Situated between self and thing, 

beauty is the primary spiritual manifestation of architecture. This paper adopts a Cassirerean approach, shedding light on beauty and architecture as originating in the symbolic form Myth, the most basic human way of relating man and world, finitude and infinity. Visiting the work of the Finnish architect Reima Pietila, connects Myth, poetic dwelling, beauty and spirituality as inseparable counterparts of architectural making.

Cassirer’s is a life-philosophy. The relation between spirit and life, between the spontaneous immediacy of life and the detached and deliberative character of spirit, is by his definition “the central problem of thought in recent times”. He sheds light on this problem by the five ‘symbolic forms’, referring to all spiritual energy by virtue of which meaning is linked to a concrete sensible sign and innerly attributed to it.

Mythos – the primary and most basic symbolic form, is con-fused, fusing together streams of experience, saturated with life and feeling: “We are in the habit of dividing our life into the two spheres of the practical and the theoretical... we are prone to forget there is a lower stratum beneath both of them.... it is sympathetic”. The symbolic-form art gives the feelings shape and form. Thus, the close ties between art and mythos, and especially between architecture as a form of art and mythos because, according to Cassirer, space is one of myth's dominant categories. Existential distinction between inside and outside, the sacred and the profane, the material and the spiritual, the real and the symbolic, are spatial-architectural constitutions of conceptual and ontological constructions within Mythos. Architecture is the spatial expression and incarnation of spiritual energy in Mythos, who is (yet) incapability of abstraction; and the essence of Mythical space is the spirit of place.
In architectural making Mythos is always present because, as Cassirer asserts, “*Even in the life of civilized man it [myth] has by no means lost its original power*”\(^7\).

Furthermore: Benjamin’s distracted appreciation of architecture in the everyday life\(^8\) describes its mythical presence: saturated with meaning, though in a non-contoured way; impregnated with our own feelings\(^9\), forming a continuity with the self in the self’s deflected attention from the subject-object Modernist dualism.

Great works of architecture are always Mythical in the Cassirerean sense, binding together *life-world, poetic dwelling and the fourfold*\(^10\). Embracing the *fourfold* (Heavens, Earth, Divinities, Mortals) is the condition of *poetic dwelling* - the way humans are in the world, when they are "at home"; peaceful, caring for their place, appeased; *Dwelling* is poetic in the sense of *making*, and *poetical making is beautiful* because it is order and meaningfulness imposed on chaos, thus *beauty* is part of being at home, in harmony and serenity.

A profound example that highlights the manifestations of Mythos is the poetical making by the Finnish architect Reima Pietila\(^11\). His own architectural expression is *gaining from the Finnish landscape* and his buildings are a *continuation of nature*, that he sees as an element of *genius loci – the spirit of place*, hence his neologism ‘*Nature-Architecture*’. At the Dipoli Conference Center, Otaniemi – says Pietila - the building needs back woods around itself in order to create the genius loci of *forest-urbanism*. Dipoli is the archetypal dwelling: the windows follow the Ur-form of protected entrance; The strongly protruding copper eaves that open out in bay-like forms represent cliffs, under which the Caveman builds his abode – reference to the Loulamieskilta and Jamera legends – hence architecture as *retelling of myth* and *imaginary identity with “Ur-Sache”*.

In the Tampere Central Public Library – “Metso” - the *topological characteristics* extend into a poetic scale. Recalling the natural history of Europe, the plan – three round centers joined by an arc - communicates the memory of the post-glacial rock landscape, hence Pietila’s neologism ‘*Object-Memory*’. The library as a whole resembles the capercaille – Metzo – the Finnish totem-bird, associated also with
the martial Valkyrie carrying its shield, going off to war. As such, the mythical culture of Northern Europe forms the temporal depth of this architectural work, evoked by abstract symbolism. Both Dipoli and Metzo vaguely convey the feeling of life: the image of an earthbound creature, a dinosaur, is an inbuilt theme in the former, while the bird, the child of air and space - in the latter. In the Malmi Church the geomorphic architecture is saturated with “the relaxed mass” of a sleeping animal.

The fourfold, the primordial structure of the world, is recalled by Pietila in the Kaleva Church, Tampere. Here the spirit of place becomes metaphorical and the architectural imaginary communicates. “The church is “a limenphenomenon”: an ‘eternal-between-two-worlds’; a metaphor for ‘this-side-ness’ and ‘that-side-ness’ … Kaleva Church is a functionalist building if we accept that its function is to be a metaphor of metaphysical ideas”¹²

Pietila speaks of peaceful coexistence with nature, of contextuality and balance. In the Lieksa Church he wills harmony and peaceful coexistence of elements. He does not require final inseparable unity and does not mention beauty; but if beauty is a way in which being reveals itself, a mode of truth (“aletheia”), a recalling of the mystery of being, then it is there, in his creative process: something that begins to appear from its concealment, a becoming that is only loosely trapped; that is concealed again if one approaches it too soon, too directly.

Heidegger was one of Pietila’s favorite philosophers¹³ (thus he was indirectly acquainted with Cassirer’s Mythos). His search for a deep truth, one beyond Modernist rationalism – is interpreted as overcoming insufficient forms of rationality¹⁴ and here it is suggested his architecture is a sought of spirituality.

¹ Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) was an influential Neo-Kantian philosopher in the mid-twentieth century. A forerunner of many ideas prevailing in critical theory and in architectural concerns in cultural theory, he was generally forgotten after his death; although some new interest in his writings has arisen in recent years, e.g. “The Body and Embodiment: Intersections of Imagery, Literature, and Science”. Symposium. Göteborg University 7-9 May 2004
“Communication in and beyond the concept of power, with particular reference to Ernst Cassirer's work on culture and communication”. Danish Centre for Philosophy and Science Studies, 2005
"Against Harmony," Ernst Cassirer Conference., Yale University, 2006
According to Cassirer, there are five modes by which humans render order and meaning in the Heraclitic flux of appearances: myth and religion, language, history, art and science. These are the five ‘symbolic forms’ – or spiritual energies. Though not totally excluding each other, they activate distinct human capacities. No symbolic form is superior to any other in its truth-value, but the mythical is the primal one and the scientific - the latest; no culture is bereft of any of the five symbolic forms.


12 Seminar on architecture and urban planning in Finland 1982 : Genius loci - a search for local identity. SAFA Helsinki : SAFA, [ca 1983].


14 Thorsten Otz-Bornstein. 'Play, Dream, and the Search for the "Real" Form of Dwelling: From Aalto to Ando'. http://www.freewebs.com/botzbornsteinarticles/