

ENCOUNTERING FROM INSIDE: THE VISHWAKARMA TECHNE HERITAGE AND “BEING” IN EXPERIENCING ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

The process of evolving from “inside”, inherent to the design culture of Vishwakarma craftsmen in Penang, provides a holistic link to its techne heritage to define the approach, process and ethics in designing culture, and sensual and sensible spaces. The exploration of “inside” allows us to understand our being in architecture which interconnects to all beings in the world. The role of body and human senses in perceiving a phenomenon, allows for a conscious experience, where we live through them by performing the conscious act through our body; which becomes an experiential, first-person feature, in exploring “being” in architecture.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the concepts of existential phenomenology as forwarded by Heidegger in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1954), within the context of design in the Vishwakarma craftsmen tradition and extrapolating that to the emphasis of experiential architecture; a concept that places the primacy of bodily experience of space, as explored by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). Both these concepts when anchored by the Vishwakarma techne heritage, perceives the pursuit of design as a process evolving from the inside, where the primacy of perception comes from inter-sensory engagement with the environment.

Evolving From Inside

The range of Indian crafts extends over the entire culture and the number of the arts is unlimited, “but they are summed up under sixty-four major headings” (Kramrisch,1958). These sixty-four headings are also called as sixty-four techniques (kalā). Elaborating on this, Kramrisch (1958), further added that, in the traditions of the Indian craftsmen, “the name for any art or craft is śilpa. The meanings for this word are “multi-coloured”, and comprise art, skill, craft, labour, ingenuity, rite and ritual, form and creation. Neither the word “artist” nor “artisan” nor “craftsman” are adequate translation of śilpin; for the arts and crafts in India partake in the nature of rites whose technical performance had magic power.” The Aitreya Brāhmaṇa (VI 5.27) says, “śilpāni, the works of art of man, are an imitation of divine forms, by employing their rhythms, a metrical reconstitution is affected by the limited human personality.” In echoing a similar understanding, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, explains the conception of art by the Vishwakarma craftsmen:

“The Indian craftsman conceives of his art, not as the accumulated skill of ages, but as originating in the divine skill of Visvakarma and revealed by him. Beauty, rhythm, proportion, ideas have an absolute existence on an ideal plane, where all who seek may find. The reality of things exists in the mind, not in the detail of their appearance to the eye. Their inward inspiration, upon which the Indian artist is taught to rely, appearing like the still small voice of God, that God was conceived of as Visvakarma. He may be thought of as that part of divinity which is conditioned

by a special relation to artistic expression or in another way, as the sum total of consciousness, the group soul of individual craftsmen of all times and places” (Coomaraswamy, 1989, p.47).

There are many previous studies done on the mythmaking and institutionalization of the Vishwakarma crafts and artisan such as “The origin of Vishwakarma caste according to the Hindu treatises on the arts” (Acharya, 1994; Ramaswamy, 2004; Varghese, 2003), “Construction of Vishwakarma caste and the demonstration of tradition” (Kramsrishch, 1958; Coomaraswamy, 1909), “intrinsic religiousness” (Coomaraswamy, 1909, p.70). “Rediscovery of South Indian bronze casting during colonial regime and its feature in museum and as tourist promotions as symbol of India’s cultural past” (Srinivasan, 2004; Dehejia, 2003; Davis, 2004; Davis, 1997; Nagaswamy, 2000; Nambiar, 1961), “The state of post-colonial craft communities and discontinuities of tradition” (Nambiar 1961). “Political mobilization in post-independence period among Vishwakarma community in Kerala” (Varghese, 2003).

While historically, the term Vishwakarma refers to an endogamous five-fold craft communities, in parts of southern India, especially in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, these communities are also known by different names such as Kammalar/ Panchala/ Aachary/ Silpachary analogous to five-fold clans . The Vishwakarma community in Georgetown, Penang engage in artisanal goldworks and trace their heritage back to southern India where they represent traditional artisanal communities who have left behind a permanent imprint in terms of material culture and techne heritage. Techne, is a complex concept constitutes both art and technology, that appear as rite and ritual in its external process. The phenomenology philosopher, Martin Heidegger in elucidating the meaning of “techne”, says the following in his book, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1977):

“To the Greeks, techne meant neither art not handicraft but, rather, to make something appear, within what is present, as this or that, in this way or that way. The Greeks conceive of techne, producing, in terms of letting appear.” (Heidegger, 1977, p.377).

