

Buber on Architecture

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“Art ...is work and testimony of the relation between the *substantia humana* and the *substantia rerum*, the In-Between that has become a Gestalt.”¹

To the best of our knowledge Martin Buber never wrote anything about architecture. Nevertheless a lot of what he did write, including his thinking on art, may be able to shed some light onto the nature of our task as architects, if we were to seek a deepening of its spiritual content and meaning. My presentation will attempt a brief outline of the source and the nature of this light and speculate on its implications for architecture.

Martin Buber (b.1878 in Vienna, d.1965 in Jerusalem) is perhaps best known to us through his most famous and influential work: *Ich und Du* (1922), translated into English as *I and Thou*. His basic thesis is that the world is given to us in a twofold attitude in accordance with the two basic word-pairs we can speak: I-You and I-It. There is no I in and of itself, but only the I of one of these two word-pairs. The I of the I-You encounters the world in a relation. Relation is always mutual: I become an I only through You. The I of the I-It perceives the world as experience: it's Its are things among other things.

But humans can enter I-You relationships not only with their fellow human beings, but also with nature and with spiritual beings. The difference between “relation” and “experience,” between You and It, is also that between presence and object, (in German better as the contrast between *Gegen-wart* and *Gegen-stand*), in other words the difference between something that comes to life as a You through the presence of my I, and something that has an autonomous existence without me. I-You is always an unmediated mutual presence. We encounter a being, we experience some-thing.

Buber illustrates this difference with a story.² A very old linden tree once stood along a path that he had walked time and time again. He always accepted it as it was given to him, until he once was overcome by this question: now, that I encounter it, the linden tree is as it is – but how is it before, how is it after our encounter? What is it when no experience approaches it? Botany could tell him nothing about the properties of this linden tree that he experienced, nothing about the space that it shared with him here and now. But there was a moment when he accepted this It-thing, that had become a featureless and abstract category, as a presence that had waited for him to once again become the blooming, scented, and rustling linden tree of the world of his senses, by speaking Goethe's words: “So, it is You!”

Where Buber extends his thinking to come closest to our enterprise as architects – which then could be defined as the task to imbue the world of merely experienced things and places with the latent potential to become a relational presence for us – is in his attempt at a philosophical

¹ Martin Buber, *Urdistanz und Beziehung*, Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1978, p. 24. (my translation)

² Martin Buber, *Ich und Du*, Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1974, pp. 30-31

anthropology of art, most clearly articulated in his book *Der Mensch und sein Gebild*³ (*Man and his Artistic Figuration*) although first already hinted at in his *Urdistanz und Beziehung* (*Original Distance and Relation*). Humans distance themselves from the things they put to their use, and thus push them into an independent existence – this is certainly true for architecture understood as a *functional* art. This distancing, however, creates the concomitant urge to reconnect, a desire to enter a personal relation with these distanced things. Use and possession are not sufficient any more, things have to re-enter our world in another way: by imbuing them with a vision that gives a perceivable form and expression to this relation. “Perception pulls out of our existence the world that we need; but vision, and led by it, art, urges us to go beyond what we need and turns the superfluous (better literally: overflowing) into the necessary.”⁴ This is equally true for architecture if we understand it as a functional *art*. The work of art, in Buber’s thinking, does not seek to express a pre-existing condition, but rather is testimony of a relational event, originating in and indeed constituted by the very act of *figurative discovery*.

In the process of becoming human, according to Buber, there gradually appear two closely related characteristics of the human person: the dissatisfaction with the reduction to what is needed, and the desire for a complete relation of perfection and consummation. This desire opens the gates into the spaces of four potentialities to pursue this quest: knowledge, love, art, and faith. They all are capable to counteract our alienation from the world, and they all show an inherent tendency to strive toward the ideal of a complete and perfect relation: in the way we understand the world, in the way we relate to our fellow human beings, in the world of our senses and our bodies, in our desire for oneness with God.

Clearly architecture is different from “pure” art in that it always is built upon a utilitarian substrate, in that it is always the result of collaborative work, and in that it always occupies public space. It is not simply testimony of a personal relational event. In its best manifestations it is the collective work of many over time: Iktinos and Kallikrates were able to achieve the perfection of the Parthenon only by standing on the shoulders of generations of like-minded builders and craftsmen before them and beautiful cities were not built by one person or in a day. At the same time, however, in our most admired examples of authenticity in architecture, whether in the vernacular or classical traditions, or in the work of thoughtful, sensitive, and inspired individuals, it seems to be the I-You relationship, the true *dialogue* its originators were able to enter with a place, with materials and their proper assembly, and with the future human inhabitants, that led to a quality of wholeness, consummation, and perfection, and to the reverence we feel for them. “And in perfection we find the origin.”⁵

³ Martin Buber, *Der Mensch und sein Gebild*, Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1955.

⁴ Ibid. 1955, p. 38. (my translation)

⁵ Ibid., 1955, p. 53. (my translation)