

Feeling at Home

Reflections on a Theme in Human Existence

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This essay is about the significance of the body for dwelling. Considering the body implies considering a concrete body, i.e. asking for the experiences embedded in it. Consequently, the body in consideration is, for example, gendered. The topic of dwelling takes Martin Heidegger's work on the hand as the point of departure and uses philosophical anthropology and Jacques Derrida's comments on Heidegger as inspiration to suggest that the relationship between the hand and thinking implies asking whose hands build places of dwelling. When dwelling is related to the body, we must also consider what concrete body is involved in building and dwelling. | *Keywords: Dwelling, Heidegger, Existence, Body, Building*

1. Introduction

The following reflects on dwelling related to our concrete bodily presence, beginning with insights from Martin Heidegger's (1954/1997) *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (Building Dwelling Thinking) where the body, in particular the hand, plays a central role between building and thinking. I will begin with asking whether the order of the title of his essay, where dwelling appears between building and thinking, is trivial, reflecting that we first build to then dwell and lastly think; or if it is of significance because dwelling connects building and thinking.

To make this connection we use the hand. Obviously, we use our hands to build a place of dwelling. However, as we learn from Heidegger, dwelling is not a matter of taking up residence but of our existence, we must say that to build is to knowingly form human existence. It is to make something present, and making present relates to thinking. With Jacques Derrida (1983; 1988) we should ask whether 'Heidegger's hand' also reveals the importance of asking who the hand building a dwelling place belongs to. Heidegger seems to neglect this aspect, something a view to philosophical anthropology (Gehlen, 1950/2004; Plessner, 1976) can help emphasising the importance of. Thus, we should say that our body is not merely central for dwelling because we are

bodily present in places of dwelling. With our bodily interaction and our use of our hands, we design and construct dwelling places, i.e. places where we are at home because they correspond to our human existence.

In dwelling we find an aspect of human existence made present in the concrete, built environment. I believe the insight we acquire from Heidegger with a view to Derrida and philosophical anthropology is of how our hands and body form a constitutive connecting point between us and the world which, consequently, makes it clear how important it is also to pay attention to whose hands and body we speak of, i.e. to their history and gender.

2. The Order of a Title

To transform a space into a space for dwelling seems to require that we build. This is how Heidegger opens his essay. The English dwelling, used to translate the German *wohnen*, stresses that it is not merely where one seeks shelter and stays but where one has a home, lives and feels at home. I inhabit [*bewohne*] a building yet I do not necessarily dwell [*wohne*] in my apartment [*Wohnung*] (Heidegger, 1954/1997, p. 139; 1971/2001, p. 144). The place where I dwell is one where I am satisfied [*zufrieden*, omitted in the English translation] because I find peace [*Friede*]; where I am protected from danger (Heidegger, 1954/1997, p. 143; 1971/2001, p. 147). We must here notice the connotations in English and German differ which is a challenge one encounters when translating Heidegger.

Dwelling is more than housing which was a pressing concern six years after WWII when Heidegger wrote the essay. If we take a leap in time, the Syrian architect Marwa Al-Sabouni, witnessing the destruction of her home city Homs as well as a large part of Syria in another war, wonders about the difference between housing and home and she asks what home is:

The question has haunted me for a long time, and the war in my country has taken me through several stages in search of an answer. At the very moment when I imagine I have arrived at a response, the letters blur before my eyes and become illegible. The truth is that I had no idea what home was before I saw the people of my country killing each other over its definition (Al-Sabouni, 2016, p. 118).

Her answer is not unlike what we should think with Heidegger: “The home was not just a place to stay in; it was a guarantee of existence. I own a home, therefore I exist” (Al-Sabouni, 2016, pp. 118f.).

To own a place is often to make it one's own. Even though Heidegger relates to building and most of us do not build but buy, I think we can allow building to imply making a place one of our own regardless of how we transform and furnish it.

