-dimensional elements and floating’, the sculptural works of the master, in a sort of game of Chinese boxes, which can reproduce in a microcosm Oteiza’s intellectual process of search, materialized in the space of a large ‘metaphysic box’, conceived precisely - as told programmatically by Saenz de Oiza - as a ‘deposit of the experimental work of Oteiza, in stone and in words’ and above all, I would add, ‘in space’.

Hollow Space

Haiku No.3 - Digging, I tried the geometry of the earth. The true depth is made of air.

The alter ego of Oteiza in the great period of the Basque contemporary sculpture is his friend-enemy Eduardo Chillida.

Even Chillida’s sculpture works primarily on the space-matter, but Chillida’s space has nothing to do with the construction of ‘void’, conceived as static and contemplative: Chillida’s space is an ‘hollow’ space, obtained through a genuine process of excavation in the mineral matter.

Its original reference is not the cromlech, rather it is the *tholos* of prehistoric cave: a space like that of the Gurfa cave in Sicily, for example: a *tholos* where space is enlivened by the changing light that enters from the

oculus (as later in the Pantheon) and by the dusty atmosphere that the light cast on the rough surface of the rock.

The sculpture-architecture of Eduardo Chillida in the mountain Tindaya in Fuerteventura repeats similar concepts and feelings.

‘Chillida knows - Kosme de Barañano has explained¹ – that the sculptor’s material is the space and the emptiness as well, and that only through the presence of both charged places are constructed. He knows similarly that the material of music is both sound and silence ... The theme or basic question of sculpture, of creating a place by taking out material and installing space, is the idea behind Chillida’s project for Tindaya mountain..... A sculpture that is not situated in a place but rather one from whose emptiness constitutes a place’.

The concept of ‘charged space’, dynamic, enlivened by constant changes of light, this concept of ‘emptiness filled with tensions and vibrations’, is at the center of the search on space by Chillida, from his early sculptures from the series *Lo profundo es el aire* (from a poem by Jorge Guillen) and in particular the one called in Basque *Mendi Hutz* (empty mountain) to the exceptional idea of Tindaya mountain: a hollow space to be perceived with all the senses, to be experienced, then a void to live - according to the teachings of Heidegger's philosophy, not surprisingly friend and companion of Chillida himself.

Tindaya’s space - unlike the immobile void sought by Oteiza – requires the immersion of the human person into the space, a multi-sensory immersion, which aspires to the deep involvement of the user in the spatial room, which is filled with a dusty and chromatically lively atmosphere and is then tested in a topological dimension, in which the void is made in fact full and space is made in fact matter, impalpable though true matter.

Chillida writes: ‘we could compare the space with the breath that bends and turn shapes, which opens them in the space of vision. For me the space is not something abstract, but a physical reality as that of the volume that contains it’².

In modern architecture we could easily compare this kind of space research to some famous experiments by Le Corbusier, for a long time misunderstood, such as the church in Ronchamp - a shell-architecture or a belly-architecture, enlivened by the play of light – or other works of phenomenological-perceptual matrix such as the chapel at La Tourette and the church at Firminy or the Philips Pavilion.

In the contemporary world, it is almost necessary to mention another chapel, that of St. Ignatius in Seattle, designed by Steven Holl, where the ‘charged’ multisensory space, is dominated by the play of light and colour, generated by a fine concept: the ‘bottle of light’.

But we can also go back to an architecture more minimalist and rationalist as the one of Alberto Campo Baeza and discover how he uses the ‘diagonal

¹De Barañano, K. (2000). ‘Geometria y tacto. La escultura de Eduardo Chillida’, in *Chillida 1948-1998*, Madrid: Aldeasa, p.31

²Chillida, E., quoted in: De Barañano, K. (2000). ‘Geometria y tacto. La escultura de Eduardo Chillida’, in *Chillida 1948-1998*, Madrid: Aldeasa.

light' and 'light rays' in generative function of a dynamic empty space, ever-changing and 'charged', not at all frozen or immobilized.

About Campo Baeza's work, Manuel Blanco, introducing a beautiful exhibition at Maxxi museum in Rome¹, spoke precisely of 'light as a matter', of 'a kinetic space, with the slow cadence of the passing of the day', of the construction of a 'sieve', 'an element that filters the light through the ceiling and fragments it into many rays', of the use of 'light to tighten space, to put into action the space container', hence not creating a diffused light, but patches of light and 'vertical lights' raining from skylights almost always along a wall.

