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Architecture as the Receptacle of *Mitsein*

Nicholas Temple

Introduction

“For we are made for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth. To act against one another then is contrary to nature; and it is acting against one another to be vexed and to turn away.” (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, II.I)

In Richard Sennett’s recent book, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, the author takes a historical view of the role of cooperation in the structuring of society, identifying key developments in social relationships. Aligning religious with secular forms of ritual, Sennett argues that in the age of modernity the social bonds that once made cooperation possible and enduring are waning, leading to significant challenges in our age of globalization. Sennett urges us to find new forms of ritual participation in contemporary urban life that can address this crisis and thereby avert the serious consequences of social fragmentation. This quest, however, prompts us to consider how the spaces of our cities, many of which have long been emptied of any explicit ritual purpose, can facilitate collective participation which are both meaningful and sustainable to an increasingly atomised (and displaced) social order. Does the search for new forms of cooperation, that Sennett suggests, also require certain spatial relationships, or situational contexts, for their legitimacy?

In this chapter I propose to address this issue by taking a particular philosophical dispute as a point of reference, highlighting how notions of cooperation as a measure of togetherness raise profound questions about the capacity of architecture to support and nurture social cohesion in our age of globalization. The dispute in question, between Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas, concerns the meaning of the term *Mitsein*, as it was originally applied by Heidegger in his seminal work *Being*

and Time. The central premise of this investigation is that the dispute provides fertile ground for considering Sennett's argument about the role of cooperation in the context of architecture and the city. In order to establish the basis of this connection between architecture and phenomenology it will be necessary, to begin with, to examine the dispute in question and consider its wider philosophical interpretations.

Being-with

Heidegger's neologism, 'Mitsein' (translated in English as being-with), underpins the philosopher's general theory of human being. The term opens up a horizon of possibilities about what it means to be part of a shared humanity, and how shared experiences of the world are constituted spatially, and therefore architecturally. To quote from Heidegger's *Being and Time*:

"The phenomenological assertion that "Dasein is essentially Being-with" has an existential-ontological meaning. It does not seek to establish ontically that factually I am not present-at-hand alone, and that Others of my kind occur. If this were what is meant by the proposition that Dasein's Being-in-the-world is essentially constituted by Being-with, then Being-with would not be an existential attribute which Dasein, of its own accord, has coming to it from its own kind of Being. It would rather be something which turns up in every case by reason of the occurrence of Others. Being-with is an existential characteristic of Dasein even when factually no Other is present-at-hand or perceived. Even Dasein's Being-alone is Being-with in the world" (Heidegger 1997: 156-57).

Heidegger's assertion that "Being-with" does not presume an "Other", that is "present-at-hand or perceived", lies at the heart of the philosophical dispute. It seems clear that Levinas adhered to the underlying principle of Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* when he states: "For Heidegger, an openness upon Being, which is not *a being*, which is not a "something", is necessary in order that, in general, a "something" manifest itself" (Levinas 2000: 189). Hence, Being provides the 'background' condition, within which entities of the world manifest themselves. This manifestation takes place in

presence, which according to Heidegger, “....is the greatest claim that a human being makes; it is what ‘ethics’ is” (Olafson 1998: 1).

In Levinas’ phenomenology Heidegger’s model of *Mitsein*, as encompassing presence in the world, is replaced by an ineluctable *orientation* to the Other. From this orientational ontology, whose destiny is humanity’s relationship to God, Levinas constructs a more distinctive ethical philosophy which he aptly describes as a “spiritual optics” (Levinas 2000: 76). Underlying this essentially ‘onto-theological’ slant on phenomenology is an implicit criticism of the ethical ambivalence of Heidegger’s ontology. This is summarised in Frederick Olafson’s own critique of Heidegger’s philosophy, when he states that mere presence is an ethics which:

“.....expresses both the strength and the weakness of Heidegger’s way of locating “ethics”. It explicitly connects presence (*Anwesenheit*) with ethics, but it does not acknowledge the even more important connection of ethics with *reciprocal* presence and this with *Mitsein*. The trouble with this association of presence (but not reciprocal presence) with ethics is that it issues in a conception of the relation of thought to the truth of being as “the original ethic” without reference to our relation to one another” (Olafson 1998: 1).

The absence of any “reference to our relation to one another”, in Heidegger’s originary ethics, is underpinned by what David Michael Kleinberg-Levin calls “the groundlessness of an ethical life measured by what is beyond all human measure” (Kleinberg-Levin 2005: 206). In challenging this groundlessness, and its ‘encompassing’ mode of *Mitsein*, Levinas’ orientational ethics applies the principle of human sociability to phenomenology through face-to-face encounter. Accordingly, as Levinas states: “We therefore are radically opposed to Heidegger who subordinates the relation with the Other to ontology.....rather than seeing in justice and injustice a primordial access to the Other beyond all ontology” (Levinas 2000: 89).