Building is not related to dwelling as a mere means to an end. The order of building and dwelling is not simply that first we build, then we dwell. Language tells us that building is already dwelling (Heidegger, 1971/2001, p. 144). To create a space [*Raum*] is to make room for [*einräumen*] something (Heidegger, 1971/2001, p. 152; 1954/1997, p. 149), and we make space for

something that matters to us. When trees are cut to create a glade in the forest, the space is arranged for something which appears in it and with it. Dwelling is not something happening between building and thinking, “man is insofar as he *dwells*” (Heidegger, 1971/2001, p. 145; 1954/1997, p. 141, italics in original; “is” in German is *modus coniunctivus*), and thinking in relation to building and dwelling is the attempt of understanding what building and dwelling is. Thinking is not the plan outlined for building, and it is not the rational conduct of constructing according to it. Thinking is to act with skills. Thinking makes something apparent which is different from thinking about something. Thinking in its strict sense is not the rules of conjunction enabling us to say something about something; it is to reflect on what saying something tells us about the world and us.

Heidegger dedicates another lecture to what thinking is (1954/1984) which gives us important clues about dwelling. The question asked, ‘what is called thinking?’, can be asked in more ways. One is: “What is it that calls us into thinking?” (*Was ist es, das uns in das Denken ruft?*) (Heidegger, 1968, p. 114; 1954/1984, p. 79). It is essential to understand its double meaning. From thinking comes a call to think, but there is also something calling us in the thinking, i.e. thinking is trying to tell us something; and “us” is an accusative and not a dative case (Heidegger, 1954/1984, p. 80, omitted in the English translation).

Our topic is dwelling and not thinking, but they are inseparable in our belonging to and feeling home. We reach with our hands into our environment to grasp or take [*nehmen*] what we are part of, and we use our reason which “is the perception [*Vernehmen*] of what is” (Heidegger, 1968, p. 61; 1954/1984, p. 27). We work towards being able to catch [*greifen*] in concepts [*Begriffe*] the significance of what there is. Essential for our world relation is the use of our hands. Heidegger can say thinking is a handiwork [*Handwerk*] (1954/1984, p. 51; 1968, p. 17 uses handicraft, I chose to follow Derrida 1988). “All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking” (Heidegger, 1968, p. 17) – *en passant* we notice that thinking is not an act of grasping in concept [*Be-greifen*] (Heidegger, 1954/1984, p. 128; 1968, p. 221). Regarding our world relation the hand connects us to our environment and makes us handle it in ways that enable us to form it and create our place of dwelling.

We must ask whether thinking as a handiwork is a metaphor used to explain thinking as a work of the mind, or if we have a world-relation that we maintain with our hands. Perhaps maintain, coming from *manu tenere*, from holding in the hand, reveals itself more clearly in French with the hand, *main*, in *maintenir*. Do we become human because the hand is an organ with which we intervene into and form the environment to liberate us from physical dependencies? Or is it because we are humans we have hands and are able to form our environment into a place for dwelling?

The latter is more plausible with Heidegger in mind, hence thinking as handiwork cannot be a metaphorical description. The role the hands play between our concrete physical presences and our interventions into the world

beyond our immediate range reveals our hands are no mere organs but hold our world relation.

3. The Hand and the World

A careful reader of Heidegger is Derrida who dedicates an essay to Heidegger's hand (1988). Here we read that "[t]he hand cannot be spoken about without speaking of technics" (Derrida, 1988, p. 169). Derrida relates to Heidegger saying thinking is a handiwork, Heidegger's example is of a cabinet maker, and we notice this is not a matter of a craftsman's skills in using the tools for making but to accord "himself with the forms that sleep in the wood as it enters man's dwelling" (Derrida, 1988, p. 170).

Let us turn to the most familiar place in Heidegger's writings when it comes to hand and tool, §15 in *Being and Time*. A handling use of things is essentially for learning about things we encounter in our world (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 63). We should keep the relation between building and dwelling in mind when we read how the tool, like the notorious hammer, is not of interest as an object, but for how it withdraws itself to be at hand for the work produced that "bears the totality of references in which useful things are encountered" (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 65). We produce and build to transform the environment and to integrate both it and us into a meaningful totality. Like building is already dwelling, making and producing already imply a meaningful use.

We must pay attention to the hand's role between our concrete presence and our interventions into the world. Let us take a step backwards from the making of cabinets and pay attention to when we began to use our hands. Perhaps it reveals something about how we handle our environment and what dwelling is.

