On the Way to (design) Thinking

RANDALL TEAL
University of Idaho

INTRODUCTION

> The question what is called thinking can never be answered by proposing a definition of the concept thinking, and then diligently explaining what is contained in that definition.[1]
>
> Martin Heidegger

Architecture is a richly compound, multifaceted temporal endeavor. In encountering compelling architectural works, one frequently finds this complexity taken up in earnest by the designer and re-presented in the built form. When architecture is not regarded in the full complexity of its situation trouble is often seen to arise. This threat is evident in Alvar Aalto's comment that, "nothing is as dangerous in architecture as dealing with separated problems."[2] He believed instead that architects should be seeking a non-splintered way of thinking that leads to architecture that is "a synthesis of life in materialized form."[3] In other words, coalescing multivalent forces as architecture requires that an effective practice of design thinking be in place. But what is effective design thinking? In this essay I will argue that effective design thinking is characterized by its attitude and quality as opposed to being of a particular ideology or methodology. This type of thinking is not self-aware, does not seek definitive answers, and cultivates response by what German philosopher Martin Heidegger calls being "on the way."[4]

However this is *a way* one cannot simply begin. Heidegger claims, "we can learn thinking only if we radically unlearn what thinking has been traditionally."[5] In so saying, he critiques a view of thinking that has become synonymous with logic.[6] In contrast to the tradition, Heidegger understands thinking to be a path, a process, and an activity of engagement within a world of involvement that he deems "ek-static": hence his suggestion that one should not attempt to define thinking in order to understand it but rather to understand thinking by doing it. [7] This understanding brings one closer to the essence of thinking, which requires that one, "first learn to exist in the nameless."[8] This is to say that thinking in this manner is necessarily uncertain, and it is this very uncertainty that offers a means of generating both provocative questions and meaningful responses.

Heidegger provides an extensive account of his notion of thinking that is both puzzling and brilliant in a series of lectures given at the University of Freiburg from 1951-1952.[9] Though he never provides any definite answers, he manages to draw the listener along with him in a process of thinking … about thinking. In short, he delivers an account of what it means to think by engaging the audience in acts of thinking. Of this approach to understanding he says, "we shall never learn what is called swimming…by reading a treatise on swimming. Only a leap into the river tells us what is called swimming."[10] With this statement, Heidegger raises two important points about thinking: first, that there is a difference between intellectual knowledge and embodied understanding, and second, that true understanding requires this leap into the unknown so that it may be effective. Simply put, no preparation fully prepares one for the actualities of encounter. This participatory method of thinking is powerful because not only does it blur the subject/object dichotomy, but it also disallows a thinking *about* something; rather, it places one *in* thinking. Thinking from inside the situation is both potent and uncomfortable for the same reason: that one cannot make the process static and surveyable. Architecture, an

art of inhabitation, needs this immersive process as a means for designers to more fully understand and develop the complexities of a real building: inhabiting the work as it evolves.

A WAY OF THINKING

Thinking that is "on the way" is important to design as it makes vital the temporal aspect of thinking which opens new perspectives by building upon its own previous steps. This occurs as one traverses a course of involvements: each reveals insights that lead to other insights. In this manner, being on the way opens a path for itself. As Heidegger explains,

> Thinking clears its own way only by its own questioning advance. But this clearing of the way is curious. The way that is cleared does not remain behind, but is built into the next step, and is projected forward from it.[11]

However, all "advancing" thinking is not the same. For example, when the Greek notion of "on the way" is translated as "method" it loses its fundamental openness and in this adulteration thinking becomes ossified.[12] For Heidegger, thinking is effective when "we learn to think by giving our mind to what there is to think about."[13] And one way to encourage this shift in thinking is by learning to "...listen closely."[14] These statements describe an attitude shift that is essential in moving toward a thinking that is not merely grounded in logic and the grip of subjective agency.

