

# ***t r a n s l a t i o n***

*from understanding to misreading and back again*

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## **Architecture or Built Thing? Translating Philosophy into Design Critique.**

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Martin Heidegger stated that we can build only if we first know how to dwell (157). He might logically conclude that today's architecture students are incapable of dwelling, for they all too often create wanton, gratuitous, arbitrary and contextually irrelevant architecture. As educators, we can halt the current trend of architecture as mere form-making by teaching our students coherent methods of architectural critique that have roots which go deeper than personal preferences. In so doing, we can hope that our students will not only be capable of critiquing the work of others, but will also critically analyze their own work and create architecture that is objective, meaningful, appropriate and relevant.

One such method is to study widely accepted philosophical models such as Heidegger's Fourfold, among others, and to translate these theories into architectural critique. By teaching beginning design students this model of critique they will base their designs on sound, tested reasoning, which will result in logical design theory and meaningful architecture.

Some may argue that most philosophy is out of the intellectual reach of the beginning design student. On the contrary, the argument of this paper maintains that with a sensitive approach, even beginning design students can achieve a basic comprehension of difficult theories and transform them into architectural critique. As a result, our students will be aware of these models of thought and understand that their design work must be squarely founded upon logic rather than on aimless caprice.

While Heidegger's thought presents only one of many viable models for this philosophy-to-architecture translation, this paper will follow his essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" as an appropriate catalyst for teaching the art of architectural critique to the beginning design student.

In "Building Dwelling Thinking," Heidegger introduces his concept of the Fourfold and its role in being-in-the-world. The basic premise of the fourfold is the remarkable relationship between earth and sky, divinities and mortals, in which mortals stand on the earth, under the sky, before the divinities and with other mortals. This basic prepositional relationship describes how mortals dwell in the world. As Heidegger points out, "[m]ortals are in the fourfold by dwelling" (148); therefore dwelling in this sense is to recognize our position in the cosmos by sparing or preserving the essential fourfold. It is the role of Architecture, therefore, to encourage mortals to save the earth, receive the sky, commune with other mortals and "hold up to the divinities what is un hoped for" (148). If a place is indeed able to inspire us, as mortals, to hope, to love and to trust, while

reconnecting us to the sky, earth and other mortals, it preserves the essential Fourfold and thus merits the name “Architecture.”

When Heidegger refers to the nature of mortality, he describes our passage through life as an evolutionary process towards death. He means to say that as we pass through life, or as we dwell in the world, we are constantly changing and developing. This evolutionary process is learning. Therefore, learning represents the fundamental activity of mortals. We can briefly investigate this notion of learning with respect to dwelling as it is manifest in Louis Kahn’s Exeter Library. If Architecture is the gatherer of the fourfold, it must purposefully admit and install the Fourfold (155). This admitting and installing is what Heidegger refers to as a “double space-making.” In this way, in order for a Built Thing to become Architecture, it must invoke the fourfold and make room for it. Exeter Library admits and installs the Fourfold in the sense that its Architecture fosters learning. Kahn’s conception of the Library allows the students, as mortals, to take the book into the light (Brownlee 207), indicating both physical light and intellectual illumination. One enters the building in the central atrium then passes through the filter of the book stacks into the reading zone, replete with natural light and exterior views where learning as “realization” takes place. In this way, Exeter Library, as Architecture, allows mortals to dwell by fostering learning, which is the essential activity of mortals.

Kahn’s Salk Institute also gives us a glimpse of how it is possible for Architecture to preserve the Heideggerian fourfold. Kahn reinterpreted the architectural past, recalling classical forms and design sensibility through the lens of modernity. As a result the Institute evokes a sense of antiquity. By not only considering his own experience as a mortal, but also the experience of all mortals before his time and after, he acknowledges that the Institute’s Architecture supersedes the mortality of Man, thereby letting dwell.