The child must learn it has hands. To begin with, it does not use its hands with purpose, it does not relate to things in its environment and it does not pursue purposes but it moves its hands aimlessly and repetitively (Plessner, 1976, p. 35; cf. Gehlen, 1950/2004, p. 165). Such use of the hands would be considered a sign of mental weakening in an adult, but this is how the child learns that it has hands to touch, grasp and reach out with. To begin with, the child only has hands in an anatomical sense; it learns it can use them in ways that are of significance and make a significant impact on the environment. It is a learning process of considerable length because the human child, contrary to the animals, has weak instincts and makes indeterminate movements because it is not determined for a specific existence like the animal (Gehlen, 1950/2004, pp. 42ff.). Instead, it has a potential for defining its own role having a yet not determined existence (Gehlen, 1950/2004, p. 146; Plessner, 1976, p. 30). Our world is open exactly because of weak instincts and organs that are not determined for particular uses – specialisation is a loss of opportunities (Gehlen, 1950/2004, pp. 86f.). Consequently, we must learn to use our organs and train our senses which takes considerable time and we must determine what is handed over to us as undetermined. We must engage in and learn how to handle things and not only mechanically respond to them.

The child embarks on a long educational journey and we often focus only on the result. However, it is important to remember where this process takes its beginning and how it relates to our bodily existence. We must avoid what Annette Baier calls “the usual philosophical amnesia of the plain facts of gestation and breastfeeding” and of the direction of the child’s development where it slowly “learns to do things for itself, rather than always with the parent and with the parent’s presence and assistance” (Baier, 1997, p. 30). We learn to become individuals in so far we are with others, self-perception is no solitude process but it requires others; and an essential part of this process is our bodily experiences (Plessner, 1976, pp. 61ff.).

It should be a plausible suggestion that this process of embodied learning forms a fundamental background for all future learning. Thus, the hand’s role in the connection between one’s presence and the environment is not neutral. Like building is already dwelling, our handling of the world is already a world interpretation which reveals, to the attentive participant, what the world is and what one’s existence is, i.e. what dwelling is.

4. Whose Hand?

Body and hands formed throughout years since childhood reflect the environment. Since our aimless first movements we have become skilled in touching and holding something – between clutching the handle of the hammer and driving in a nail passes a considerable time of bodily training. We have also learned restrictions as to touching one’s body and another’s body; moral codes prevent us from some forms of self-touching in public, and they outline rules for who we can touch and where. However, this learning also conceals interpretations we act along without awareness. One such interpretation is what technical devices provide us with. Derrida mentions how Heidegger believes writing should be done by hand and not with a typewriter because it is a machine that destroys the relation between thinking, hand, and word, reducing the word “to a simple means of transport” (Derrida, 1988, p. 179). Technical instruments mediate our acts. The problem, according to Heidegger, is not their mediation, not that we use levers and buttons to handle machines; machines are means for what we wish to do and we have no desire for returning to “a rustic idyll” (Heidegger, 1968, p. 23). The problem is that machines are inserted between us and the ‘forms that sleep in the wood as it enters man’s dwelling’. Machines are used to produce and reproduce what is required for us to achieve goals; they serve our interests but they also distance us from encountering “what is near [*das Nahe*]” (Heidegger, 1968, p. 129; 1954/1984, p. 88, a noun in German). Machines may serve well for producing housing, and it may answer an urgent need of providing protection, but it is not the same to say one has an address and one has a home.

Building requires the use of hands and one such hand is the architect’s. Peter Zumthor writes, with respect to Heidegger, that his “wide sense of living and thinking in places and spaces, contains an exact reference to what reality means to me as an architect” (Zumthor, 2006, p. 37). And Al-Sabouni says: “Home is the goal of architecture” (Al-Sabouni, 2016, p. 125). But does the

architect's hand resemble the hand with the hammer? Is it compromised like the hand using a typewriter?

The architect draws with the hand like the philosopher writes. Today's architect most likely also draws aided by software like computer aided design (CAD). Is the architect's hand then out of touch with the material, perhaps led by technics when the programs used are based on pre-established parameters? Is the move from pen to typewriter and computer a loss of hands, hence of thinking? I believe Zumthor reflects on difficulties similar to Heidegger's concern for losing touch with the forms that sleeps in the wood as it enters man's dwelling when he wishes to "build houses like Kaurismäki makes films" where he shows the actors "in a light that lets us sense their dignity, and their secrets" (Zumthor, 2006, p. 53). His goal is to build for human living and not merely to construct houses.

