Instead of being mere utilitarian shelters, architectural constructions have since the beginning of the art of building mediated between the world and men, macrocosm and microcosm, gods and mortals. Architecture has significantly contributed to the human experience and understanding of the world. Buildings have been metaphysical and mental constructions, spatial mandalas of sorts, at the same time that they have performed their practical tasks. This observation does not apply to constructions of high cultures only as also the countless vernacular building traditions contain mental functions in the village and house structures as well as daily patterns of life from the Bororo and Rendile to the Dogon, as anthropologists have revealed. While the “primitives” constructed their physical settings, they also constructed and concretised their cosmogony, mental world and social order.

Rudolf Wittkower describes this metaphysical aspiration in Renaissance architecture: “The belief in the correspondence of macrocosm and microcosm, in the harmonic structure of the universe, in the comprehension of god through the mathematical symbols of centre, circle and sphere—all these closely related ideas which had their roots in antiquity, and belonged to undisputed tenets of medieval philosophy and theology, acquired new life in the Renaissance.”(1) This spiritual mediation took place through deliberate symbolization, the metaphoric use of geometry and proportional harmony which both sought to connect the sphere of human life with the harmony of universe.

It is rather disturbing to realize that ever since the forceful emergence of rationality and secularisation during the 17th century, architecture has practically abandoned its originary cosmic and mythical task. The art of building, the existentially most strongly grounded of the art forms, has most usually turned into instrumental utility
and aesthetics without deliberate metaphysical concerns. In fact, architecture has thus discarded its originary content.

While architecture is taught, practiced and evaluated today as an instrumental, rational and aesthetic practice, a profound architect is bound to approach his work in existential terms, in other words, to regard his/her building as a mediation between the world, the cultural domain and the human mind. The timeless and explicit task of architecture has curiously turned into an unconscious and personal aspiration of the dedicated architect, instead of being part of the explicit cultural commission.

“How would the painter or poet express anything other than his encounter with the world?”, Maurice Merleau-Ponty asks (2), and this encounter is equally the core of the architect’s expression. The poet, painter, musician and architect alike express and articulate “how the world touches us”, as Merleau-Ponty beautifully characterizes the effect of Cézanne’s paintings (3).

A few years ago I had the chance of spending a day in the Poli House (2003-2005), located on a dizzyingly high and steep rocky shore of the Pacific Ocean near Concepción in Chile (4). This cubic concrete structure with its poché walls that contain all the services from stairways to toilets and kitchen facilities to storage spaces, kept me awake through most of the night. I felt that I occupied a metaphysical instrument, a meditation object, which activated and re-organized my relationship with the world. It made the world familiar and mysterious, intimate and sublime, at the same time. The elimination of the practical aspects of the house through locating them in the back stage zone of the invisible poché made the rooms simultaneously exceptionally pure and mysterious. Elimination of the practicalities and connecting elements of stairs and corridors, gave the impression of an Annunciation, as if I had magically appeared in the space without a process of physical arrival as the angel in the countless paintings of the biblical theme. The flocks of sea birds flying below the level of the windows further contributed to the feeling of suspension and altered gravity. The Poli House seemed to be about the opposite experiences of gravity and flying, weight and weightlessness. I recalled Alvar Aalto’s view that works of art always need to succeed in doing the impossible; to unify the opposites. The irregularly placed openings through the
thick walls revealed cinematic views of the outside, simultaneously fragmenting and unifying the image of the world. At the same time, the openings turned into elevated miniaturized stages; every now and then my wife miraculously appeared in one of the balcony/window stages against the sky through the invisible stairways concealed in the opaqueness of the thick wall.

I remember having had strong recollections of Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s utopian projects for the spherical rural caretaker’s house and the cylindrical house for the supervisors of the source of the Loue with a waterfall gushing through the house. These are houses that project a powerful metaphysical ambience in addition to their residential purpose.

The cube appeared monolithic with its carved-out, cavelike interior spaces. This image reminded me of the stone structures of Petra and Lalibela, carved out of the bed rock. I also recall thinking of Eduardo Chillida’s sculptures carved in blocks of rock, such as the illuminated Goethe’s House (1975), carved in semi-transparent alabaster. The architectural ideas of the architect couple often border on highly abstracted artistic concepts; Mauricio Pezo’s own textural paintings are evidence of the interaction of artistic and architectural images in their imagination and work.