Levinas examines this philosophical model of face-to-face in a number of seminal works, in which our mortal relationship with others is interrogated as a form of transcendence. In *Alterity and Transcendence* Levinas considers the question of the beginning of philosophy (to take the Socratic model) as an asymmetrical dialogue of the I-You relationship (Levinas 1999: 98 &101). It is interesting to note how Levinas uses Heidegger's foundational principle of *Dasein* to underpin his own ethical philosophy, but in such a way as to draw attention to the distinction between the two approaches to phenomenology: "...I already ask myself whether my being is justified, whether the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of someone's place" (Levinas 1999: 28). At the same time, it seems clear that Levinas takes Heidegger's principle of *Mitsein* (as the 'ground' of coexistence) as a critical point of departure for developing his own ethical philosophy:

"In Heidegger, coexistence is, to be sure, taken as a relationship with the Other irreducible to objective cognition; but in the final analysis it also rests on the relationship with *being in general*, on comprehension, on ontology. Heidegger posits in advance this ground of being as the horizon on which every existent arises, as though the horizon, and the idea of limit it includes and which is proper to vision, were the ultimate structure of relationship. Moreover, for Heidegger intersubjectivity is a coexistence, a *we* prior to the I and the other, a neutral intersubjectivity. The face to face both announces a society, and permits the maintaining of a separated I" (Levinas 2000: 67-68).

The last sentence declares the decisive split, by which Levinas adds his central philosophical principle (of the specificity of being with one another) to Heidegger's thesis that "*being in general*.....[is] the ultimate structure of relationship." Oona Eisenstadt, among others, interprets this division in a particular way when he states that face-to-face constitutes Levinas' "...main symbol for the "rupturing ethical encounter". In distinction, the side-by-side would seem most likely to symbolise the kind of unified social action that Levinas calls politics and justice, and might also evoke, in the mind of the reader, the Heideggerian *mitsein*" (Eisenstadt 2006: 66). But where does this expression "side-by-side" (*Nebeneinander*) come from, and how might we judge its use as a term of reference for

Heideggerian *Mitsein* in the way Eisenstadt suggests? Whilst side-by-sideness could be identified in strictly spatial/geometric terms as a simple ninety degree orientation from frontal (face-to-face) dialogue, it also connotes certain forms of cooperation that entail mutual autonomy or separateness. Both characteristics, of course, are interconnected, since side-by-sideness assumes a certain detachment, without the burden of direct visual exchange. Can we construe therefore that side-by-sideness constitutes a mode of 'Being-with'? Significantly, Heidegger responds to this question unequivocally when he states: "As an *existential*, 'Being alongside' the world never means anything like the Being-present-at-hand-together of Things that occur. There is no such thing as the 'side-by-sideness' of an entity called 'Dasein' with another entity called 'world'" (Heidegger, 1997: 81).

In his famous Zollikon Seminars, Heidegger devotes a significant part of one seminar to explain how side-by-side relationships are inadequate to convey his concept of Being-with, but which nevertheless provides a useful datum for understanding the spatial implications of *Mitsein*:

"Being-with one another is [phenomenologically] not a relationship of a subject to another subject. As an example, imagine that we are in a restaurant, and each of us is sitting alone at a separate table. Then, are we not with one another? Of course, but in an entirely different way of being-with one another from what occurs in our present group discussion. The way we sit by ourselves in the restaurant is a privation of being-with one another. The ones who exist [this way] are not interested in one another, and therefore are with one another *this way* in the same space. Now, even if I get up and accompany you to the door, it is [still] not the same as in the case when two bodies are merely moving side by side to the door" (Heidegger 2001: 112).

By describing this choice of sitting in separate areas as "privation of being-with one another", Heidegger is making the case that *Mitsein* is a 'built-in' condition of being human, and therefore side-by-sideness (in the way natural objects are arranged) lies outside the ambit of human experience (Olafson 1998: 21).

And yet in the increasing mechanisation of modern society, in which efficiency of production has dictated – and overshadowed - how we behave alongside each other in the workplace, the notion of side-by-sideness as a spatial register of ‘concatenated’ (efficacious) cooperation is both compelling and pervasive. In the traditional settings of the workshop, cooperation was in many respects a dialectical process of negotiation (or *negotium*), variously entailing both face-to-face and side-by-side interactions, in which a given task was accomplished through mutual support. Sennett states however that: “...technical innovation changed cooperation in the workshop. Technical change unsettled its social relations. Rituals based on shop hierarchy were subverted” (Sennett 2013: 115).

