Interrogating spaces

Viewpoints on architecture, the city, and society

Defining space: monadic glimpses

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I've always thought that Leibniz's monadology offers comfort during parallel session conferences. Assuring us that each monad reflects the whole, although from its particular point of view, Leibniz makes the sanguine case that one can make sense of things even if one's viewpoint is sadly singular. In the mad rush from one paper session to the next, knowing that at best one gets to hear a third of what is being said, it helps to invoke a bit of Leibnizian optimism. And indeed, Dublin seemed like a best possible world during the three days of the *Defining Space* conference taking place in October 2007. Generously hosted and meticulously organised, the University College Dublin-led event succeeded not only in attracting more than eighty papers that contributed to elucidate the concept of space in relation to architecture, art, and the city, but also in creating an atmosphere of conviviality and intellectual generosity which gave the event an unusual sense of sharing.

The tyranny of space

Nonetheless: to choose as hackneyed a concept as space as a topic for an international conference is not without hazards. With Robert Venturi's warning of the tyranny of space still ringing in our ears, the attempt to revive this Modernist buzzword may seem futile. If space, for Sigfried Giedion, was a vehicle for articulating the *Zeitgeist* of modernity, space for the post-war generation of architects and theorists became an oppressive phenomenon; a vehicle for ideological dominance, as for Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, or a threat to the authenticity of place, as for Aldo van Eyck and Christian Norberg-Schulz. More recent attempts at re-establishing space at the heart of architectural discourse have had something strangely stale about them, endlessly promoting 'new' conceptions of space capable, supposedly, of overturning Euclidian geometry and Newtonian physics in one fell swoop. The folded and curved blob-spaces of the 1990s soon became – excuse an irresistible pun – somewhat vacuous, as they inevitably suffered the fate of all fashionable form: they went out of fashion. When the Dublin discussions seemed to offer an altogether fresher take on space, it was perhaps because they managed largely to avoid such hype. As far as I could tell, there were few, if any 'new' conceptions of space proposed. Instead, there was a sustained will to interrogate existing conceptions of space, whether very old or very recent. This was done through a wealth of different perspectives, from investigations of the choric space in pre-classical Greek thinking to the warped space of contemporary architecture – from the politically contested spaces of the German-Polish borderland to the claustrophobic interiors encountered in Georges Perec's short stories – from Edvard Munch's emotive rooms to the space of hygiene in 1930s Turkey. This multitude of perspectives was bound together by a decidedly sober-minded mode of theorising which confirmed what we might have suspected for a while, namely that post-structuralist theory-frenzy has given way to less boisterous modes of reflection, engaging with substance rather than jargon and valuing subject matter above its theoretical orchestration.

Sensation, atmosphere, experience

In a sense, the two keynote speakers Barry Bergdoll and Anthony Vidler established between them a thematic range within which most papers were inscribed in one way or another. In his opening lecture, Bergdoll outlined the historical genesis of the modern concept of



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space, locating it in a German nineteenth-century tradition. He reminded us that while space, as Adrian Forty asserts, can indeed be considered a modern invention, its modernity reaches back at least a couple of hundred years. When Goethe yearned to be led blindfolded through a well-built house, he anticipated a *Raumgefühl* that would come to shape both nineteenth- and twentieth-century architectural discourse in fundamental ways. Calling to mind Richard Lucae's astonishingly modern-sounding evocations of spatial experience in his 1869 Berlin lecture, Bergdoll dismantled the frequently invoked opposition 'modernism = space' versus 'historicism = style'. Instead, he pointed to the complex continuities and interwoven lines of thought that run from the late eighteenth century and well into the twentieth, establishing *Raumempfindung* – the feeling for space – at the core of modern architectural experience and creation. Lucae's beautiful meditation on the Crystal Palace demonstrates the subtle understanding of space emerging in mid-nineteenth-century architectural discourse:

> '*Whereas in the powerful train hall we have the feeling that it, taken in the strictest sense of art, was not a complete space, the magic of Sydenham for us resides in the fact that we are in an artificially created environment that has already ceased to be a space. We are separated from nature but yet we are scarcely conscious of it. If we reflect on it, it is as if one has poured air, as it were, like a liquid; thus we have the sensation that the free air has kept its solid shape after the form in which it had been poured was again taken away. We find ourselves, so to speak, within a piece of sculpted atmosphere.*'[1]

In this sanguine counterpoint to Marx's melting modernity, Lucae points to a distinctly modern sense of space in which its sensuous qualities, its atmosphere and impact are brought to the forefront of attention. Modern thinking on space dovetails a poetics of emotion which is noticeable already in late eighteenth-century thinking on the sublime – in itself, as Bergdoll pointed out, a spatial theory – and which constitutes a powerful tenet in nineteenth-century discourse and practice.