In *Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934), Coomaraswamy writes,

“there is indeed, but one authority (pramatr) whose knowledge is universal (visva) and innate (shaja), not acquired by instruction

or practice, that is the Lord as Visvakarman or Tvashtṛ” (Coomaraswamy, 1934, p.81).

Coomaraswamy’s writings awaken a holistic link between the conceptual significance of the universal creative principle of Vishwakarma and the lived artistic traditions in order to understand the transformation of nature into plastic arts, although in an idealized vision. Furthermore, as illuminated by Jan Brouwer (1995) in his book *Makers of the World: Caste, Craft and Mind of South Indian Artisans*, informs an anthropological study amongst blacksmiths in Karnataka, India. Vishwakarma, who is venerated as the God of engineering and architecture, if we were to go back to the Vedic period, is the “maker of the world” as how the Sanskrit term implies.

“Lord Vishwakarma, who is the origin of all sculpture, creator of architecture of the universe source of all forms, actions and names... He who keeps...Mother Gayathri in his heart...who is as high as the Meru Mountain (the divine mountain)... like the divine kalpavriksha (tree of life)...” (translated from “Kasyapa Silpasastra”, the medieval artistic treatise used in southern India in Nandagopal (2017) , *Ritual Enactment in Temple Tradition*).

The myth, a form of awareness, of the descent of the craftsmen from the principle – “Lord Vishwakarma”, is active on all levels of the craftsmen’s being. If the craftsmen infringe on the tradition, and if the composition of the art has no wholeness, the craftsmen therefore not only projects as a poor artist, but becomes an unholy person. While all craftsmen are artists, not all artists are craftsmen. This is because creative work that evolves from the inside has the sanctions of a sacrament in Indian societies. Even today, in the Indian diaspora, craftsmen revere and worship their tools and instruments of trade on the day of Vishwakarma Puja at the Dussehra festival because these paraphilias are essentially an extension of a craftsman’s body by which the artist who lies inside can evolve beyond the limitation of human psyche to shape nature into work of art.

From this perspective, flawless execution of the rules of the art is only one of the conditions. For example, the rite of initiation of architects comprise of mastering the drawings, knowledge of 2D or 3D diagrams etc. But this alone does not make the true work of art, because apart from technical competence, the artist within has to awaken “the latent possibilities

of the being” (Kramrisch, 1958, p.5).

The personality of the craftsmen is therefore proposed with practical application in a somewhat mystical way where the process of design itself is regarded as a sacrament, rather than secular. Coomaraswamy (1909), has quoted in his writing by extracting from the Sri Maha VajraBhairava Tantra, an ancient Sanskrit text that offers a description of an ideal artist:

“The painter must be a good man, no sluggard, not given to anger, holy, learned, self-controlled, devout and charitable, free from avarice – such should be his character. The hand of such a painter may paint on Sura-cloth. Would he attain to success, then enters the gift of the Sura into him. He should draw his design in secrecy, after having laid the cloth quite flat. He may paint if besides the painter only a sadhaka be present, but not if a man of the world be looking on.”

All of these may appear as expressions of spiritual understanding, yet we can also see how these ideals were reproduced in practice. Watt, in his writing, *Indian Art in Delhi* (1903), describes about the works of a head carpenter who was commissioned to make a reproduction of a room in a palace of the Maharaja of Bhavnagar by following the ancient rules of his craft. The head carpenter while progressing on his work, observed that the finger of God was pointing the way, hence mistakes were impossible. In support, he quoted the ancient rules of his craft:

“The breadth of the room should be divided into twenty-four parts, of which fourteen in the middle and two at each end should be left blank, while the remaining two portions should each form windows or jalis. The space between the plinth and upper floor should be divided into nine parts, of which one should be taken up by the base of the pillar, six parts by the column, one by the capital, and one by the beam over it. He then added that should any departure be made from these rules, the ruin of the architect and death of the owner were sure to follow.”