As Kahn designed the Salk Institute, he was keenly aware of the necessity of the intellectual retreat as a part of scientific study. The researchers’ private studios are located in towers flanking the central patio and connected to the laboratories via bridges. This type of separation allows the researchers to retreat from the bustle of the laboratories, reconnecting them with the sun, sea breeze and ocean views, thus encouraging them, as mortals, to preserve the fourfold.

It is also vital to consider how the Salk Institute references the natural elements. It is impossible to stand in the central patio of the Institute and not ponder the fourfold in its entirety. In essence, the Institute can be compared to the nave of a great Gothic cathedral from which the vaulting has been peeled back to reveal the grandeur of the celestial dome, while simultaneously being connected to the contrasting natural elements that can be seen at either end of the patio: the grove of trees to the east and the ocean to the west. Again, this reconnection with the natural elements renews the relationship between Man and his environment.

## Pedagogical Implementation

Having thus demonstrated how Heidegger's Fourfold can be translated into design critique, it is now appropriate to discuss an educational setting in which beginning design students have been taught the Heideggerian Fourfold and applied it to their thoughts on Architecture.

Of the many unique features of Ball State University's College of Architecture and Planning is its Common First Year Program, in which students of various design fields share a common design foundation before declaring a major field of study. These students, mostly ranging in age from 17-20 are exposed to basic design and design communication fundamentals in a studio setting. Simultaneously, they are required to take introductory courses in the fields of Architecture, Urban Planning and Landscape Architecture. The Introduction to Architecture is essentially an architecture appreciation course and as such constitutes a logical forum in which the Heideggerian Fourfold can be applied as a means of critically assessing architecture. This course involves lecture format delivery and encourages student interaction.

The students are first required to read an article written by the instructor that renders Heidegger's essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" in a more accessible format. The article utilizes a language that is much more conversational and familiar while being careful to avoid oversimplification of the essential ideas. After the students have read this article the instructor applies the Fourfold-based critique to architectural pieces among which are Exeter Library and the Salk Institute, as mentioned above. After reading the reduced article and hearing the in-class demonstration, the students read "Building Dwelling Thinking." In so doing, the initial "philosophy shock" is mitigated, and the students are subsequently able to read the original Heidegger text more objectively. In culmination, the students write an analytical essay utilizing the Fourfold as a means of critiquing three pieces of architecture they have chosen.

The final product of the Fourfold-based essays typically represents a full range of academic ability. Several of the students who choose to apply the Fourfold to architectural critique demonstrate a particular adeptness and surprisingly profound understanding of the difficult concepts Heidegger uses.

Following are excerpts of student essays which demonstrate a good grasp on the implications of the Fourfold in architecture.

### Student Example #1:

Paul Lindsay, first year design student with freshman standing chose to critique Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York as follows:

"The center of the spiral is opened to allow natural light to pour into the nautilus' center. The sky seems to penetrate into the museum, unifying the sky and earth. Visitors are almost completely enclosed, but still feel the connection to the sky.

They even begin high above the bottom of the atrium, and progress from this point (the sky) towards the end of the exhibit on the ground floor (the earth). Guests are constantly connected to both the earth and the sky by the natural light flooding the nautilus.

This light also serves to symbolize the divine enlightenment of art and the visitor's journey through that enlightenment. Through his design, Wright presents the artistic divinity and then leads visitors back to the city floor to join the population of New York again. While still connected to the artist through [his or her] work, the visitors are momentarily transformed through the art into a divine and enlightened being while still remaining in a mortal setting.

The unification of the fourfold is achieved simply through this brilliantly devised shaft of light. Symbolizing both sky and divinity, to the eye it is a sharp contrast to the earthly building and mortal inhabitants, but in fact unites the four. It leads the guests through the sky and through divinity back down to the earth and fellow mortals, all the while allowing them to dwell within the structure.”

In this excerpt it is clear that Mr. Lindsay manages a basic knowledge of the Heideggerian Fourfold as a critical tool. He demonstrates a fundamental understanding of the interdependency of sky, earth, divinities and mortals. He also makes a keen observation that Wright's museum admits and installs the fourfold, noting that the architecture itself plays an active role by encouraging the visitor to ponder his or her relationship with the physical elements of sky and earth and with the metaphysical elements of divinities and other mortals.

