Autonomy of Architecture, Architecture of Autonomy

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Abstract
This enquiry into ontological experience of space and architecture is aimed at illustrating the relationship between the architecture itself and the subject within. Analysing Otto Friedrich Bollnow’s writing and Louis Kahn’s sketches determine the principle idea towards architectural autonomy, which allows changes within the architecture itself. Simultaneously, keeping in mind the that architecture and the city holds a collective consciousness towards future changes, the paper interprets the works of Michel Foucault and Richard Sennet permitting illustrations towards the limitation of centrally organizing the subject and the institutionalized entity that determines the city and architecture. Inferring the problem of centrally organized systems and promotion of singular monumentality in architectural practice and education, this discussion attempts to reveal the embedded concept of duality, whilst reinterpreting the relevance of early modernists’ works and questions its relevance and application to current practices and architectural education.

Keywords: autonomy; architectural education; ontology; community; subject

In these rapidly changing social and economic circumstances, architecture and urbanism often looks back upon its past; to remind themselves, to anchor their thoughts, to evaluate the present, or sometime just be nostalgic. Particular to the present social scenario in Japan, there are an increasing number of debates and discussions towards the utilization of existing building stocks amongst architects and planners, not only to overcome the problem of decreasing population, but also to seek sustainability towards regeneration of the city. The question, of course, remains; are architecture and urbanism as disciplines adapting to the current situations of the city’s demands? Or does it carry this memory over to the next generation, holing on to its appearance and structure? Has it the capacity to embrace these dual, contradictory demands? And what is the fundamental role of architecture in its response to human requirements? My attempt here is to investigate the primitive architectural experience, whiles identifying this valid architectural autonomy with its future practice and discourse within architecture and urbanism.

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While thinking about the constitution of primitive spaces I refer to pedologic behaviour where in the ontological experience of space is observed when a child crawls under the table and declares that that space belongs to him, sometimes as house or castle. It has been speculated that such realization of space is pre-natal, nonetheless, when this child is observed under his ‘table house’, it becomes clear that he has a clear comprehension of being a separate body than that of his parents, relating to his surroundings independently creating a space that belongs to him. This is also seen when a child is given a toy establishing a sense of ownership. In both cases it becomes clear that the child has gained an understanding of self with relation to the other bodies around him. Such a study becomes important while simulating human experience of self.

“Spatiality is a definition of the essence of human existence. This is the meaning of Heidegger’s statement: ‘The subject (Dasein), if well understood ontologically, is spatial.’” [Bollnow, 2011]

“That is spatial does not … mean that the human being occupies a certain space with his body, … It means that the human being is always and necessarily conditioned in his life by this behaviour in relation to a surrounding space.” [Bollnow, 2011]

Bollnow explains that the human consciousness of self is that of oneself in relation to their surrounding, there by accepting his position within imaginable space. This position is established with the experience of 6 dimensions of space: the ground that the man stands on i.e. what is under him and what is above him, creating a vertical axis.

“…most straightforward structural principal: vertical axis and horizontal plane together form the simplest system of concrete human space. Similarly, Kant in his observations ‘On the first ground of the distinction of regions in space’ started out from the position of the human body standing upright. Here he says: ‘Since through the senses we know what is outside us only as far as it stands in relation to ourselves, …’” [Bollnow, 2011]

With the realization of Vertical axis comes the realization of the horizontal plane around the self. This horizontal plane, referred to as field prompts movement, with which comes the awareness towards what is in the front, moving every closer and that which is at the back. Movement has direct relation to the intention with which man moves, thereby implicating that the consciousness of self is undoubtedly consciousness of thought. While moving, man looses the perception of the field, focusing only towards the front. This loss of perceptions brings about a realisation of dimension, which is ‘width’, resulting in an equal right and left. Such perceptions of self, then is unarguably related to how space is constituted. Vertical Axis and Horizontal plane are but descriptive in their spatial understandings.

“A universal pillar, axis mundi, … connects and supports heaven and earth and whose base is fixed in the world below (the infernal region). Such a cosmic pillar can be only at the very centre of the universe, for the whole of the habitable world extends around it.” [Eliade, 1987]

This idea, that the human remain at the centre of space is affirmed by Eliade in his essay “The Centre of the World” in the book The Sacred and the Profane. Human places himself in the centre, as it is the only way in which he is able to establish or measure his relation to the other, be it another being or that of space. It is with this notion that human creates order around him, so that he may form his subject. Bollnow’s rather primitive, simplistic idea may be intangible, yet his description is very spatial. As man stands up right, he constitutes “Vertical axis and Horizontal plane”. While he moves ahead straight, he defines the front and back. At same time, he recognize path of his movement as “width”. As extension of “width”, he recognizes his right and left. Both arguments may be considered valid: Man as a subject first while dealing with space
and the idea that man understands space before he understands his subject.

Bollnow’s writings are both significant and questionable. It may be considered that while man establishes himself within a given space, the space allows for him to gain consciousness towards the other. Nonetheless, such explanations do not reflect human behavioural and social patterns. Mliade though clearly understands these through the tribe’s religious acts. The creations of tribes, according to him are done with the intention of defining man at the centre of the world, thus a social act. Communities are created as social bodies in order to share customs, styles and beliefs. The requirement of the community to share such agendas creates the need for an institutionalized spatial order, distinguishing themselves from other communities, beliefs and customs.