What can be implied here is, the Indian craftsmen views are more than contempt of those who “draw after their own vain imagining” (Coomaraswamy, 1909, p.90). This is because under all the limitations of the human physical body and the context of surrounding, the craftsman,

when it comes to the process of designing, is no longer an individual who is expressing the individual whims and fancies, but part of the universe, evolving into expressions that gives form to the ideals of eternal aesthetics – an everlasting beauty that is eminent in nature around us.

Experiencing From Inside

Architecture, as applied arts and technology, is essentially, the physical demarcation of an inside from an outside. All of us begin being inside in the womb. Even when birth brought us outside, we are still inside; inside the room, inside the building that holds the room, inside the building on the site, the site in the city, the city in the region, the region in the country, the country in the world. Although from birth onwards, we are all forever inside some space and outside some space, the primacy of experiencing architecture itself remains one of being inside.

“Inside refers to a physical location that is somehow separated, physically or symbolically, from another physical location that is exterior to it. The locations of inside and outside generate different spatial experiences and, by association, suggest different mental orientations toward the world. And so, we use the spatial and experiential distinction between inside and out to help structure our understanding of the world and the actions that follow” (Johnson, 1987, pp. 30-7).

The places we occupy with our bodies that we fill with memories and aspirations becomes another kind of inside called the “being” of human occupancy. In understanding “being” in architecture, we look at how phenomenology philosophers have explored its etymological concepts.

Heidegger in his *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1954), discusses the word “to be” (German: *sein*) which points us to the essence of “being.” *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, (German: “*Bauen, Wohnen, Denken*”) was originally published from a lecture Heidegger presented in 1951; while, Jeff Malpas, in his essay of Heidegger, Aalto, and the Limits of Design, contends that “dwelling” is not the ideal translation of *wohnen*, because “dwelling” is an unusual word in English, whereas *wohnen* is an everyday term. Malpas argues that a better translation would be “living” or “residing.”

“The truck driver is at home on the highway, but he does not have his

shelter there; the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place there; the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he does not dwell there. These buildings house man. He inhabits them and yet does not dwell in them, when to dwell means merely that we take shelter in them” (Heidegger, 1954).

“Dwelling” and “building” are related as ends and means. As long as we think about this, we tend to take “dwelling” and “building” as two separate activities. But in Heidegger’s writing, “building is in itself already dwelling.” Through language we can measure the essence of “dwelling” and “building”. Derrida (1997), translated by Gayatri Spivak, forwarded the concept of supplementarity, which sees language, as a supplement of reality and can be taken into discussion with these Heideggerian’s concept. Even for Heidegger, language is omnipresent and things exist in relationality with language. In Old High German, the word for bauen – buan - means “to remain.” While the actual meaning of bauen is lost in translation to English, we can project to a concealed trace of it in the German word, Nachbar, which is the Nachbar, the Nachbarbauer; “the near dweller.” In German, the verbs buri, büren, beuren, beuron, indicate “dwelling”. Thereby, the old word buan, not only informs us that “to build” is really “to dwell” (to remain), it also hints us to direct us of how we must think about what it means “to dwell”. This is also because, when we talk about dwelling as human activity, we usually imagine its implied connotation. The word bauen, speaks in its original sense, of how far the essence of dwelling extends. So, bauen, buan. bhu, beo exist today in the German word bin, in the forms ich bin (“I am”), du bist (“you are”) and the imperative form bis (“be”).

However, building as dwelling, as being on earth, often escapes our everyday experience as linguist says, that which we do “habitually”. The German word for “habitually” in this context is Gewohnt. There is obvious relationship between wohnen and Gewohnt, just as in English, the relationship between the word “habit” and “inhabit.” Therefore, the evidence of the original meanings is shown in the fact that language retracts the actual meaning of the word bauen. This is because with the essential words of language, these foreground meanings often veil the true meaning, which are easily forgotten. Just like the old word bauen, the Old Saxon word wunon and the Gothic word wunian, mean “to remain”, “to stay in a place”.