Student Example #2:

Ethan Harris, first-year design student with freshman standing chose to write about the Katsura Rikyu in Kyoto, Japan:

“The palace references the earth in various ways, however the most perceivable is perhaps the sliding screens that separate each room, and separate the inside from the outside....[These] Shoji screens reference the mortal facet of the fourfold through the rhythm of life. The screens would refer to the rhythm of life through the fact that they [can] be opened and closed when day turns to night, sunshine turns to rain, summer turns to fall, and fall turns to winter etcetera. Since the rhythm of life is ostensibly “among mortals” and also “before the divinities” then the Shoji screens imaginably would reference both mortals and divinities.”

While this passage may not represent a fully developed thought process, Mr. Harris demonstrates a basic understanding of the potential of the Fourfold. His analysis of the Shoji screens as a representation of the rhythm of life, changing with both the diurnal and annual cycles remains a rather acute observation. Mr. Harris recognizes that the Shoji screens are more than the rice paper and wood that compose them; they remind us of the rhythm of our days and the seasons of

our journey through life. As such, the Shoji screens give us pause and encourage us to consider our position in the Fourfold.

If this method of architectural critique is to succeed, it must be taught in depth, encouraging students to observe more deeply than that which is readily apparent. In their essays, some students demonstrated a rather shallow understanding of the Fourfold and their efforts to apply it to architectural critique have been clumsy. These students must be steered away from thought processes such as “the wall, being made of stone, represents the earth;” or programmatic issues such as “the building, designed for worship, represents divinities.” Such statements are not untrue; however the students must realize that it is not only the materiality of the wall that makes us consider our relationship to the earth, but also the wall’s location, the wall’s shape, how we interact with the wall, etc. Similarly, as they consider a space designed for worship, this exercise should instruct the students to recognize the architectural qualities of the space that help us consider our relationship with the divine, not simply the programmatic intent. Such instruction will help the students recognize spaces that truly meet both the letter and the spirit of the program.

#### Further Application and Study

It would be appropriate to propose additional methods and situations to which this philosophy-to-architecture translation would be applicable. First, within the same Introduction to Architecture Course, the written essay project could be accompanied by a project in which the students take a philosophical “tour” of their own campus or city to discover places that can be interpreted along Heideggerian ideals. The product of such an exercise could take the form of an annotated inventory, in which the students would document their findings in short paragraphs along with quick sketches that illustrate the Heideggerian ideal they find in those places.

On a broader scope, this philosophy-to-architecture translation could occur in the design studio setting, in which the students would be asked to produce a place whose design is based on Heideggerian ideals. This type of exercise would demand a deep comprehension of the Fourfold before proceeding with the design project, and would likely be more successful as a follow-up exercise to the essay and philosophical “tour” mentioned above. The program of this design project would have to be fairly simple and flexible. The site for the project would have to be realistic, although not necessarily real.

Not only would it be beneficial to reinforce this philosophy-to-architecture teaching method in the design studio, but it would also be beneficial to teach it across the design curriculum in various year levels. If each year level studio taught this design method at some point in the semester, the students would gain a significant knowledge of several major philosophic models, the application of these models and, most importantly, an understanding that architectural design should be based on sound reasoning rather than on fleeting whimsy.

This method of translating philosophy to architecture should in no way be limited to the thoughts of Martin Heidegger. Other philosophical models could be employed, such as the thoughts of Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Christopher Alexander and Gaston Bachelard among others. The available pool of models would only be limited to those which can be readily applied to the making of places that is architecture, those models that can be interpreted as helping us understand how and why we create places.

In the end, the purpose of this philosophy-to-architecture translation is to aid design students in the formation of their own philosophies regarding architecture and the creation of places. It is not our responsibility, as educators, to dictate the correct and incorrect models to students. Rather, by teaching them how to comprehend and apply these models to their own design work, we give them the necessary tools to discover themselves as designers and apply their own thoughts logically and coherently to the places they design.

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