The thinker exists "in the nameless," and so too the designer must dwell in the unknown. Becoming comfortable with the ambiguity of the design process releases one from the unproductive mode of "figuring it out in one's head" or the calculating notion that there might be rules for making good design. The impossibility of these purely rational approaches for producing good architecture is provided once again by Alvar Aalto, who flatly states that "no such possibility exists."[15] Instead, one creates by creating -- this is the leap. And when undertaken earnestly one finds that "the leap alone takes us to where thinking resides...what the leap takes us to will confound us."[16] This is to say, by relinquishing control one drops those things superficial, separate, and habitual, allowing the process itself the power to clear the way to things previously unknown. Further, the leap brings with it the place from which one leaps and situates one's

experience squarely in the actual circumstances.[17] This enmeshment with situation effectively brings one's past experience into a vital relation with the fresh information of the present and is an important corrective to the detached practice of counting new circumstances as equivalent to something already experienced. The latter approach seeks to avoid the fear of the leap, the messiness of process, and attempts to release one from the tension of truly thinking. Conclusions that avoid the leap are usually recycled, generalized or both.

An effective means of facilitating immersion into the complexities of the problem is by being attentive to matters close at hand, or as Heidegger says, "underway, then – we must give particularly close attention to that stretch of way on which we are putting our feet."[18] This is a point that seems somewhat paradoxical when often a design needs to be concerned with achieving particular ends. And yet Heidegger's intent is to remind that there is a certain loss of perspective that is required for real participation. He explains:

> A specific kind of forgetting is essential for the temporality that is constitutive for letting something be involved. The Self must forget itself if, lost in the world of equipment, it is to be able 'actually' to go to work and manipulate something.[19]

Forgetting is required for growth and an effective thinking process. In fact, Heidegger claimed that for the Greeks the counter-essence of truth was forgetting.[20] By this he means to suggest that essential to the uncovering of truth is a focus that allows one to come into an ecstatic relation with the world. This ecstatic relation lets the situation be effectual as one understands opportunities to come *from* the world through one's involvement with it and further that this type of focused encounter must necessarily cover up other potentialities.

In Heidegger's thinking, it is the dialogue between individual and their involvements that begin to indicate the way toward results. However it is not the individual that is the agent that controls this dialogue; it is the focus of thinking itself that "draws us along by its very withdrawal."[21] Heidegger goes on to say that, for "when man is drawing into what withdraws, he points into what withdraws. As we are drawing that way we are a sign, a pointer."[22] Heidegger calls this our essential nature.[23] In other words, by allowing ourselves to be affected

by the world and its possibilities we find more sensitive perspectives. This being drawn-in reveals or "points" out certain aspects and relations that would not be otherwise evident, and it occurs most effectively when one becomes deeply attuned to the prevailing mood of the encounter.

BEING IN THE MOOD

According to Heidegger, situations first strike us as moods. This is to say, one feels the atmospheric qualities of a situation and whether something is of concern to them before all the details come into conscious focus. Heidegger refers to the ground of this phenomenon as *stimmung*, writing that, indeed, one's "...openness to the world is constituted by *stimmung...*"[24] S*timmung* not only refers to the mood of a situation, but also the way in which that mood resonates with an individual. Heidegger's description suggests reciprocity between person and situation that arises though concernful involvement. *Stimmung* is the first indicator of one's "ek-static" engagement with the world: that is, rather than being a personal emotion, *mood is in the world*. This experience of mood is betrayed by the colloquial, "I'm *in* a _____ mood." Here mood is like the weather and the whole of one's involvements are colored by this pervasive atmosphere.

The second important aspect of *stimmung* is that the resonant dimension of mood reveals how each individual is made up of a unique set of contextual, historical, and social facts, what is elsewhere called "facticity."[25] Revealed through an existential structure called *befindlichkeit,* one's facticity insures that one always finds oneself involved in a particular situation in a *particular* way because of who they are and what they have experienced up to and including that moment. In other words, our past makes us susceptible to be affected in certain ways by certain situations.[26]

Mood does not come from nowhere; rather, a mood is structured and facilitated by the relations between people and "things."[27] Things form the basic structure of human environments and in this structuring help to establish certain atmospheres. With things as important indicators of mood it seems reasonable that one might seek an aesthetic correlation between mood and form. In fact, one of the founders of formalism in art, Clive Bell, pursued

the relation in his 1914 book, *Art*. In an example of thinking that went from being on the way to one that became ossified, Bell first suggested that it was the ability of a thing to elicit a particular emotional response that determined its veracity as a work of art. Bell claimed that, "the starting point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion."[28] And that, "any system of aesthetics which pretends to be based on some objective truth is so palpably ridiculous as not to be worth discussing. We have no other means of recognizing a work of art than our feelings for it."[29] Bell describes the class of objects that possess the power to move one to this aesthetic emotion as having "significant form."

