



# LEARNING TO BE 1

## Selfhood, Friendships, and the World

Consider this quote from one of my favorite architectural writers – the great Argentinian poet Jorge Luis Borges: “A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Over the years he fills a given surface with images of provinces and kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fish, rooms, instruments, heavenly bodies, and people. Shortly before he dies, he discovers that this patient labyrinth of lines is a drawing of his own face.”<sup>1</sup>

My favorite architecture books are not books on architecture or by architects; the most important architecture books in my library are novels, poems, and books on and by writers, artists, philosophers, and film directors, as well as books on the sciences – from biology and psychology to neuroscience and physics. These books are not about architecture as a separate discipline, but about houses, man-made spaces, places, and situations as frames of authentic life. In particular, biographies of film directors bring us especially close to describing the work of architects, as cinema is entangled with life, human situations, and actions in much the same way as architecture. Architecture books usually present buildings as estheticized objects, whereas literature, film, and paintings portray them as backgrounds and frames of lived and experienced life.

During my student years, I classified my books as architecture books and “other” books. After a few years of rather intense reading, I realized that my category of “other books” revealed essences of architecture better than the books written especially for the field. Soon, I understood that all books are books about architecture, as architecture is an inseparable part of the human condition and fate; we live in and through architecture, and architecture provides the most significant frames and horizons of experiencing and understanding the world and the human condition.

1

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Secret Books* (Stony Creek: Leetes Island Books, 1999), 7.

## 2

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993), 26.

Rilke makes a significant statement on the task of writing poetry, and his observation surely applies to architecture, as well as to all authentic works of art: “Verses are not simply feelings, they are experiences.”<sup>2</sup> Resounding this insight, the American philosopher John Dewey convincingly points out in his seminal book *Art as Experience* that a work of art emerges and exists through, and in, its individual experience. This surely also applies to architecture; and, in fact, one of Dewey’s examples is the experience of the Parthenon: “By common consent, the Parthenon is a great work of art. Yet, it has esthetic standing only as the work becomes an experience for a human being [ . . . ] Art is always the product in experience for a human being [ . . . ] Art is always the product in experience of an interaction of human beings with their environment. Architecture is a notable instance of the reciprocity of the results in this interaction [ . . . ] The reshaping of subsequent experience by architectural works is more direct and more extensive than in the case of any art [ . . . ] They not only influence the future, but they record and convey the past.”<sup>3</sup>

## 3

John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam’s: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 4–231.

In the world, we and our actions are always *placed*, and this *placeness* usually implies architecture in some form. The arts, in general, offer both dramatic and intimate views to the human condition; the art of architecture situates that human condition in the world.

As a student, I began to admire the touching artistic presentations of human figures in paintings, depicted as individuals or as groups of figures in a legendary or mythological context, or in an historical event, and then as an individual or as a group of figures in a room, a building, or an urban setting. For decades now, I have studied paintings by Giotto, Duccio di Buoninsegna, and other painters of the Siena School of the early Italian Renaissance. Time and again, in particular, the paintings of Fra Angelico have provided inspirational insight into the relationship between human beings and architecture. The Florentine artist’s depictions of the simultaneous presentations of exteriors and interiors are especially meaningful demonstrations of the continuum of the inner and outer worlds, the continuity of space, the complementarity of the inside and the outside, and the duality of the material and the mental.

Whenever I have wanted to gain inspiration for any design task, I hardly ever sought examples of contemporary architecture in comparable situations; almost always I have sought my inspiration in these early Renaissance painterly representations. In these paintings, buildings are depicted almost as human figures, as if they also had a capacity to breathe and speak. The equality and dialog between

the human figure and the architectural place are equally inspiring in historical iconic paintings, which I also often have studied to focus my perception and mindset for design work. The very same approach applies to cinema, as I have said previously, as an equally powerful art of the human condition and, in my view, the closest art form to architecture, related through the concept of existential, lived space. In my book entitled *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema*, I explore the central role of existential, lived space in both architecture and cinema and the parallels and interactions of cinematic and architectural space; these are seminal concepts for me, further elaborated in these reflections.<sup>4</sup> The relationship across time between the paintings of the early Renaissance and the highest achievements of modern cinema may seem distant or tenuous, but I perceive an important correspondence for anyone working in architecture.