Bergdoll's reflections on space and emotion could not have been more appropriate for the Dublin setting, where the renewed interest in sensation, atmosphere, and experience of space dominated the paper sessions. In particular, one could notice a new focus on the non-visual aspects of architectural space. In the session on *Performance*, for instance, Fiona Smyth and John Olley explored the impact of acoustic reverberation times on medieval sacred space. Their analysis would have pleased Gottfried Semper, who some one and a half centuries before had associated space with musical rhythm, and located the origin of architecture in the movements of the human body. The body in space was indeed a central concern, informing as different contributions as Steven Spier's exploration of ballet as spatial practice and James Fleming's evocations of Gilles Deleuze's 'any-space' as a prism for understanding the corridor stroll scene in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*. Jonathan Hill, Ulrike Passe, and Steven Ryan's session on *Atmospheres* explored the sensuousness of weathering as well as of darkness, and the session on *Emotive Enclosures* explored the continued relevance of nineteenth-century empathy theory for understanding the 'sensuous turn' in contemporary architecture. The Dublin sessions seemed to confirm what has been noticeable for a while; namely a distinct turn away from post-structuralist semiotics towards a more embodied understanding of human culture,



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in which sense-experience yet again is granted ontological and epistemological significance. Bergdoll's opening speech reminded us of a historical tradition in which this significance was articulated subtly and succinctly. Indeed, Heinrich Wölfflin's incisive question at the outset of his *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture* goes straight to the heart of contemporary concerns: 'How is it possible that architectural forms are able to express an emotion or a mood?'[2]

A multifarious mosaic

If it was lived space rather than the abstract space of globalisation that engaged most speakers – MVRDV's KM3 was, as far as I could tell, curiously absent – it does not mean that the conference retreated into personal spaces devoid of political meaning. As Anthony Vidler made clear in the final keynote speech, modern space is a playing field in which cultural vision, social action and architectural realities constantly interact and influence each other. Quoting the French sociologist Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, Vidler invoked a multivalent kind of space which both encompassed and summed up the whole conference:

> '[we speak of] *not only a geographical space, but a social space; of a demographic space, a cultural space, a juridical space and a religious space* [...] *the limits within which the life of a group of humans unfolds cannot be defined by a single criterion.*'[3]

The Dublin conference certainly managed to touch on a multiplicity of such criteria. The session on *Virtual Maps*, particularly Vittoria di Palma's inquiry into the paradoxical intimacy of Google Earth's zoom-scapes and Mimi Yiu's reading of the American artist Nikolas Schiller's map-quilts, provided thought-provoking insight into the panoramic visions of contemporary culture. The nicely crafted session on *Systems*, moving through the statistical mapping of Paris in the nineteenth century (Diana Periton) to the ideologically laden diagrams of the 1961 Parker Morris report on housing standards (Gary Boyd) and further to the system-based design of American public space (Mark Pimlott), offered nuanced perspectives on the representation of public as well as domestic space in the twentieth century.

The many sessions on literary spaces – appropriately hosted in James Joyce's old place of study, UCD's Newman House – presented interesting interpretations of the complex spatialities in Beckett, Jabès, Perec, to mention but a few. These sessions – and many more – demonstrated a thoroughness in scholarship and a soberness in interpretation which was decidedly refreshing. Instead of the recent 'mapping school's' fetishising of data, the Dublin conference approached political space in all its depth and complexity, offering fascinating glimpses into its multifarious significance. And even though scholarly conferences are necessarily fragmented, the Dublin discussions seemed to testify to a common concern for cultural significance – auguring a welcome change from the insularity of architectural discourse in recent years.

Maria Theodorou, in her paper on early Greek conceptions of space, memorably defined Homeric space as 'An agitated state of balanced immobility in which all possibilities remain open'. This seemed like an apt characterisation not only of 'space before philosophy' but also, curiously, of the Dublin conference itself. Blissfully devoid of hype, the research that was compressed into the three, hectic days represented a whole monadic mosaic of viewpoints on architecture, the city, and the society to which they both belong.

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Notes

1. Richard Lucae, 'On the Meaning and Power of Space in Architecture', in *Architectural Theory, Vol. I*, ed. by Harry F. Mallgrave (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 559–60.
2. Heinrich Wölfflin, 'Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture' (1886), translated in *Empathy, Form, Space: Problems in German Aesthetics 1873–1893*, ed. by H. Mallgrave and E. Ikonomou (Santa Monica: Getty, 1994).
3. Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, 'L'étude de l'espace social', *Paris, Essais de sociologie 1952–64* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1964), pp. 22 ff.

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