De-located Space

Haiku No.4 - Wherever you will see footprints of life, you will find the air to your breathing.

The dynamic and tense hollow space of Chillida can be compared - but in very different forms - with the concept of 'de-located' space, proposed by the unique artistic experience of Claudio Parmiggiani.

'I want to emphasize - wrote Parmiggiani² - the importance it has for me ... not only the work of the space but the space of the work. The reality of work begins beyond what is visible of it ... For example, take a painting, unplug it from the wall and throw it forever. Observe the white made of light that it leaves; observe the infinite that this white light will indicate us. As we can finally open a bright window on the world'.

The amazing magic *Delocazioni* by Parmiggiani reveal - through the disappearance of the work material and the highlighting of imprints - the dimension of environments, not only spatial but also temporal, explain their life cycle.

'I showed environments completely bare - the author explains³ - *The only presence was the absence*, the imprint on the walls of all that had occurred, the shadows of things that those places had kept ... An environment of shadows as an artwork, a place of absence as a place for the soul'.

Imprints should be interpreted rather as 'the physical form of the shadow' than the shadow of the physical form; they are ghosts of spent lives, that persist not only in our retina or in our memory, but find physical substance, though ethereal and intangible, in real space - representations of a immaterial persistence.

Georges Didi-Huberman significantly compares them to the concept of survival in Rilke: 'It's important - he writes - that Rilke wanted to talk about this ruin in terms of "willful life" after the destruction, in short, in terms of survival. And that has lived it primarily as a breath'⁴.

¹Blanco, M. (2011) *Campo Baeza. El arbol de la creacion*. Roma: Maxxi, AC/E

²Parmiggiani C. (2010), *Una fede in niente ma totale*, Firenze: Le Lettere.

³Parmiggiani C. (2010), *Una fede in niente ma totale*. Firenze: Le Lettere.

⁴Didi-Huberman, G. (2009), *Sculture d'ombra. Aria polvere impronte fantasmi*. Milano: Electa, p.19.

The process by which Parmiggiani builds his *Delocazioni* - through the burning of dark matter (tires) and then the production of smoke and soot - creates a virtual displacement of place and sense of bodies and objects, which underscores the cycle of life, the temporality.

'*Delocazione* - explains Didi-Huberman¹ - does not mean absence of place but translation of it, a displacement generator of paradoxes. Not the denial but the setting in motion of the place ... As it builds his place through the transfer of a site, *delocazione* in its own way is related to certain reflections carried out by some of the greatest artists of the same years: Robert Smithson, Dennis Oppenheim, Marcel Broodthaers, then Christian Boltanski. Blowing the space, Parmiggiani put the place on the move. "Blowing" a space not only one can create a place: it insufflates time in it'.

The disappearance, then, is really just a 'de-location': this determines *de facto* a survival; the physical matter is transformed into immaterial matter, just as in burning, the body becomes ashes, dust. And it is this dust that draws the passage of time.

Parmiggiani obviously lives a spiritual dimension, albeit without pass to be really religious - *a belief in nothing but total* is the paradoxical title of his book of 'poetry' - Thus he shares this research of spirituality with Jorge Oteiza, from whose work we started our speech. But what there was looked like 'immobile, contemplative and metaphysical space', here becomes a space of memory, dreams, atmospheres.

'My sculptures of ash - explains Parmiggiani - originate from the silence, the shadow, the bonfire of summer, the morning vapors, the clouds of vanilla blown into the air, from the impression of the sun imprinted on the retina, .. from eddies of dust ... wind, thunder, ... from the smoke of the chimneys, the smoke of the candles in the churches ...'².

They are therefore true and pure 'atmospheres'.

Atmospheric Space

Haiku No.5 - The fog is stardust. Inside it melts even the eye of the moon.

The matter of 'de-located' space is therefore a pulviscolar matter, a dusty atmosphere.

Let's go back to the acute interpretation by Didi-Huberman³:

"It's the air as gate-imprint - he writes - Plato would say *chora*, the place par excellence, the place as opposed to any trivial notion of space.... If the air becomes the place of the images - their medium - the pigment will be pollen or dust, and the stain will breath or aura. Parmiggiani ... works with the material of the shadow because the latter, in his view, is "the hidden place where images

¹Didi-Huberman, G. (2009), *Sculture d'ombra. Aria polvere impronte fantasmi*. Milano: Electa, pp.12-13.