Architecture is often understood and taught as a utilitarian and formal discipline outside of us – as something that is “out there” in a material, objective, and autonomous world. Additionally, in our quasi-rational era, the practice of architecture is increasingly seeking an objectified and externalized scientific grounding. Yet, I want to propose that the real, and perhaps the only, source of a poetic architectural sensibility and creative capacity is one’s selfhood – our own individual minds, our personal histories, and experiences – each of us as unique human stories and fates. To mold and cast our lives from the shapeless clay of our given individual conditions in the world is a human necessity, but to do so as architects and artists is a special circumstance and obligation.

In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke advises us: “In writing poetry, one is always aided and even carried away by the rhythm of exterior things; for the lyrical cadence is that of nature: of the waters, the wind, the night. But to write rhythmic prose one must go deep into oneself, and find the anonymous and multiple rhythm of the blood. Prose needs to be built like a cathedral; there one is truly without a name, without ambition, without help: on scaffoldings, alone with one’s consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> This is also the fate of the architect; as a maker of buildings, you are also alone “on scaffoldings, alone with your consciousness.” You must maintain your solitude in the middle of the complexities of life, surrounded by life and other people, and, I would add, as our work always takes place in a historical continuum, amid the accumulated life of all time. We need to be humble and courageous, at the same time, to acknowledge our work and to set ourselves to work in that cultural and temporal continuum.

## 4

Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema* (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Oy), 2002.

## 5

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (New York and London, W. W. Norton & Co., 1993).

## 6

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Revised edition, G.H. von Wright, ed. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 24e.

Ludwig Wittgenstein – one of the most significant philosophers of the last century – confesses: “Work in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things.”<sup>6</sup> The philosopher’s lesson is clear in extension for our work in architecture and design: architecture is fundamentally thinking, not necessarily conceptual and verbal thinking, but embodied, sensory, and existential thinking, thinking through one’s sense of being. Architecture is existential thinking and sensing human existence in the world – existence in space and time in general, but truly particular in place and situation. Architecture is also simultaneously a process of personal identification – a fusion of one’s own experiences and growing self-awareness with the constructed settings and situations in which that growth occurs. Architecture is being an individual in constant encounter with the world – the delicate sensing and felt awareness of being in the world.

## 7

Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

We normally assume that thinking is a purely cerebral activity of the brain, but this is a limited understanding, as several contemporary philosophers contend. Mark Johnson, among them, asserts that, “All thinking is embodied activity.”<sup>7</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, my favorite philosopher, argues this general proposition on behalf of artistic work writing,<sup>8</sup> “A painter takes his body with him. It is inconceivable that a bodiless mind could paint.” But it is even more impossible that a bodiless mind could conceive architecture, or even think about it, as architecture is directly engaged with our embodied existence. Architecture is a continuation and extension of our bodies and minds, memories, and imaginations. We live in the “flesh of the world,” to use Merleau-Ponty’s even more provocative expression. How could we think of architecture without our existential body that generates it and gives it all its dimensions and meanings? At its most abstract and poetic moment, architecture reifies our existence and domicile in the world, mediating between our existence and the world and between our earthly and cosmic realities. Architecture fuses us with the world in its substance – a substantiation shared by us and our structures and constructions.

## 8

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, James H. Edie, ed. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 162.

In my view, this realization of the embodiment of thought and our substantial presence in the world is the essence of the process of education: we learn to be both in the world and of the world. Information, both learned and acquired, and experiences and skills gradually condense around the students’ understanding of themselves, of their selfhood. The development of this selfhood is at the very core of learning, and only lessons that have become part of oneself are

useful in creative work. When gathering knowledge and experiences, we are simultaneously constructing both our world and our sense of self – our selfhood, that is, the significance of the mirror image in the Borges text with which I began this reflection. Our unconscious self-identity and understanding of selfhood, in relation to the natural, historical, cultural, social, and poetic worlds, is the sieve through which our experiences are filtered and evaluated.

Creative capacity does not arise from an external source as an imposed quality, as that would be only bound to echo what already exists, nor do the poetic and existential qualities of architecture arise from pure information or categorical knowledge. Information and knowledge are about what exists, but art and architecture are about what could be. We need knowledge for the technicalities, practicalities, and legalities of our work, but for the creative dimension, we need condensed and mature internalized understanding – what can only be called wisdom. This open possibility and invitation is essential in all creative works. To see and sense the nonexistent, we need wisdom. As Rilke maintains in one of his letters, “Art is not a little selective sample of the world, it is a transformation of the world, an endless transformation towards the good.”<sup>9</sup> Wisdom is always the ultimate goal of teaching, but always the most difficult goal to achieve because it requires a deep collaboration between the teacher and the student.