Despite promising beginnings, when faced with an explanation of significant form, Bell's thinking falls into exactly the trap he was arguing against. Rather than continuing to reveal the contours of a compelling argument, Bell suddenly turns to a generalized explanation of the phenomenon he is describing, saying that significant form is "lines and colors combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms stir our aesthetic emotions..."[30] and "...arrangements and combinations that move us in a particular way."[31] These generic and rather emotionless explanations of being moved by emotion are odd in an argument whose basic premise that significant work *communicates* emotionally. Here Bell loses his "way."

In the disintegration of Bell's thought, we learn something about the link between mood and design thinking: that the moods which attune us to situations operate with the same indefiniteness as thinking that is on the way. Handling mood adeptly requires that designers learn to operate on the same level as mood. Similar missteps as the ones the undermined Bell's argument occur when designers turn to the intellect prematurely in the creative act, not allowing thinking to remain in the milieu with which it was developing. Take, for example, the Eglise Saint-Pierre de Firminy-Vert, a Le Corbusier church completed by José Oubrerie after Corbusier's death. The experience of this place suggests that Oubrerie was not continuing the way of Corbusier's thought. Although this claim will have to stand on conjecture, what was clear to me upon a visit was that the design, despite being mostly well executed in its form, space, and detail, was completely wrong in terms of its mood

(for both Corbusier and for a church). Leaving the church I asked British architect Alan Forsyth what he thought, to which he replied, "a tragedy."[32] For him the theatrical mood of the sanctuary was *so* wrong that it actually overwhelmed and destroyed all other aspects of this building. Perhaps this difficult to define sense of the work being somehow "off" is summed up best by Jeffrey Kipnis who called it "…a flagrantly unforgettable architectural opus."[33] Corbusier's work at both Ronchamp and La Tourette provide excellent counter examples that demonstrate a variability and subtlety of atmosphere that is clearly lacking at Firminy.

THINKING TEMPORALITY

The composition of place and mood is grounded in temporality. Understanding this is crucial toward the preservation and extension of complex environments. Further it is not just that mood is changing but that we are changing along with it and this process of attunement is facilitated by persistence and the openness of thinking. The variability of place is a key reason that design thinking cannot rely on the instrumental, remain tied to the object, or be the act of a self-sufficient subject. Rather interfacing with this order of complexity requires a thinking that is dexterous and fluid, affording one the ability to think along with the shifting nature of situations:

> *After an overnight flight I arrived in Paris on a drizzly morning. I was eager to get settled in my room, unpack and prepare for the city. I left the train at the* Gare du Nord *and walked down the hectic* Boulevard Magenta *to the* La Place du Republiques *before eventually finding my hotel. Upon arrival I found the hotel lobby under construction, the reception to be in someone's living room, and my room as a drab, dark, and possibly dirty (but it was too dark to tell) space. It felt like a closet. I felt depressed.*
>
> *Later, after many treks across the city, my experience impressed upon me that my hotel was on the fringe of a lively neighborhood street in the* Marais*. Upon realizing this, I was struck by the difference in the affect of this place on me having walked from the north, down a busy and highly impersonal boulevard, compared to arriving here from the opposite direction. Either sequence would have provided a totally different impression of this place.*
>
> *However, it seemed that my understanding of this place was also undergoing a transformation. As I spent more time coming and going from my hotel, it became apparent that its precise locale was more*

> *part of the* Marais *than of the* Place du Republiques*. That is to say, without my focusing on it, the mood associated with this place changed. Although it still had the same adjacencies, the lobby in disarray, and drab room, The Hotel Picard was now a different place than it had been initially. Somehow it seemed less depressing, less connected to the frenzy of the* Boulevard Magenta *and more tied into the rich character of the* Marais*. This experience reminded me how it is easy to jump to conclusions and fix place as a static entity and it is striking that more often than not these conclusions are not indicative of the layered reality that surfaces through continual engagement.[34]*

Design thinking must put itself in a position to cope with and build from this process of continual becoming. Thinking on the way is primed for this task because it is fundamentally temporal: it arises from out the past and presses into the future in a particular way because of one's experience. It does this by remaining acutely aware and involved in the present. This is a thinking that is always in process. Thinking in this manner allows the evolution of places as a temporal phenomenon; moving from the abstraction of a map, image or idea, to a simple physical engagement where place shows nascent aspects of a more complex reality, to finally (if engaged repeatedly and openly) a multifaceted and nuanced region of inhabitation. Thinking that allows world and individual to inter-penetrate reveals place as a layered, multi-faceted, embodied reality. This kind of temporal integration asks that one remain open to the whispers of the strange even when ensconced within the intensely familiar. Here Heidegger's emphasis on listening returns as it allows a supple perception which lets an environment's true possibilities come to light. The temporal revelation of place signals the beginning of an attuned architecture.