The smallest social cluster is that of partnerships between individuals. Space within oneself is defined by the permitted accessibility given to the partner over the same premises. The accessibilities and permissions vary based on the relationship share, but in each case spatial understanding is clearly defined. L. Kahn, with the help of his sketch ‘Room’ portrays this spatial recognition, asserting, “How marvellous that when I am in a room with another. The mountains, trees, wind and rain leave us for the mind, and the room becomes a world itself.” [Koyama, 1996]

![L. Kahn's sketch in Beginnings.](image)

In the above sketch, Kahn deliberates upon the idea of a room, scribbling Architecture comes from the Making of a Room / The Plan. A society of rooms is a place good to live work learn.

It must be brought to attention that while Kahn talks about the relationship to the other, he firmly establishes self as the centre. This may be seen within the details of the room’s characteristics. Without the establishment of such centred consciousness, the room itself may be considered the centre, yet the fact that Kahn illustrates such details establishes his position in the consideration of self as the centre. In the sketch, the room has a clear geometrical centre, with the fireplace to the right, defining the centrality of the room. The Door signifies the room connection to a wider world around, at the same time allowing an invitation to the other to enter this space. Windows allow light and wind, creating an environment. The sketch shows two persons by the window indicative of man’s desire to create space not only for him but also with the need to invite the other into this space. Kahn’s sketch is indicative of the smallest unit of space that man creates, for himself and the other. While Khan continues to think with room as the smallest unit of architecture, he expands his thoughts to those outside of architectural discussions. Yet his concerns on spatiality are firmly established as one looks to the next sketch.
Fig.2. L. Kahn’s sketch in *Beginnings*.

Within the Sketch, Kahn states The Street is a Room by agreement A community. Tyng in her interpretation of this sketch affirms,

“By speaking of the street as a room, Kahn was referring to the inspiration of its beginning rather than to the street as it exists today. …the life of the city as a whole was dependent on the mutual agreement of its citizens to support common way of life. A community is the natural result of people gathering together.” [Tyng, 1984]

Here one can clearly recognize the development from a room as smallest institutional unit within society towards those of forming a community. Kahn uses the idea of room to elucidate the human order and its centrality, while this study of the street address the notion of institute as the centre of community. Tyng explains,

“If the institution of a city are not answering the needs of the population, the city must lack a common spirit because a city is evaluated through its institutions. But as long as citizens maintain their unity of purpose, institutions will not lose their usefulness and relevance.” [Tyng, 1984]

This may be seen as the need of the community to establish a central institution to create order within its society. Community as a collective of individuals require a collective identity to serve itself. Establishing an order allows for the community to gain its own identity whiles relating or distinguishing themselves from other groups or communes. The Institute physically become centre of community to generate a common sense of belonging for its population whiles maintaining a code of conduct, affirming one owns subject and autonomy.

While Kahn’s thinking on the matter may not be relevant in the current context, Tyng maintains that to contextualise the ‘beginnings’, such remain pertinent. Kahn, while deliberating on ‘Beginnings’, maintains its relevance towards relationship between subject and spatiality, although he too realizes its limitations in explaining current autonomous nature in the city.

M. Foucault declare:“I don't think there is actually a sovereign founding subject, a universal form of subject that one might find everywhere. I am very sceptical and very hostile towards this conception of the subject. I think on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of freedom, as in Antiquity, starting of course, from a number of rules, styles and conventions that can be found in the cultural setting.” [Foucault, 1996]
Foucault is opposed to phenomenological universal and timeless subject. Limitation of such subject, mostly developed in the nineteenth century, was that it attached people to specific identities, which could never be changed. [O'Farrell, 1997] His understanding of the subject is more flexible, determined by the practice of liberation, of freedom as well as culturally defined rules and styles as they may be constituted in an autonomous way.

During the conception of New York’s Central Park, there had been a clear aim towards people’s dealings with the other in the public realm. That is, it has clearly been the intention of Central Park to facilitate the learning of how to behave, amongst other considerations. This is one of example of the way which practicing autonomy in spatial form.

R. Sennett describes, “The public realm can be simply defined as a place where strangers meet.” [Sennet, 2008] His description on public realm meets how Central Park functions within New York City. Further in his essay, Quant, he argues the way in which a community works with a centre of its own: “When we imagine where the life of a community is to be found, we usually look for it in the centre of a community; when we want to strengthen community life, we try to intensify life at the centre”. [Sennet, 2008] In his experience with immigrants, he realized that “By privileging the centre, community-based planning can thus weaken the complex interactions necessary to join up the different human groups the city contains.” [Sennet, 2008] He understands urbanism as a changing practice. Dynamicity of urbanism comes only because of its ever-changing nature, and not from continuity of the same. The cause for such an continuous change comes from the transactions between racial, ethnical or class differences brought about by immigrants. Such transactions are assumed to happen at the border of the community, where different peoples meet. He therefore argues that the physical centre of the community or community centre brings about limitations and points out that the literal centre must be at the physical border of the community/ territory.

The practice of architects and planners must be understood as one that is aware of both: autonomy in built-environment and collective consciousness towards current and future needs. It is imperative to understand both these ideas together in order to locate a new architectural autonomy.

Architecture requires maintaining a relationship between human and the constituents of space. This is then the principle idea towards architectural autonomy, which allows changes within architecture itself, expanding its territory or reach. At the same time, architecture holds within itself a collective consciousness towards future change.

References