Is it impossible with a computer or is it just difficult? After all, it is not the machines that make our age one of technics; it is the opposite (Heidegger, 1968, p. 24). But Heidegger makes us aware of how we maintain a world-relation with our hands and in our hands. If we follow him, should we not also be aware of other traces found in the hands? Taking inspiration from Derrida (1988, p. 182) we can ask if the hand is the furniture carpenter's making a cabinet, the mason's building a house, the philosopher's writing, the architect's drawing? If the role of the hand is significant, will it not also be significant whose hand it is? If it is a male, German, philosopher's hand or a female, Syrian, architect's? Hand and body are important for Heidegger, but what body do we speak of? As Derrida (1983) points out, *Dasein* has a body, and there is no body without gender, so is it not an absenteeism not to ask what gender uses the hand? Why should Heidegger care about the hand if we are without a body? If thinking as handiwork is no metaphor but a world-relation we maintain with the hands that are forming our environment into a place for dwelling, hands are different. So are dwellers.

The child's body and hand are formed by the world it interacts with. The child learns how to grasp a stone and to throw it, and the girl learns how she throws differently from the boy (Young, 1980). We learn from the culture we are formed by, and it comes to appear to us as obvious, as if it could not be otherwise. It appears to us as a second nature (Gehlen, 1950/2004, p. 38) and, consequently, it can make us blind to the privileges we acquire when growing up and others are excluded from (Ahmed, 2007).

Buildings are important components in this forming and educational process. We spend most of our lives in them and consequently, they have a manifest bodily influence on us. Another architect, Bernard Tschumi, tells us that "[a]ny relationship between a building and its users is one of violence, for any use means the intrusion of a human body into a given space, the intrusion of one order into another" (Tschumi, 1996, p. 122). Our "bodies rush against the carefully established rules of architectural thought" (Tschumi, 1996, p. 123). Sara Ahmed points out that when space takes shape "by being orientated around some bodies" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157) we must pay attention to what

these bodies are – like their gender and colour, and to the institutionalised positions of power embedded in the space causing confrontations between space and bodies, especially when the bodies in the space are different from those the space was orientated around.

5. Conclusion

Dwelling reveals human existence. Building is already dwelling and to build is to make apparent how we are bodily related to the world which is a relation endowed with structures of power and interwoven with bodily differences. When we intervene into and form our environment into a place for dwelling we use our hands, and we use them not as mere instruments for executing deliberate plans. Our hands hold our world relation.

Heidegger is not the most prominent philosopher of the body; nevertheless, he provides us with important insight regarding the body when he clarifies the role of the hand in thinking, i.e. in making something apparent to us when we are also attentive ‘listening’ to what it tells us. Our hands, and our bodily relations to the environment in total, are formed in interaction, and this interaction originates with the infant. We learn to use our hands, and they come to embed a cultural practice.

Both philosophical anthropology and phenomenological studies stress the role of the body. The child learns how to act through interacting with others, and the acquired patterns of acting are sedimented in the infant's body memory (Fuchs, 2016, p. 201). Bodily interaction is decisive for our world-relation and for social cognition (Gallagher, 2017); we interact through bodily reactions, through emotions, and through physical interventions such as those performed with the hands. “In social contacts, our lived bodies become extended such that they are intertwined with those of others in a way that prevents any conceptual or ontological reduction to isolated entities” (Fuchs, 2016, p. 205). What is here a matter of social cognition is just as much a matter of our bodily relation to the built environment, and in this concrete bodily interaction appears the question inspired by Derrida: what body interacts? Of, for instance, what gender and colour is it?

One final reflection is that an awareness towards such questions in particular is a task for aesthetics because aesthetics is concerned with how something appears in forms that affect us. Affective forms provide us with a relation to ourselves and to the world. Consequently, dwelling in an aesthetic perspective draws attention to an aspect of human existence made present in the concrete, built environment, i.e. to a concrete aspect of how we maintain, administer and think about our existence.

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