To say this more declaratively: information and knowledge are of little value in true creative work; only experiences and skills that have become integrated with one’s sense of being, one’s self-identity, are of real use in this search for artistic meaning and expression. Also, irrespective of your experiences and abilities, any new creative task always returns you back to the beginning to a new search for the means of expression. This is true even for those with great experience and knowledge. Once in the early 1980s, I dined with the great Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida – one of the most architectural of sculptors, and during the meal, he said: “I have never had any use of what I have done before when I begin to work on a new piece of sculpture.”<sup>10</sup> This is an expression of amazing humility and open-mindedness, from an exceptional sculptor in his own right, and also one who once collaborated on a book with the philosopher Martin Heidegger – a central figure in twentieth century thought.<sup>11</sup>

In one of his letters to his sculptor wife Clara Westhoff, Rilke memorably describes the solitary and even dangerous path of the artist: “After all, works of art are always the result of one’s having been in

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Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter to Jacob Baron Uexkull, Paris, August 19, 1909. *Rainer Maria Rilke, Hiljainen taiteen sisin: kirjeitä vuosilta 1900–1926* (The silent innermost core of art: letters 1900–1926), Liisa Enwald, ed. (Helsinki: TAI-teos, 1997), 41.

## 10

Private conversation at a dinner in Helsinki in 1987 between Chillida and the writer.

## 11

Martin Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum* (Erker-Verlag, 1969).

danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, to where no one can go any further. The further one goes, the more private, the more personal, the more singular an experience becomes, and the thing one is making is, finally, the necessary, irrepressible, and, as nearly as possible, definitive utterance of this singularity.”<sup>12</sup> The poet points out the fundamental loneliness and solitude of the true artist in this journey toward selfhood; so too must a student of architecture and design be prepared for this solitude, if she takes her calling seriously. A creative individual is simultaneously on a journey to an ever-expanding world of experience *and* to the silent solitude of herself.

## 12

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letter to Clara Westhoff*, op.cit., note 8.

Our selfhood also defines our relationship to other people, and our awareness of the limits of our knowledge and experience shapes the integrity of our interactions with others. Whenever I meet a colleague who behaves arrogantly, and deliberately wants to give the impression that he knows everything and is certain of his ways, I feel immediately, with certainty, this person does not even know the foundation of understanding: the significance of modesty and humility. He has not permitted the true character of his experiences to condense around his core of his selfhood, or for the “creative doubt” emerging from experience to soften this center of consciousness and eventually mature into wisdom. The more one knows, and the wider one’s perspective, the more subtle one’s senses and perceptions become, the deeper one’s understanding becomes, and the more humble one is bound to become. The more one knows, I propose, the more insecure and the more uncertain one becomes – and understandably and wisely so.

One of the most useless and valueless words in today’s professional jargon is “expert.” Joseph Brodsky – the Russia-born Nobel Laureate poet – expresses his ultimate doubt about the hubris of “expertise” in this way: “A craftsman does not collect expertise, he gathers uncertainties.”<sup>13</sup> When someone is named an expert in an interview or a debate, the title most often means that the person has an extremely narrow focus. True knowledge and experience expand the world and widen the horizon; these ways of thinking never narrow down or close the scope of available possibilities. This continuous expansion of possibilities, I propose, is the reason for a necessary, fundamental, and structural uncertainty in our acquisition of knowledge. You might have known something yesterday, but you do not know that so precisely anymore today, not to speak of tomorrow, because your field of experience has widened even in that

## 13

Joseph Brodsky, “Less than one,” *Less Than One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 17.

simple passage of time. Recently, for instance, I heard an accomplished physicist and cosmologist confess that as he began his studies decades ago, nearly 50% of the universe was assumed to be known, but today only less than 1% is expected to be known. No wonder cosmologists today predict that there can be an infinite number of universes, and indeed, instead of speaking of a *universe* in singular, they have introduced the notion of the *multiverse*.