THE REGION OF ARCHITECTURE

> In thinking there is neither method, nor theme, but rather the region, so called because it gives its realm and free reign to what thinking is given to think. Thinking abides in that country, walking the ways of that country.[35]
>
> Martin Heidegger

Achieving a meaningful connection to place through architecture requires a thinking that possesses an ability to *enter* the place of the architectural problem. This is the real task for situated architecture – articulating a place by way of building. In other

words our listening opens a region for thinking from which form might find us. This similar to the task of the cabinetmaker where it is not just skills of technology that allow the craft rather; "what maintains and sustains even this handicraft is not the mere manipulation of tools, but the relatedness to wood."[36] Thinking on the way in design opens *a path* toward a "relatedness" to place.

Bringing this type of thinking into design must begin at the foundational levels and like any other any kind of fundamental skill one wishes to master; thinking on the way too requires continual practice. For the beginning designer the indefiniteness of this approach is often difficult to manage. It is difficult because thinking in this manner demands acting before knowing or perhaps knowing by acting. The fact that this seemingly groundless state is where thinking thrives is reinforced by Heidegger's statement that "everything rests on the path."[37] He explains:

> This means two different things. First, it means that it all comes down to the path, to our finding it and remaining on it – which means to our persistence in staying 'under way.' The paths of   thinking that belong to the situating discussion have the peculiar character that when we are under way on them we are nearer to the site than when, in order to become ensconced there, we convince ourselves that we have reached the site; for the site is of a different nation than a station or a place in space. What we call the site…is what assembles what comes to be essential of a matter.

> Second, that everything rests on the path suggests that everything we must bring into view shows itself only under way on the path.[38]

For the designer remaining under way on the path allows *the work itself* to open up a space where the specifics of the problem can be understood and worked out. In this manner, the activity of design is a thinking that circumscribes the problem area and thus "assembles what comes to be essential of a matter." In other words, the designer acquires insight into the architectural problem not by defining the requirements, outcomes, or goals in a fixed manner, but rather by living them through doing, acting, and making. In this space opened by action the problem and design solution co-inform one another with each becoming more lucid through the lens of the other. The work of the designer is to maintain the "questioning advance."

Teaching thinking that is on the way is first a dismantling of preconceptions, often requiring tasks that initially do not resemble architecture. For example, I frequently ask students to make short films, create three dimensional models of music, re-presenting the spirit of a place as a three-dimensional assemblage and so on. These sorts of exercises are meant to disconnect the causal chain of I think of X, then make X, which would be not so much a process of design as production. In order for design to not get confused with mere production there is a requisite darkness, that is an intensity of focus. Attending to the path as such opens the region of the project that can then be experienced in its "nearness," that is, with an intimacy.[39] Nearness within the region of thought is key for this notion of thinking to be effective. The difference between developing nearness in a region of thinking and prescribing an intellectual method is the difference between going into the attic and finding what is there versus sitting in the living room and writing an inventory of the attic's contents. Inhabiting a region with intimacy allows discoveries that are both palpable and experiential. Architecture comes into being with a similar inhabitation of the work. This *placed* thinking lets a designer live the temporal reality of a work and discover relations and experiences that would not have been understood in a detached "inventory" mind-set. Nearness in design frees essential relations and creates new avenues. It propels experiential understandings and forms a place where ideas, possibilities, and requirements all emerge as the resonance of a particular understanding. With resonance there comes, as Aalto suggests, the recognition of significant form which emerges as "a mystery which eludes definition but it gives man a good feeling, quite different from an act of social rescue as such."[40] In effective design one finds that thinking, making, mood, and form all depend on one another.