But the Gothic word *wunian* says more distinctly how this remaining is experienced. *Wunian* means to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. While *bauen* in modern German means “to build”, Heidegger establishes *bauen* as having two essential meaning; *pflegen* (to cultivate), and *errichten* (to erect). Ultimately, Heidegger is making the argument that *bauen* (building), *wohnen* (dwelling), and *sein* (be) point to the same act, because they share their etymologies in German.

The basic feature of “building”, “dwelling” and “being” reveals itself to us as soon as we reflect on the fact that human existence is based on “dwelling”, in the sense that mortals reside on the earth. In this “Primal Oneness”, all four (earth, sky, the divinities and mortals) belong in one unity. Heidegger developed and characterized “The Fourfold”, inspired by the poetry about nature and beauty by Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), a German poet. Heidegger in discussing “The Fourfold” describes that, “human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth”. To elucidate further, “on the earth” already mean “under the sky” and both of these mean “remaining before the divinities” and fosters a “belonging of inter being with one another”. Not only does our “being” as humans belong to one another, our “being” belong with all other beings on earth as well. Heidegger called life, *das sein* (“being”). Much of Heidegger’s philosophy is devoted to trying to wake us up to the fragility of our lives. Once we are aware that we and all other living things share this finite, fragile state called “being”, we might learn to identify more with them, recognizing our universal kinship with all living things and the earth itself. This feeling of unity comes when we realise how much are all of us, in other words the entities on earth are connected. However, usually we tend to separate ourselves from these “others”. This happens due to the continuous “chatter”, which Heidegger termed, *das gerede*, of routine life in modern society, that tends to drown our senses and lead to separation that results from escapism. Heidegger urges us to see the interconnectedness of life and to emancipate ourselves from the chatter by focusing on the intensity of our “being” and to live “authentically”, or as Heidegger termed *eigentlichkeit*.

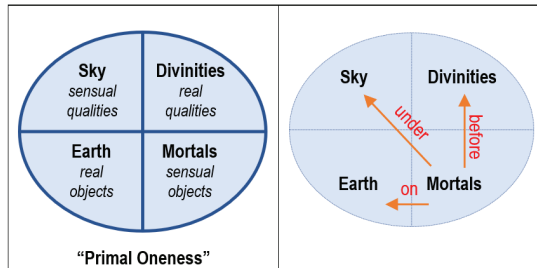


Figure 1. “The thinging of things”

(Source: Adapted from Heidegger’s “The Fourfold”)

Life, therefore is a conscious experience, where we live through them by performing the conscious act through our body. This experiential, first-person feature, that of being experienced is an essential part of existential phenomenon. While Heidegger handles the “big picture” of existentialism by studying the grandness of “being”, Maurice Merleau-Ponty illuminates the details of daily living and the details of the everyday that comes from human interaction with the environment.

DISCUSSION: EVOLVING FROM INSIDE

The inside which is unseen but felt, is the realm of embodied experience, of both aspirations and fears, could also be too “subjective” to be trusted or valued. This is because, our societies today have adopted the perspective that stems from the model of understanding that rests on Cartesian duality, introduced by René Descartes, that is based on an attempt to detach human consciousness from what is considered the physical materiality of bodies and matter. In the philosophy of René Descartes, one has to arise above the embodied experience of the lived-body to attain objective knowledge. To elucidate further, René Descartes, regards vision as the most universal and noble of the human senses and his objectifying philosophy is consequently grounded in the privileging of vision where he also equated vision with touch, a sense which he considered to be “more certain and less vulnerable to error than vision.” (Pallasmaa, 1996). The distancing of the objectivity of this “experience of inside” arise in architecture mainly from the sense of sight because in order to see, we need no direct physical contact with the phenomena, and thus we can be removed from it. The other senses of touch,

sound, smell, taste in unison require actual engagement and immersion in the phenomenon, which comes naturally in the artisanal goldworks tradition of the Vishwakarma.

Very often, we remain on the outside where our experience gets limited to contemplation of the building, its spaces and the architectural experience of our physical bodies because we remain remote, disengaged from the phenomenon as disembodied beings.