Hence, if “privation of being-with one another” is the consequence of our alienated situations, then the ontological constraints of distanced side-by-sideness could be deemed its equivalent theoretical construct. What emerges from this initial investigation is that two broadly ‘orientational’ modes of Being-with could be said to lie at the boundaries of Heidegger’s encompassing model of *Mitsein*. On the one hand we have Levinas’ uncompromising principle of fully engaged face-to-face encounter which involves infinitesimal responsibility to the Other; an asymmetrical relationship where ‘alterity’ “is reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor” (Levinas 2000: 33). On the other hand the distanced relationships that characterise side-by-sideness summon forms of (faceless) cooperation, between autonomous ontological entities, that contribute to synchronous or closely coordinated behaviour typically directed to specific ends or goals.

In Sennett’s thesis of ‘togetherness’ in the workplace it is evident that the author is concerned with the ‘middle ground’ between these two positions, to demonstrate how “physical labour can instil dialogical social behaviour” (Sennett 2013:199). This form of behaviour, moreover, entails a triadic relationship, which Sennett calls the “social triangle” (“earned authority, mutual respect and cooperation”) (Sennett 2013:148). He argues that “...this threefold relation is often experienced physically, non-verbally; bodily gestures take the place of words in establishing authority, trust and cooperation” (Sennett 2013: 205).

It seems that Levinas' argument of infinitesimal responsibility, that forms an integral part of face-to-face encounter, is necessarily circumvented in the social triangle for the sake of the needs and priorities of collective cooperation in the workplace. Quite how Sennett's thesis of cooperation can be seen in action is suggested in Simon Bronner's investigation of the Amish barn-raising ceremony. He states that the event "is the most dramatic example of 'social capital' among the Amish, which includes face-to-face relationships, extended family, and longstanding traditions and rituals that support them" (Bronner 2006: 35). In such an example of collective manual labour, "Gestures of movement, facial expression and sound endow the social triangle with sensate life" (Sennett 2013: 206). Hence, the act of building, as much as its mode of inhabitation, has the potential to redefine the meaning of cooperation, an argument that has certain resonance with Heidegger's premise that building is a form of dwelling and therefore embodies *Dasein* (Heidegger 2010: 343-63).

II 'Certame Coronario'

The debate surrounding the meaning of *Mitsein* has a bearing upon architectural thinking, in particular the ways in which architectural settings avail themselves of meaningful situations that are conducive to forms of cooperation. Olafson implies such a relationship when he states:

"The right place is the world as a space that is inhabited by human beings who are with one another although not simply in the side-by-side manner that expresses a mutual externality; whose *Mitsein* impringes on the things that matter to them; and who finally have to be able to count on one another if they are to have any hope of achieving any real control over the world they are in." (Olafson 1998: 57, n.28)

Perhaps the most obvious historical settings where notions of *Mitsein* are manifested as demonstrable forms of human participation are religious spaces such as a church. In the assembly of members of the congregation, whose physical side-by-side relationships reinforce rather than obstruct social cohesion and a common religious bond, the church is also the location where this mutual dependency

in numbers actively supports the ‘face-to-face’ encounter between individual worshipper and God, through the agency of prayer and participation in the church liturgy.

I would like to refer to an unusual (one could say unorthodox) case, dating from the 15th century, where a basilica was used for a purpose other than worship. The example is a literary contest held in Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence in 1441, an occasion which formed part of the celebrations to commemorate the recently completed dome of the cathedral by Filippo Brunelleschi (Crum 2011: 59-79). Called the *Certame coronario* by Leon Battista Alberti, who organised the event, the competition was, according to Charles Burroughs, a “spectacle of remarkable irrelevance to the sacred values and purposes the great building had been constructed to accommodate and express” (Burroughs 1998: 40). The liturgical protocols and practices of religious space were momentarily suspended during this event, for the sake of inventing different forms of ritual that nevertheless drew inspiration and meaning from the architecture.

The theme of the *Certame* was friendship between individuals, rather than between “humankind and a transcendent deity”, and entailed readings of poetic verse presented to a panel of judges (Burroughs 1998: 40). The prize for the winning entry of the contest was a silver laurel wreath, emulating the classical tradition of ancient poets. However, unable to agree on an outright winner, the judges in the end awarded the crown to the building in which the event was held, a gesture of huge symbolic significance as I will explain later.