LAST THOUGHT

Heidegger's description of thinking is complicated because it is not definitive. However, this does not make it deficient; rather, it captures the very qualities required for effective thinking. This type of thinking allows moods to remain palpable, influential, and variable, which helps to create a responsive design disposition. With this disposition one becomes capable of remaining amidst the

multiplicities of place and process as well as one's experience therein. When engaged in the temporal complexity of experience, thinking on the way allows a means to negotiate this immersion without recourse to reduction. This mode of thinking thus remains closely aligned with the way that we actually inhabit particular places. Inhabiting a design in this way requires endurance, suspending conclusions until it is time for the *final* leap of completion. It is the peculiarities of this constant negotiation that allows a work to emerge with potency - drawing us in with complexity, subtlety, and at times intensity. Higher magnitudes of success in the built environment come when the calculating "subject" is subsumed by the "mood" of thinking. Only then can design thinking become a process of intimacy and discovery.

Heidegger has suggested that "only when man speaks does he think."[41] And so it is with design. Design speaks through the absorbed process of making, and significant architecture is simply the mature record of this speaking. A final example from Aalto demonstrates this point:

> While designing the Municipal Library in Viipuri, I spent a great deal of time making children's drawings…In themselves these drawings had nothing to do with architecture, but from these childish drawings sprang a combination of plans and sections which, although it would be difficult to describe how, were all interwoven. And this became the basic idea of the library…[42]

Taking up a path of thinking *is* understanding the problem. Developing architectural solutions comes by inhabiting this region of the unknown through the process of design.

ENDNOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 21.

2. Alvar Aalto, "Alvar Aalto Speaks," Virtual Finland [accessed November 15, 2008]. Available from http://virtual.finland.fi/netcomm/news/showarticle.asp?intNWSAID=26191

3. Alvar Aalto, "Alvar Aalto Speaks."

4. Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 66.

5. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 8.

6. Ibid. 113, 57, 210-11.

7. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 247.

8. Ibid., 243.

9. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*

10. Ibid. 21.

11. Ibid. 170.

12. Heidegger, *Parmenides* 66.

13. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 4.

14. Ibid. 25.

15. Nicholas Ray, *Alvar Aalto* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 163.

16. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 12.

17. Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 60.

18. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 46.

19. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Seventh ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962) 405.

20. Heidegger, *Parmenides* 88.

21. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 9. see also Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 242.

22. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 18.

23. Ibid. 9.

24. Heidegger, *Being and Time* 21, 176.

25. Ibid. 82.

26. *Befindlichkeit* is literally, "how one finds themself-ness" and is usually translated as affectedness or disposedness. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division 1* (London and Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). and William Blattner, *Heidegger's Being and Time* (London New York: Continuum, 2006).

27. "We understand ourselves by way of things, in the sense of the self-understanding of everyday Dasein. To understand ourselves from the things with which we are occupied means to project our own ability to be upon such features of the business of our everyday occupation as the feasible, urgent,

indispensable, expedient. The Dasein understands itself from the ability to be that is determined by the success and failure, the feasibility and unfeasibility, of its commerce with things. The Dasein thus comes toward itself from out of the things. It expects its own can-be as the can-be of a being which relies on what things give or what they refuse. It is as though the Dasein's can-be were projected by the things, by the Dasein's commerce with them, and not primarily by the Dasein itself from its own most peculiar self, which nevertheless exists, just as it is, always as dealing with things."

From - Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problem Problems of Phenomenology*, *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 289.

28. Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914) 6.

29. Ibid. 18.

30. Ibid. 8.

31. Ibid. 16.

32. From a conversation on September 8th 2008.

33. Jeffrey Kipnis, *Eglise Saint-Pierre De Firminy-Vert* (2007 [cited 9/22 2008]); available from http://archrecord.construction.com/projects/portfolio/archives/0706eglise.asp.

34. Author's recollection. September, 2008.

35. Martin Heidegger, "The Nature of Language," in *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper One, 1971), 74.

36. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 23.

37. Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason* 59.

38. Ibid. 59-60.

39. Heidegger, "The Nature of Language," 101.

40. Alvar Aalto, "Between Humanism and Materialism," in *Synopsis; Painting, Architecture, Sculpture.* (Basel: Birkhauser Verlag, 1970), 20.

41. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 16.

42. Alvar Aalto, "Abstract Art and Architecture," in *Synopsis; Painting, Architecture, Sculpture.* (Basel: Birkhauser Verlag, 1970), 18.