In architecture today, we see buildings that represent what Juhani Pallasmaa calls “architecture of the eye”, which create a sensory and mental distance between bodies and building. We have created built environments in this disembodied image of our body to experience; “observe but do not feel”. The dominance of vision over other senses and its resultant bias in cognition is evident in our built environment as much as it is in many other areas, as it has been observed by many philosophers. For example, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, a collection of philosophical essays, analyses the “historical connections between vision and knowledge, vision and ontology, vision and power, vision and ethics.” This body of writings argue that “beginning with the ancient Greeks, Western culture has been dominated by ocular-centric paradigm, a vision-generated, vision-centred interpretation of knowledge, truth and reality” (Levin, 1993). In describing the isolation and detachment that arise from this, Pallasmaa (1996, p. 20) argues that “as buildings lose their plasticity and their connection with the language and wisdom of the body, they become isolated in the cool and distant realm of vision. With the loss of tactility and measures and details crafted for the human body – and particularly for the hand- architectural structures become repulsively flat, sharp-edged, immaterial and unreal.” (.

To put it directly, “objects” are readily visible and take no effort to discover. However, what is inside is not visible because it is not yet been made visible. To perceive the inside, it necessitates realizing and discovering, which can come through the lived-body experience. Phenomenology philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty makes the human body the center of the experiential world. He says, “our own body is the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive; it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.” Merleau-Ponty argues that the experiential foundation of this immersion-in-world is perception,

which he relates to a lived-body that simultaneously experiences, acts in, and is aware of the world that, typically, responds with immediate pattern, meaning, and contextual presence. By its very nature, perception places itself in the background as it draws us out into the happenings of our world. As Merleau-Ponty clarifies, “perception hides itself from itself. . . it is of the essence of consciousness to forget its own phenomena thus enabling ‘things’ to be constituted. . .” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 58). Hence, in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental intention is to review perception of the lived-body phenomenologically by “reawakening the basic experience of the world. . .” (1962, p.viii). In explaining perception of the lived-body, Merleau-Ponty argues that it results in “synaesthetic perception” – “a whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning. . .” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 229, pp. 21–22). In other words, qualities of the world directly resonate with the lived-body and thereby convey immediate meanings and ambiances, though typically at a contained, unself-conscious level of awareness that is best located and described via phenomenological study. The very process of creating from inside is therefore an exploration of the unknown that also strikes a theological tension. Each process requires reinterpretations of any existing boundaries to reinvent the means and end. It brings with it a certain tension to balance amongst need, purpose, and resource to manifest a new experience every time.

CONCLUSION

Reading Heidegger’s *Building Dwelling Thinking* (1954), parallel to the projection of Vishwakarma techne heritage into architecture, allows us to advocate for a more phenomenological and poetic understanding when creating spaces, where designers construct new pieces of reality, thus modifying and enriching the world of human experiences. While we hold true to the Heideggerian essence of “being” in inhabiting spaces, we anchor that understanding in the process of design as advocated by Merleau-Ponty (year?) who urges us to look at the experiential body and the experience of engaging with space. In consolidating these two concepts, we can look at what limits architecture today as explained in *Body Memory and Architecture* (1978), by Bloomer (year?) and Moore (year?) who argue, “what is missing from our dwelling today are the potential transactions between body, imagination, and environment (page number?).”

While it is true that the objective model of knowledge is the prevailing model in our societies today, we have to acknowledge the reality, that by denying the lived-body experience, we also devalue both our bodies and the material world by treating them as merely objects. In repressing the value of encountering, experiencing and evolving from inside, we repress our desires, dreams, fears and aspiration which give form to the narratives that in turn give form and animate our lives and our physical surrounding. As designer-architect, Kisho Kurokawa (1998, p. 99) argues, “the essence of the problem is ... that one-sided overdependence on the intellect underlying Western culture. Intellect is valued far above emotion; rationality the essence and ultimate form of humanity. Rationalism has played a decisive role in industrial society, but it has also led us to disdain and devalue the importance of consciousness, spiritual phenomena and emotion.” Striving for rationality and objectivity alone in architecture becomes an attempt to repress our collective dreams altogether, consequently, we forget in the power of our dreams in making our world. We forget our own magic power because we are fascinated by what appears as “rational”.

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