

# Christian Norberg-Schulz and the Existential Space

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**ABSTRACT:** The historian-theoretician Christian Norberg-Schulz, examining the development of his ideas across 30 years. While Norberg-Schulz started out with *Intentions in Architecture* (1963), a work that was clearly influenced by structuralist studies, he soon shifted to a phenomenological approach with *Existence, Space and Architecture* (1971), and then with *Genius Loci* (1980) and *The Concept of Dwelling* (1985). He attempted through this trilogy to lay down the foundations of a phenomenological interpretation of architecture, with an underlying agenda that espoused certain directions in contemporary architecture. This article will examine the major writings of Christian Norberg-Schulz, critically evaluating his interpretation of phenomenology in architecture in its ambiguous relation to the project of modernity. In addition we will introduce his perspectives on the meaning of dwelling as well as the newest concept of dwelling in the West and its problems

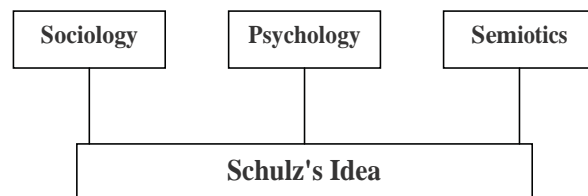
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## INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology owes its main thrust to Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Husserl launched the phenomenological movement in philosophy with the intent of developing it into a method of precise philosophical investigation that is, a comprehensive new “science”, but it was his student Heidegger who took it into another direction and turned it into one of the major philosophical movements of the twentieth century influencing all subsequent developments in philosophy from Sartre to Foucault and Derrida. Heidegger transformed Phenomenology into a means for the questioning of philosophical traditions, a radical dismantling to be followed by a reconstruction, with the intent of founding a new fundamental ontology that looks at the way in which the structures of “Being” are revealed through the structures of human existence.<sup>1</sup>

The main thrust of Heidegger’s philosophy was developed in his major work, *Being and Time* (1927), which constitutes the basis of his phenomenological approach. Yet, as scholars of Heidegger remark, his later works, especially the series of essays “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935), “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” (1952) and “The Question concerning Technology” (1949),<sup>2</sup> reflected a turn in his orientation from the earlier *Being and Time* towards a mythopoeic approach that privileges a direct reflection on the nature of elements, common to poetic or artistic practice.<sup>3</sup> It was this later Heidegger who

would become influential among a number of architectural theorists, namely Christian Norberg-Schulz, who was among the first to attempt to translate this phenomenological approach in architecture. Christian Norberg-Schulz’s first theoretical work was very much influenced by the structuralist tendencies of the 1960s, without being specifically anchored to any single source or reference. *Intentions in Architecture* appeared in 1963 and constituted an ambitious project to develop an overarching “system” that would account for the various poles of architectural activity. The framework for this study included a combination of scientific ideas derived from sociology, psychology and semiotics.



Already at that time, he attributed the condition of “crisis” in architecture to the failure of modern architecture to take account of some of the essential factors that give significance to the built environment, primary among those the role of perception, in addition to the importance of history as a source

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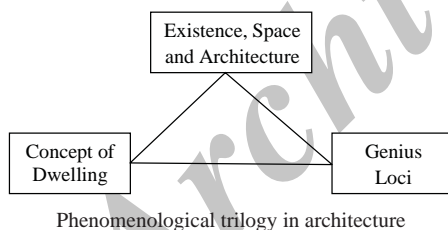
of meanings.<sup>5</sup>

Other thinkers in the West note that the crisis has social and cultural problems for modern man. For example, there is a sense of the absurd, such as anxiety or pessimism, and loss of life and enthusiasm to live. Schulz knows that emerging from this crisis is possible through training.

#### Basic View

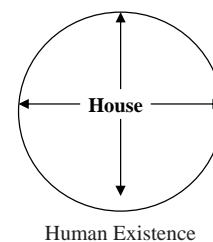
Norberg-Schulz's discussion of perception was largely influenced by Gestalt psychology, to which were also added the socialization of perception and the process of "schematization", that is the way in which perception leads to the construction of an understanding of the world, based on the pioneering studies of Jean Piaget in child psychology. From this, he proceeded to outline a theoretical framework which would include all the semiotic dimensions. This theory, influenced to a large extent by Charles Morris's interpretation of semiotics, constituted a similar attempt to develop a comprehensive structure that is, an "architectural totality" that would account for all the dimensions of architecture: the technical structure, environment, context, scale and ornament.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that this work did not list any single reference to Heidegger in its bibliography, only mentioning him in a single footnote.<sup>7</sup>

A few years later, Norberg-Schulz published a work with a very indicative title, *Existence, Space and Architecture* (1971), followed by *Genius Loci* (1980) and *The Concept of Dwelling* (1985) which constitute his phenomenological trilogy in architecture.