FIGURE 1. HERE – View of the Dome of Santa Maria del Fiore from Via dello Studio, Florence.

© 2014. Photo Scala, Florence.

The most controversial aspect of the contest was the requirement that all participants recite their poetic verse in the Tuscan vernacular, rather than in Latin, a decision which was closely allied to

Alberti's personal ambition to communicate ideas to the widest possible audience. Alberti considered ancient eloquence as part of a more general skill or human facility, *facilita*, which informed other creative and intellectual endeavours besides oratory and written tracts, such as painting and architecture (Baxandall 1988: 123-24). Hence, the contest would have revealed how poetic evocations of friendship can be amplified by the decorum of the architectural setting. Alberti no doubt drew upon ancient models of poetic contests for this event, where the city provided the dramatic backdrop to great rhetorical deliveries, only here the rostrum of the Roman Forum is replaced by the pulpit of the Christian basilica.

The choice of this unusual historical event in which to investigate the architectural implications of *Mitsein* is justified firstly on the basis of the manner in which a religious space was used to host an event that celebrated relationships *between* people. A space otherwise devoted to the 'face-to-face' relationships between the penitent and God through worship, and its supporting 'side-by-side' arrangement of members of the congregation and those performing the liturgy, was appropriated here to communicate mutual exchange in friendship through the reciting of poetry. Secondly, the poetry was delivered in the *volgare*, rather than in the authoritative language of the Church (Latin), further underscoring the principal purpose of language - as Alberti believed - to convey a shared rather than hierarchical (authoritative) relationship between deliverer (speaker) and the audience. In this communicative sphere - to borrow Levinas' principle - knowledge of God is mediated by one's relationship with one another through language (Levinas 2000: 73). Thirdly, the canopy of the dome served as a potent symbol of collective (Tuscan) identity and ultimately of social cohesion that transcended specifically religious and architecture purposes. Reciting poetry in the Tuscan dialect in the Duomo both commemorated - and became consonant with - the visual and symbolic reach of Brunelleschi's dome as the embodiment of the city of Florence and its outlying regions of Tuscany. Alberti implies such a connection when he "portrays the "machine" of the dome as rising above the heavens, and large enough to cast a shadow over the Tuscan people" (Pardo 2001: 228).

By awarding the silver laurel to the building, Brunelleschi's dome could be said to embody the idea of architecture as a receptacle of *Mitsein* in the sense that the space *affirms* Being-with, with respect to others in friendship and to the broader notion of collective belonging (the bond of Tuscan citizenship) communicated through both spoken and visual/architectural language.

Of course, this particular (and exclusionary) sense of Being-with, with its territorial, linguistic and cultural definitions, bears little direct resemblance to Heidegger's 'encompassing' and universal precept of *Dasein*, or indeed Levinas' principle of infinitesimal responsibility to all humanity (Levinas 2000: 35-40). Nevertheless, the example provides a vivid case of how architecture can reinforce the bonds between individuals, and thereby constitute a social as well as a religious symbol. By substituting the face-to-face relation between man and God with that between individuals in friendship, Alberti was giving religious space the stamp of Humanism, with the support of classical eloquence, but in ways that would have made it impossible to ignore, or dismiss, the prevailing religious beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church; the sacred remained present during the contest as a background witness, that gave legitimacy and *gravitas* to the occasion.

Dwelling among Strangers

Against the backdrop of the social discordances that characterise modernity, which Sennett uses as the context for his thesis on togetherness, Humanist evocations of the moral compass of friendship, citizenship and family loyalty, that formed the foundations of Renaissance notions of *civitas* (and which could serve as a particular theoretical model of *Mitsein*), seem remote from 20th century theories of alienation and social atomization that have come to define what is deficient in modern urban life.

More recently, the impact of systematic – technologically driven - globalization on our relationship to others, and to the world, has prompted intense debates about what social cohesion can mean in contemporary society (Sassan 2014). It is in the context of these debates that I would like to briefly

examine the Thermal Baths at Vals in Switzerland by Peter Zumthor, which in many ways serves as a contemporary ‘response’ to the kind of historical situations as Alberti’s *Certame* in Santa Maria del Fiore.

Located in the remote resort village of Vals in Graubünden, the thermal complex was built as a half-buried extension to an existing hotel, to which it forms part. Built in layers of Vals gneiss, a dark grey stone extracted from a nearby quarry, the rectangular foot-print of the building emerges in stratified layers from the south-west slope of the hotel:

“The building takes the form of a large, grass-covered stone object set deep into the mountain and dovetailed into its flank. It is a solitary building, which resists formal integration with the existing structure [of the hotel] in order to evoke more clearly – and achieve more fully – what seemed to us a more important role: the establishing of a special relationship with the mountain landscape, its natural power, geological substance and impressive topography” (Zumthor 1998: 156).