As a student and young architect, I thought I knew well what a door is, or what a window is, but now after more than 60 years of practice, thinking, and writing, I do not know with certainty any longer. Each time the task of door or window presents itself, I need to redefine and reinvent these prosaic elements of construction because a window or a door is not a universal given or a standard thing. A window opening to a garden differs from the one opening to the street; a window with a mountain view differs fundamentally from the one that focuses on an apple tree in the orchard. As importantly, a door to a burial chapel has completely different connotations, requirements, and meanings than the one leading to a house or a grain store. Windows and doors, as all deep and authentic images in architecture, have their ontologies and their histories, and even today's generic glass wall needs to remember and dream of the historicity of the window. Meaningful works of architecture and art are not mere momentary images, inventions, or generic constructions. On the contrary, these constructions are condensations of artistic works and ideas across time and specific frameworks for the singular experiences of life. All meaningful works of art and architecture constitute the continuum of tradition.

I emphasize the value of modesty, but I also need to say firmly that only a humility connected with a sense of inner pride can be productive. You must be proud of your curiosity and open-mindedness, as well as your willingness to turn away from conventions and stereotypes. This is not a contradiction, but a necessary complementarity: you must become proud of your sincere humility, acquired through true experiences of life.

Mature selfhood is essentially a dialog with the world, with its historicity, cultures, and other individuals. Selfhood is a verb rather than a noun – an act of becoming rather than a defined or given destination, a desire and a longing rather than an objective condition. Architecture, likewise, is a verb that seeks to facilitate, condition, and mediate. Selfhood is the ground of human relationships and

friendships, as a mutual friendship is a relationship of separate, independent, and autonomous selves. Without complete independence, respect, and freedom, friendship turns suppressive. In my view, friendships form our most valuable emotive and mental capital in life. Friends create the human core of our world, and eventually we remember, know, understand, and feel our life-world through the capacities and sensibilities of our circle of intimate friends. True friends travel, read, and think on our behalf. In our solitary moments of work, they are our absent critics and advisors. We should cultivate our individual sense of selfhood by cultivating friendships as extensions of our own sensibilities, interests, and skills. Having a master cabinet maker as a friend demonstrates the skill and meaning of the hand and what it takes to make things well. We also learn and internalize the ethics of making through such friends. A skillful bronze caster friend will inevitably teach us the magic and alchemy of matter, a poet friend will concretize the reality of feeling and imagination and the true magic of words, a philosopher friend will teach us to think with clarity and subtlety, and a painter friend will assist us to see and understand the true realities beyond the sensory world.

I understand myself in my core as an educator, as a teacher. But as I use the infinitive verb “to teach,” I do not mean verbal or formal teaching. I am speaking of an approach toward teaching another simply but significantly through presence and behavior – a process providing a student the opportunities for unconscious identification and osmosis. I gained this insight from my longtime friend John Hejduk – the legendary dean of the School of Architecture at The Cooper Union in New York – who when asked what his teaching method was, answered “Osmosis, I teach through osmosis.”<sup>14</sup> Very simply, we simulate, echo, and absorb the personalities and characteristics of our friends, teachers, and heroes. Here, too, I should emphasize that we all need to have our heroes and models, at any age, across time. In this, I am no different from you.

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John Hejduk and David Shapiro, John Hejduk or the architect who drew angels, *Architecture and Urbanism*, 244, 1991, 59.

**15**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne’s Doubt,” *Sense and Non-Sense*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 19.

**16**

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *Little Prince* (Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1995).

While it is well-known that couples who have been married for many years begin to resemble and behave like each other, we also simulate and absorb physical environments and situations, natural and constructed, identifying with them, in a sense coming to resemble them in our inner selves. “Paul Cézanne’s landscapes make us feel how the world touches us,” Merleau-Ponty tells us.<sup>15</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the legendary early French aviator and poet, makes a stunning suggestion: “We do not see precisely with our eyes, we can see clearly only by our hearts.”<sup>16</sup>

Our friendships can also teach us the artistic virtues – the arts of the heart. I appreciate meeting my friend – the Finnish painter Tor Arne, who is 3 years older than me, because we speak about poetry, music, the ethical sense, and of the true human qualities and virtues. During the 60 years of our friendship, I have designed 11 humble studio projects for him, and he has taught me that the highest qualities in painting are not appearances as much as they are essences with an ethical echo. Our common ground is the belief that great paintings are evidence of how we see and comprehend the authentic aspects of the world. As the social psychiatrist Erich Fromm wrote remarkably in his book *Escape from Freedom*: “Beauty is not the opposite of the ugly, but of the false.”<sup>17</sup> The great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky even believed that “beauty will save the world.”<sup>18</sup> So do I: only beauty and sensitivity to beauty can save the world, and this is the grand task of the arts.