*Existence, Space and Architecture* marked a turning point in Norberg-Schulz's theoretical project. While his first work was based on a structuralist approach blending semiotics and Gestalt theories, this work betrayed a shift which would be translated later into a move towards a phenomenological approach. In the foreword, Norberg-Schulz announced, in fact, a "new approach to the problem of architectural space", attempting to "develop the idea that architectural space may be understood as a concretization of environmental schemata or images, which form a necessary part of man's general orientation or 'being in the world'".<sup>8</sup> This reference to "being in the world" is indicative of this new shift, supported by several quotations from Heidegger. Still, in this transitional work, Norberg-Schulz stood on a middle ground between the

structuralist positions of Piaget, Arnheim and others, and the phenomenological position represented by Heidegger and Bollnow.<sup>9</sup> This attempt at reconciling structuralism with phenomenology may also be traced in his subsequent works and never seemed to pose any problems for Norberg-Schulz. The major concept in *Existence, Space and Architecture* is "space". The discussion of "space" was motivated by what the author perceived as a reductive reading of that concept, first given currency by Giedion and later used by others, particularly Bruno Zevi.<sup>10</sup> Norberg-Schulz qualified space as "existential space", structured into schemata and centres, directions, paths, and domains; concepts that he illustrated by concrete examples derived from multiple sources, from Mircea Eliade to Otto Bollnow, Gaston Bachelard, Claude Levi-Strauss and Kevin Lynch. The centre, for instance, was illustrated by the image drawn from Eliade's discussion on mythology, a mythical origin traversed by a diagram of the axis mundi, which represents a connection between the different cosmic realms.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the path was related to the idea of departure and return home, and the division into the "inner" and "outer" domains of existence, as explained by Bollnow. Norberg-Schulz also introduced a new concept that would be expanded later, that of *genius loci*, literally the "spirit of a place".<sup>12</sup> He identified four levels of "existential space": geography and landscape, urban level, the house and the thing. In discussing the house, Norberg-Schulz referred to Heidegger's essay on dwelling and the etymological roots of "building" which go back to "dwelling", stressing the role of the house as the "central place of human existence": "The House, therefore, remains the central place of human existence, the place where the child learns to understand his being in the world, and the place from which man departs and to which he returns." <sup>13</sup>



The last chapter discussed the concept of "architectural space" which he defined as a "concretization of existential space", illustrated by a historical survey of various architectural works, from villages and towns to specific architectural artifacts, subjected to a classification in terms of the spatial concepts of centre, path and domain, as well as a qualitative description in terms of their phenomenological attributes. Existential space was thus defined as a qualitative space, manifest in the monumental architecture of the Parthenon as well as that of the medieval towns, in the dynamic architecture of Borromini as well as in that of the Renaissance, in the work of Le Corbusier, La Tourette, being a favored example, as well as in Louis Kahn's and Paolo Portoghesi's works.



Le Corbusier, La Tourette, France 1957-1960

For Norberg-Schulz, there exist multiple variations to the concept of “architectural space”, but its essential aspects had been obliterated by some modern works, especially at the level of urbanism. There, the figural quality of the street and its variations, the centrality of the town square and its existential role have all been ignored by architects, which led to deficient urban environments. In this respect, he joined Venturi, Jacobs, and Rossi in criticizing Modern Architecture for its short comings, especially at the level of the urban environment. As in the case of Venturi, but using a different approach, Norberg-Schulz returned to history in its wider sense to give comparative examples of buildings, towns and landscapes as examples that naturally incorporate these qualities of “existential space”, creating meaningful and wholistic environments.