²Parmiggiani C. (2010), *Una fede in niente ma totale*. Firenze: Le Lettere.

³Didi-Huberman, G. (2009), *Sculture d'ombra. Aria polvere impronte fantasmi*. Milano: Electa, p.25.

and ideas take shape", because "the shadow is the blood of the light" ... The atmospheric effect of a disappearance able to invade the space and densify it... Thus the atmosphere takes shape ... in the fog, in the twilight or in the shadow of things "

Space, according to this interpretation, comes back to being a bodily, corporeal matter, albeit in the form of dust in the air: not at all void, but matter, however impalpable, in the same way we talked about it for Chillida's work or for similar architectural spaces.

The difference here lies in the fact that the matter around this impalpable body was in fact dissolved: it is no longer the case of hollow spaces with their own shape, generated by carving the mineral matter, but the case of ghost-spaces, of imprint-spaces, whose corporeality is far more evanescent, because it spreads in space and it prints on mere surfaces.

For this reason, shifting the discourse to architecture, this type of 'de-located' space can be assimilated to contemporary experiences of 'evanescent' architecture, in which the transparency, the blur, precisely the evanescence of surfaces and bodies transmutes the space into pure atmosphere.

It's the case of Toyo Ito's architecture: the 'airy lightness' of Toyo Ito – as defined by Yuko Hasegawa - resulting in an architecture that 'plays on the contrasts between weight and lightness, container and content, contraction and expansion, transparency and opacity' accepting the novelty of the 'virtual space and electronic information, then the immateriality of electronic communication'; and on the other side, the 'mobility without weight' of Kazuyo Sejima (the definition is again by Hasegawa), played on her relationship with the space through the body and multi-sensoriality: her body and the one of the users of her spaces, responsible for the interpretation and modeling of the space, in a symbiotic relationship between the environment and the human person who experiences it.

In this type of architectural spaces - Hasegawa writes in the catalog of the *Biennale* directed by Sejima in Venice with the significant title *People meet in architecture*¹ – 'the body and expansion of its energy produce space, and with its movement the body makes itself in accordance with the rules of space'.

'What attracts Sejima - Hasegawa comments yet - is not the transparency of modernist architecture, but a transparency much evolved, the use of laminated glass that has reflections similar to those of a film, an arrangement of spaces that baffles users, leaving at the same time free choice, and the curved shaft not as sculptural forms, but as mechanisms to extract new behaviors by crossing these spaces'.

And Eve Blau - introducing the same *Biennale*² - emphasizes the concept of 'atmosphere' as central to this reflection on contemporary architectural space.

¹Hasegawa, Y., in: Sejima, K.,ed (2010) *People meet in Architecture*, Venezia, Biennale di Venezia Architettura – Marsilio.

²Blau, E., in: Sejima, K.,ed (2010) *People meet in Architecture*, Venezia, Biennale di Venezia Architettura – Marsilio, pp.38-45.

To become, in the *Corderie*, in *Cloudscapes* installation by Mathias Schuler and Transsolar, 'real fog' (similar to the famous cloud over the Lake of Neuchatel by Diller and Scofidio), or in the installation by Janet Cardiff 'pure sound space' and to translate at last, in the 3D video by Wim Wenders on the Rolex Centre, into pure expression of the thoughts and emotions of the users of the architectural space.

It's here then that we can engage, on the concept of 'atmospheric' space, a most general concept of 'atmosphere as emotional perception' of a space or a place, as well as it was described by Peter Zumthor, coming to call it 'the magic of real', with words and meanings which are very close to those used by Parmiggiani when he speaks of mixing the dream to land, materiality and immateriality. 'To immerse not life into dream, but dream into life', or when he writes: 'the dream is an immense cloud ... is the domain of freedom and fear'.

And then Zumthor ends by enumerating nine principles or design conditions with which his work tends to interact in order to achieve similar 'atmosphere' in an architectural space: 'the body of architecture, the harmony of materials, the sound of space, the temperature of space, the objects that surround us, the condition of calm and seduction, the tension between internal and external, the degrees of intimacy, the light on things'¹.

The de-location and the emptying process, working on the matter of void, can become technique of building the space as atmosphere, design of emotion.

¹Zumthor, P. (2006) *Atmospheres*, Zurich: Birkhauser.