

THE EYES OF THE SKIN ARCHITECTURE AND THE SENSES

Juhani Pallasmaa

Reviewed by Ghania Shams Khan*

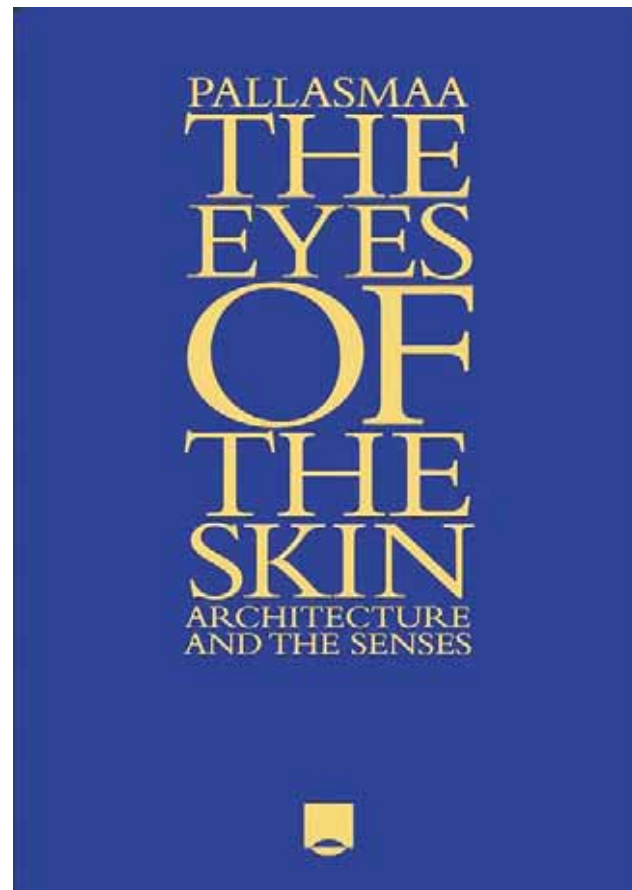
BOOK REVIEW

To know Pallasmaa is to enrich one's architectural perspective with the phenomenological side in theory and practice. Juhani Pallasmaa is a Finnish architect, who is also an academic and a critic. His practice is rooted in the Nordic architectural culture. But his thinking and theory can easily be applied to any region. His philosophy sits well with the diversity of contexts, uniting them in thinking through an embodied knowledge of spaces experienced and designed.

The book 'The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses' is an important text to bring attention to moments and details which in modern practices are somehow looked upon as tertiary details. But in the light of Pallasmaa's text, these are the details that are a primary way to understand and create spatial narratives. The book is divided into two parts. The first part is a critique by Pallasmaa on the visual regimes in architecture.

Taking support from philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Satre, Jacque Derrida, and more, he marks the ocular-centric perspectives that developed across the 20th century and the dangers of this visual hegemony. In the modern world, we perceive life through an 'image' only. In this era, the visual is given preference over other senses. Also due to the rapid technological advancements, a flurry of images and visuals is how we start to make up our own reality as well, evident in today's social media. A visual hegemony has aided the mass production of idealized and manipulated images which are fabricated purely from the ocular perspective.

Followed by this dominance of the eye and the vision, he translates this dominance into the loss of plasticity in architecture. With this term 'loss of plasticity' he brings forward the argument of traditional cultures. Every built within a tradition is embodied and guided through bodily wisdom. He mentions 'Indigenous environment clay and



mud architectures in various parts of the world seem to be born of the muscular and haptic senses more than the eye'. This statement can easily be identified in the mud architecture of villages of Thar and the indigenous wisdom, their living spaces embody. The curves and undulating adobe plaster surface of a *chaura* which signifies the lived experience in a form, stand as an example against the neat and meticulous details that satisfy the eye and the ocular senses only.

* Architect and Visiting Faculty, Department of Architecture and Planning, NED University of Engineering and Technology, Karachi. ghaniashamkhan@gmail.com

His text also places the departure from the plasticity of architecture with the Modernists. In the practices of Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and artist Laszlo Maholy-Nagy, modernism and its preference for visuals have taken strong root. Modernity approaches architecture through the sense of vision only as Le Corbusier says ‘Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light’. It confirms the ideology of the ‘architecture of the eye’ that developed so forth. This visual hegemony even translated into urban planning. A top-down view dictated cities, ignoring what kind of contextual relevance can a grid-like plan have in for example, South-Asian cities. Colonization brought a grid and radial plan into major cities as a way to surveil and create dominance. It is a play of the vision that ensured a ruling class. As Pallasmaa talks about this visual hegemony as a loss of plasticity in-built practices, in post-colonial times urban planning still favors the ‘idealizing and disembodied Cartesian eye of control and detachment’.

In the second part of his book, Pallasmaa talks about the embodied knowledge of space. He discusses the role of different senses in shaping our understanding of space as ‘sensory agglomerations’ using Aalto’s architecture as a case study here:

“I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square; my gaze unconsciously projects my body onto the facade of the cathedral, where it roams over the mouldings and contours, sensing the size of recesses and projections; my body weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, and my hand grasps the door pull as I enter the dark void behind. I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me.”

In this context, architecture is not just seen as a single image. It is not identified through nouns, but verbs. Spaces have muscular movements, where the design approach is located in the minute movements of these muscles. In the chapter ‘Vision and Hapticity’, he relates the sense of vision to the sense of touch. In this relationship, the space is not an end in itself. In engaging other senses it becomes a script of actions which ‘frames, articulates, structures, gives significance, relates, separates and unites, facilitates and prohibits.’ In looking at architecture through verbs, there is a blurring of purely functional objects. A tension is created between the utilitarian use and abstraction of space.

Throughout the book one understands the terrains of sensory experiences that help draw out the experience of a space. One cannot comprehend a whole architecture through hegemonic eyesight only and as primary. The tactile, auditory, and olfactory details are what define and ground any architectural or spatial practice. He also refers to Junichiro Tanizaki’s work ‘In Praise of Shadows’ which talks about sensing the architectural space in the Japanese context in the dark lacquer of a soup bowl. The levels of intimacy in sensing a space have been brought to the sense of taste to be engaged in understanding space. These sensory layers engage the whole human body with the architecture as illustrated in the chapter ‘The Body in the Centre’.

“Aalto’s architecture exhibits a muscular and haptic presence. It incorporates dislocations, skew confrontations, irregularities, and polyrhythms in order to arouse bodily, muscular, and haptic experiences. His elaborate surface texture and details, crafted for the hand, invite the sense of touch and create an atmosphere of intimacy and warmth. Instead of the disembodied Cartesian idealism of the Architecture of the eye, Aalto’s architecture is based on sensory realm. His buildings are not based on a single dominant concept or Gestalt; rather they are sensory agglomerations.”

Juhani Pallasmaa’s work and this book is a seminal text in understanding the critique of modernity through a phenomenological lens. The era with its scientific clarity reduced space to a visual subject only. The constant focus on utilitarian use, technological advancements, and the distancing from the sensory world has brought spatial practices to a point where the human body as a whole can never become grounded in space. But in the text reviewed, modernity finds its strongest critiques in the way a human body inhabits a space. The human does not experience the space as its surveyor, but he greets it, encounters it, and further explores it through the body and not just the eye. In contemporary practices, Juhani Pallasmaa is as much relevant to combat the visual regimes dominating architectural practices in order to understand our own vernacular relevance.