Norberg-Schulz reiterated the necessary recognition and understanding of the different levels of architectural space that “form a structured totality which corresponds to the structure of existential space”.<sup>14</sup> This understanding of “existential space”, ignored by “orthodox modernism” reappeared, according to him, in the work of Louis Kahn, Robert Venturi and Paolo Portoghesi. Portoghesi was singled out for his supposed mastery through the application of geometry of the interaction between different levels of space, resulting in a balanced relation between the building and its environment. Norberg-Schulz concluded with a quote from Heidegger: “Mortals dwell in as much as they save the earth”, as a confirmation of the necessity of re-appropriating the elements of existential space into the foundation of architecture.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Concept of Dwelling*

The Concept of Dwelling constituted the third part of Norberg-Schulz’s phenomenological trilogy, still supported by a framework of semiotic, behaviorist and other studies.<sup>16</sup> In this work, Norberg-Schulz directly addressed the issue of “dwelling”, a concept that was singled out by Heidegger’s famous essay. Here, surprisingly, the subtitle indicated a movement towards “figurative architecture”.<sup>17</sup> In the foreword, the author announced the basic premise of the book as the rediscovery of “dwelling” in its comprehensive totality, leading towards a final overcoming of functionalism and a return to figurative architecture.<sup>18</sup> The keynote to this work is given by the Norwegian story of Knut, a youngster who

recognizes, through a sort of spiritual revelation, his presence in the forest as a fundamental aspect of his existence. Two illustrations, a Norwegian forest and a farmhouse, accompany this introduction, further evoking this idea of dwelling as a return to the sources.<sup>19</sup>

The Concept of Dwelling was organized into a structured study that proceeded from the general outline to the development of the concept, and again from the macro level of the settlement to that of the individual house, passing by the intermediary “modes” of dwelling, urban space and institution. These four basic modes of dwelling are organized through two “aspects”: identification and orientation. Mingled in the text are various quotations from Heidegger, but also from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, to give a phenomenological flavor to an otherwise structuralist work that revives the same concepts derived from Gestalt psychology, from Kevin Lynch, in addition to references to the work of Mircea Eliade on mythology. In focusing his attention on laying down the foundations of an architectural “language”, Norberg-Schulz in fact returned to the earlier phase of his *Intentions in Architecture*, coloured by his more recent discovery of phenomenology. In this work, the author re-examined the four categories of dwelling under the structuralist template of “morphology”, “topology” and “typology”, which constituted the organizing structure that was applied onto the dimension of “being”: Man’s being-in-the-world is structured, and the structure is kept and visualized by means of architecture.<sup>20</sup>

And further: The meaning of a work of architecture therefore consists in its gathering the world in a general typical sense, in a local particular sense, in a temporal historical sense, and, finally, as something, that is as the figural manifestation of a mode of dwelling between earth and sky.<sup>21</sup>

Once again, the selection of “particular” examples of dwelling at the level of the individual house is quite revealing of the author’s selective interpretation. The first example mentioned was the Hill House by Mackintosh, lauded for its fulfillment of the task of dwelling: to “reveal the world, not as essence but as presence, that is as material and colour, topography and vegetation, seasons, weather and light”.<sup>22</sup>



(Hill House in Helensburgh, Scotland is one of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's most famous works, probably second only to Glasgow School of Art. It was designed and built for the publisher Walter Blackie in 1902 – 1904)

After the Hill House, the author turned to vernacular architecture, particularly to the types of dwelling common in northern European countries, which were mentioned by Heidegger. In addition to these, Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen's Hvit-träsk complex, Behrens' house in Darmstadt, Hoffmann's Palais Stoclet and Wright's prairie houses, which share little in common, were seen as good examples of this interpretation of dwelling.

(Between 1900 and 1917, Wright's residential designs were "Prairie Houses" (extended low buildings with shallow, sloping roofs, clean sky lines, suppressed chimneys, overhangs and terraces, using unfinished materials), so-called because the design is considered to complement the land around Chicago. These houses are credited with being the first examples of the "open plan.")