The architect’s characterization of the thermal complex as a “solitary building”, by virtue of its ambivalent relationship to the nearby hotel, serves as a powerful analogy to how one dwells within it. This relates to a key premise of this study, that a visitor to the Thermal Bath at Vals *always* arrives as an ‘outsider’, even if he/she has been before. As if discovering the building anew on each visit, one’s initial sense of unfamiliarity with the place – on account of its uniqueness and otherworldliness – gives way to a deeply felt intimacy – even privacy.

FIGURE 2. HERE – View of the Interior of the Thermal Bath in Vals. Peter Zumthor (1990-1996). © H el ene Binet.

We can see how this particular architectural response to Being-with unfolds as a ritual journey through the various layers of the building. The visitor accesses Thermal Baths from a narrow concrete tunnel buried into the hillside. From here he/she enter a series of small communal changing rooms through leather curtained openings. Surrounded by heavily lacquered and polished wooden lockers,

these dimly lit rooms operate as a kind of liminal space that contrasts with the monolithic – cave-like – spaces beyond. The row of exit doors on the south side of these changing rooms leads onto an elevated platform, from where the visitor gets the first glimpse of the layered stone interior of the thermal baths with partial views of the main tepid pools below. Extending the full length of the landing is a stepped ramp, along which the bather gradually descends into the body of the building, with framed views of the mountainous landscape beyond. From the base of the ramp the bather arrives at the main level of the building, adjacent to the central square pool. At each corner of the pool are freestanding rectangular rooms, each oriented in the direction of the four sides of the sunken pool, with wide steps between each leading down to the tepid water. The resulting rotational effect of this arrangement draws the bathers into both traversal and forward movements; the former leading to the rectangular pool to the west that projects into the landscape as an external bathing area, and the latter culminating in the main internal relaxation area to the south which faces large framed openings overlooking the Valserrhein river valley. Enclosing the overall rectangular footprint of the building is a series of small rectangular rooms that contain a range of pools, treatment areas and private resting spaces.

In this constellation of open and closed spaces, Zumthor has skilfully brought intimacy and immensity, finitude and infinitude, into dialogue through the varying scales and ritual settings of bathing:

“....there was a feeling for the mystical nature of a world of stone inside the mountain, for darkness and light, for the reflection of light upon the water, for the diffusion of light through stream-filled air, for the different sounds that water makes in stone surroundings, for warm stone and naked skin, for the ritual of bathing” (Zumthor 1998: 156).

Derived from what Zumthor calls a “profoundly archaic heritage”, this visual and corporeal connection between landscape and bathing spawns situations where the *Da* of *Dasein* need not assume the usurpation of the other, in the way Levinas contemplates, but rather opens up a shared

Mitsein between strangers (Zumthor 1998: 156). The passage of solitary bodies through openings and level changes, that permits visual exchange and physical contact, provides the *foreground* setting against which the *background* context of the building's relationship to its surroundings is sustained; or to use Heidegger's terminology, both background and foreground affirm a relationship between "earth, sky, mortals and divinities" (Heidegger 2010).

Conclusion

In this investigation I have tried to elucidate how the Heideggerian concept of *Mitsein*, with its various philosophical interpretations and disputations, provides a lens for examining Sennett's thesis of cooperation in the modern age and its spatial/architectural implications. By fostering such a philosophical dialogue, architecture has the capacity to open up a field of potential situations, where relationships between fellow beings is contingent upon our capacity to relate to the world – as it is represented or circumscribed by a visual horizon or territory. The two case-studies examined in this study (Leon Battista Alberti's *Certame* in Santa Maria del Fiore and Peter Zumthor's Thermal Baths at Vals) speak of how such an understanding was addressed ritually, topographically and architecturally during two very different periods in history. Whilst the Humanist world of 15th Florence could assume that notions of friendship between individuals could be co-existent with regional identity (and that the shadow created by Brunelleschi's dome could impart such a bond), the age of globalization is governed by far less coherent spatial (geographical) parameters for sustaining *Mitsein*, of which Zumthor's Thermal Bath at Vals could be said to provide a convincing and meaningful response.

Rather than bound in friendship through a common ethos or regional identity, as embodied in the dome of Florence Cathedral, the experience of the Valserrhein river valley at Vals – through the

receptacle of the bath building – constitutes a retreat for visitors to take private ‘measures’ of a place, in a world increasingly devoid of spatial registers of *Mitsein*.

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