Magically, we can even make friends with great individuals who may have died decades or centuries before us and ask them cordially to become our mentors. If we are sensitive, perceptive, and brave enough, we may name Piero della Francesca, Johannes Vermeer, or Filippo Brunelleschi our personal teacher. I can say sincerely that Brunelleschi has been one of my teachers since my student years. His noble Foundling Hospital in Florence has been one of the strongest inspirations for me in architecture. The seemingly weightless poising of the architecture’s upper volume on the slender columns and graceful vaults of the portico below is an example of true architectural magic.

One of my closest friends was Tapio Wirkkala, the legendary Finnish designer, sculptor, and artist, a true genius of form, who was 21 years my senior. Age is not a factor in a true friendship, and I have had numerous friends both decisively older and younger than myself. Tapio often told me about his true teacher and mentor – Piero della Francesca, who was born in 1416 and died in 1492, 418 years before my friend’s birth. This is true friendship and genuine mentorship. We are all historical and evolutionary beings – in fact biologically and genetically we are millions of years old – and we can only be as wise and as good as our friends, those living and those long dead.

I have spoken about the significance of friendships for a person with a creative calling. But that advice would be one-sided without simultaneously emphasizing the meaning of isolation and solitude – a condition to which I referred earlier. Creative work is finally bound to take place in solitude and in inner mental silence. The French

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Erich Fromm,  
source unidentified.

18

Fyodor Dostoyevsky,  
source unidentified.

existentialist philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre wrote sitting in the restless activity of the cafés of Paris, but he must have had an exceptional capacity to silence the world around him in his mind and project an encompassing inner silence amid the constant social chatter and clink and clatter of glassware and dishes.

Correspondingly, great art always silences the world around us, and simultaneously our very soul. As I look at one of my favorite paintings – Giorgione’s enigmatic *Tempiesta* (The Tempest), in the Accademia Gallery in Venice, the world around me is totally silenced. There may well be hundreds of restless visitors in the museum space, but the painting’s aura silences the clamor of the crowd and places me alone with that emotive scene in total silence in contemplating a masterpiece of art in that gallery.

The resonances of Rilke’s letters to the young poet are instructive and inspirational in the search for selfhood and can be valued whether in the cause of writing poetry or in the cause of designing architecture. In his first letter to the young poet, Rilke advises: “You ask whether your verses are good [. . .] I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward, and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write, find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it denied you to write. This above all – ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: must I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple ‘I must’, then build your life according to this necessity; your life even its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and testimony to it.”<sup>19</sup> In his seventh letter to the young poet, Rilke writes further: “[. . .] It is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be a reason the more for us to do it.”<sup>20</sup> And, lastly in this regard, Rilke adds yet another question in his eighth letter: “Why do you want to shut out of your life any agitation, any pain, any melancholy, since you do not know what these states are working upon you?”<sup>21</sup>

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Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, transl. by M.D. Herter Norton (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993), 18–19.

**20**

Rainer Maria Rilke, *op.cit.*, 53.

**21**

Rainer Maria Rilke, *op.cit.*, 70.

If each time Rilke uses the word “write,” we substitute the word “design,” the meaning remains the same: instead of seeking external references, characteristics, and qualifications for creative work, search within yourself, your own mental world, your memories, and your dreams. In today’s educational approach, this essential inner

world of the student is usually disregarded; together with Rilke, I propose a countering approach – one emphasizing an intensely focused self-awareness. In his tenth and last letter to the younger poet, Rilke finally advises: “The stillness must be immense in which such sounds and movements have room, and when one thinks that to do it all the presence of the far-off sea comes chiming in as well, perhaps as the innermost tone in that prehistoric harmony, then one can only wish for you that you are confidently and patiently letting that lofty solitude work upon you, which is no more to be stricken out of your life [. . .].”<sup>22</sup>

22

Rainer Maria Rilke,  
op.cit., 76–77.