(The Ward W. Willits House is a building designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Designed in 1901)

Yet this time, the critique of the "modern house" was more explicit, and the author recognized its failure to arrive at a satisfactory solution to the problem of dwelling, for it lacked the "figural quality"; it did not look like a house. Hence, what seems to be the problem is simply the inability of the modern house to look like a house, and not, as Heidegger had alluded to, the inability of modern man to dwell. Norberg-Schulz expressed here the hope that the revival of this figural quality, as evident in many post-modern projects, will again make dwelling possible.<sup>23</sup> Despite a cautionary remark against the fall into eclecticism, the book ends on an optimistic note that this recovery of the figural quality would lead to a recovery of dwelling, in which phenomenology would play a major role as the catalyst for the rediscovery of the poetic dimension in architecture.<sup>24</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Despite its wide dissemination in architectural circles during the 1980s, Norberg-Schulz's phenomenological interpretation received relatively little critical overview, apart from the usual book reviews, most of which were generally positive.<sup>25</sup> The strongest attack against this interpretation of phenomenology came indirectly from Massimo Cacciari, who criticized the naive

interpretations of Heidegger's concept of dwelling.<sup>26</sup> Cacciari, in clear opposition to Norberg-Schulz, read in Heidegger's essay a recognition of the "impossibility of dwelling", rather than a desire for a nostalgic return to pre-modern conditions of dwelling: No nostalgia, then, in Heidegger but rather the contrary. He radicalizes the discourse supporting any possible "nostalgic" attitude, lays bare its logic, pitilessly emphasizes its insurmountable distance from the actual condition.<sup>27</sup> The difficulty of interpreting Heidegger's later writings has been raised by some critics. Hilde Heynen, for instance, saw in these different interpretations of Heidegger an opposition between two ideological positions, utopian- nostalgic and critical-radical, represented respectively by Norberg-Schulz and Cacciari. In this opposition, Heynen recognized the deficiencies of both positions, the first for its simplistic reduction of the problematic to a question of architectural form, the second for its assimilation of the condition of anxiety as a generative principle.<sup>28</sup> It is precisely this aspect that constitutes the weakest point in Norberg-Schulz's theoretical proposition: his desire to translate phenomenological discourse into a tool for the generation of architectural forms that recreate a semblance of meaningful environments. In his interpretation of Heidegger, Norberg-Schulz did not go beyond the surface, satisfying himself with the later works of Heidegger, without attempting to answer some of the problematic issues raised by its critics. Further more, phenomenology, in Norberg-Schulz's understanding, was continuously supported by a structuralist framework, which puts into question the very possibility of overcoming the duality of mind/body as phenomenologist claim, using this structuralist framework as a pretext for one of two possibilities: a return to vernacular architecture as an archetype for an idealized dwelling on the one hand, or an espousal of a "figurative" post-modernist architecture as a second option. Even in his last publication, Norberg-Schulz did not propose anything beyond a synthesis of these various concepts from structuralism to phenomenology into yet another work that attempts to give a "comprehensive" account of architecture from all periods and regions.<sup>29</sup>

Heidegger's later reflections on art and architecture and the mythopoeic turn that he took may also be partly responsible for this particular interpretation of phenomenology, which was translated by some as a nostalgic return to an "authentic dwelling" and, consequently, as a retreat to certain styles or periods. The later developments in architecture and the various appropriations of the "figurative" have shown that the crisis of the object, of which Tafuri had spoken, cannot be simply resolved by such artificial measures. It is questionable whether other phenomenological interpretations would be more successful in resolving the problematic condition of contemporary architecture, without addressing the current conditions of its production. A phenomenological approach, in the real sense of the term, cannot be reduced to a formal manipulation of specific parameters such as tactility or vision.<sup>30</sup> And despite the occasional masterpieces which can



bring forth intense spatial experiences that distinguishes them from “ordinary” productions, such as the work of Peter Zumthor, it is questionable whether it is possible to raise architecture as a whole to this level of aesthetic resolution, within a practice that continues to separate architecture from its social and political dimensions, which was the historic condition for the generation of “meaningful” environments.<sup>31</sup>

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1. Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, London/ NY: Routledge, 2000, ch. 6.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Harper, 2008; “The Origin of the Work of Art” and “Building Dwelling Thinking” are included in the collection of essays published as *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper, 2001; “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, Harper: 1982.
3. Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, p. 209.
4. Structuralism largely developed out of linguistic studies, the branch of knowledge concerned with the study of language itself. Initially, the main source of influence was the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who left no work of his own, other than the collected notes published by his students after his death, as the *General Course on Linguistics*, a work that was first translated to English in 1959. Saussure initiated a major change in the study of language, insisting on a synchronic approach rather than the usual diachronic approach by looking at the structure of the language and its rules of operation. He also posited that language is a ‘constructed’ system, and not naturally inherited or metaphysically inspired, thus opening the way for a deeper probe into the very foundations of this system, which directly affects the way we construct our reality and the world. Although in his collection of notes, the term ‘structure’ was never used by Saussure, but rather ‘system’, later readers of Saussure came up with this terminology which became a standard bearer for other studies, and first among those, the work of Claude Levi-Strauss in anthropology. For more on this see Francois Dosse, *Histoire du Structuralisme*, Vol. 1, Paris: La Decouverte, 1991; and John Sturrock, *Structuralism*, London: Blackwell, 2003.
5. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965, pp. 21–22.
6. Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*, pp. 101–102.
7. Peter Collins wrote a sharp critique of this early work of Norberg-Schulz, warning against the dangers of assimilating architecture within overwhelming “theories” of philosophical or linguistic nature. See his book review of *Intentions in Architecture* in the *Journal of Architectural Education*, 21, 3, 1967: 8–10.
8. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, NY: Praeger, 1971, p. 7.
9. Otto F. Bollnow, author of *Mensch und Raum*, 1963 as well as a number of works on German existential philosophy and hermeneutics, among others.
10. Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, p. 12.
11. Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, p. 21.
12. Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, p. 27.
13. Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, p. 31.
14. Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, p. 96.
15. Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, p. 114.
16. This work did not conclude the series on this topic, as the author published another work, titled *Architecture: Presence, Language and Place*, which reiterated the same themes discussed in the previous books.
17. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling: On the Way to Figurative Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli, 1985. Again, the original publication came out first in Italian, under Electa, one year prior.
18. In another essay titled “On the Way to Figurative Architecture”, Norberg-Schulz sheds further light on his interpretation of the “figurative”, using this concept to support recent post-modernist projects by Venturi, Graves and Botta, among others. See Christian Norberg-Schulz, “On the Way to Figurative Architecture”, in Norberg-Schulz, *Architecture: Meaning and Place*, New York: Electa/ Rizzoli, 1988, pp.233–245.
19. Norberg-Schulz, *Concept of Dwelling*, pp. 9–12.
20. Norberg-Schulz, *Concept of Dwelling*, p. 29.
21. Norberg-Schulz, *Concept of Dwelling*, p. 30.
22. Norberg-Schulz, *Concept of Dwelling*, p. 89.
23. Norberg-Schulz, *Concept of Dwelling*, p. 110. Two drawings were used to illustrate the “figural quality”: the first a drawing by Louis Kahn, the second by Michael Graves, titled “On the Way to Figurative Architecture”, pp. 132, 134.
24. Norberg-Schulz, *Concept of Dwelling*, p. 135.
25. See for instance: Harris Forusz, “Review of *Genius Loci*”, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 34, 3, 1981: 32; one of the critical reviews of Norberg-Schulz is by Linda Krause, “Review of *Architecture: Meaning and Place*”, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 50, 2, 1991: 197–199. Also, a critical yet cursory discussion of Norberg-Schulz’s concept of dwelling can be found in David Leatherbarrow, *Roots of Architectural Invention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
26. Massimo Cacciari, “Eupalinos or Architecture”, *Oppositions*, 21, 1980: 106–116. This article was written as a review of Tafuri & Dal Co’s *Architettura contemporanea*, for the journal *Oppositions*. *Architettura contemporanea* appeared in 1976, and was translated as *Modern Architecture* in 1979. Cacciari’s essay in *Oppositions* coincided with Norberg-

Schulz's original publication of *Genius Loci* in Italian.

27. Cacciari, "Eupalinos or Architecture", p. 107.

28. Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

29. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Architecture: Presence, Language, Place*, Milan: Skira, 2000.

30. This appears to be the case for instance of Steven Holl who, despite the stimulating experiences that his architecture creates, can not claim to resolve the contradictions born out of operating within a certain economic mode that determines a priori the conditions for experiencing and using these buildings. This reduction of phenomenology to a "sensory"

or "embodied" experience of space is advocated for instance by Fred Rush in his book *On Architecture*, New York: Routledge, 2009.

31. Botond Bogner articulated a similar position in his essay "Toward an Architecture of Critical Inquiry", *Journal of Architectural Education*, 43, 1, 1989: 13–34 in which he came to the conclusion that the recent phenomenological approaches architecture are legitimate in insisting on a meaningful dimension, yet they lack the strategies for critically evaluating the given social reality which determines the realms of intentionality and inter subjectivity (p. 22)

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