A profound architectural experience is always an exchange; I enter the space and the space enters me, I leave part of myself in the building and the building becomes part of my self-image and travels with me forever. I carry an entire museum of architecture, collected around the world, in my mind as a consequence of my countless travels. I have often returned back to the Poli House in my imagination, and my memory brings back the roar of the wind and the ocean below, the creak of the birds and the majestic horizon line of the Pacific. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out: “We come to see not the work of art, but the world according to the art work." (5)

The work of Mauricio Pezo and Sofía von Ellrichshausen aspires to introduce elements of mystery, the unexpected and unknown back to contemporary architectural imagery which has become too transparent, predictable and instrumental. Buildings of the post-modern era have lost their opacity, mystery and shadow. They have lost their echo in the deep historicity and memory of the
collective human mind. The architect couple aspires to bring back the second level of reality, the realm of myths, dreams and imagination. They also survey various ways of strengthening the artistic autonomy and authority of architectural structures.

These architects deliberately explore the secret power of basic geometric configurations and archetypal images: “We were extending our research on “spatial structures”; an attempt to identify those elementary mental figures that we occupy to depict spatial relations (e.g. crossed, central, peripheral, etc.) and the way in which we can translate those figures into architectural representations.”(6) This recent confession reveals a concern for the loss of mental meaning in the architecture of the consumer era. This interest in the archetypal and deep syntax of architecture echoes Louis I. Kahn’s passionate exploration of the power of geometry half a century earlier.

Sir Colin St. John Wilson points out the irresistible deep force of architecture and physical settings concealed in the very historicity of the human minds: “It is as if I am being manipulated by some subliminal code, not to be translated into words, which acts directly on the nervous system and imagination, at the same time stirring intimations of meaning with vivid spatial experience as though they were one thing. It is my belief that the code acts so directly and vividly upon us because it is strangely familiar; it is in fact the first language we ever learned, long before words, and which is now recalled to us through art, which alone holds the key to revive it…”.(7)

The frequent feeling of meaninglessness today arises from the loss of this “first language”, the embodied and mental echo of the mythical dimensions of construction. Paul Valéry searches this deep meaning through his poetic words in his dialogue “Eupalinos, or the Architect”, and he points out the temporal depth dimension of art by his words: “An artist is worth a thousand centuries.” (8) The poet seems to refer both to the timelessness of profound art and its ability to maintain and reveal the layering of time.

From the smallest of their projects, the XYZ Pavilions in Concepción (2001), to the series of thick wall houses with different layouts and plan geometries, and the
recent museum, office and hotel schemes, the projects of Pezo von Ellrichshausen emanate a combined sense of clarity and mystery, regularity and maze, contemporaneity and historicity.

A frequent theme in their projects is the image of the maze and the experience of getting lost. The 120 doors pavilion in Concepción (2003) is an example of the duality of conceptual simplicity, and experiential complexity in their work; the 10 x 10 regular grid turns into a labyrinth of the Minotaurus, or more precisely, the maze of doors brings to mind the astonishing Egyptian labyrinth of King Amenemhet III that contained three thousand rooms. The Forest Pavilion in Santiago (2008) is another maze image, a geometricized forest. Even their project for the Parr House in Chiguayante (2006-2008) is a labyrinthine village within an enclosing perimeter.

The Field Garden in Ithaca (New York, USA, 2009) is a variation of the regular grid that is made irregular by the slight movements of the terrain and existing foot paths. The Hipocentro Memorial in Concepción (2010) transforms the maze image into a pulsating fractal or botanical figure that fuses curving and linear alignments and suggests numerous radial paths out rather than the frustration of losing one’s sense of exit.

Regardless of the basic clarity of the scheme, the Memory Museum in Santiago (2008) also turns into an experiential maze by means of its repeated volumetric spatial units and column grid. At the same time the project brings in mind J. N. L. Durand’s system of architectural elements and his rationalized theoretical schemes for various architectural functions in the early 19th century. With its façade system the project also turns into a metaphor for an architectural filing system, and the image of a computerized memory system.

Their recent projects contain a host of other motifs. Instead of a maze, the project for the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago (2006) presents a reversal; the glass floor of the existing Classicist building becomes the sky and source of light for the several floors of underground galleries. The CAF Building in Caracas (Venezuela, 2008) creates a forceful image of tectonic stacking, an image that seems unified and individualized at the same time. The Hotel Indigo project in Santiago (2009) projects somewhat classicizing façades that imply regularity,
authority, order and depth. The façade balances between the imagery of exposed frame and punctured wall. This project makes one think of the geometric devices and thick facades of some of the recent projects of David Chipperfield.

Some of the new residential projects of Pezo von Ellrichshausen, such as Arco House in Concepción (2010-2011), Endo House in Machali (2010-) and Abba House in Cabrero (2011-) seem to study the potential of Miesian Classicism and the ordered constructivism of the Case Study houses of the late 1940s and early 1950s in California. These projects also express an emphasized structural order akin to Tadao Ando’s early residential projects.

The Cien House in Concepción (2009-2010) also deviates from the theme of the thick wall and presents the strategy of a defensive tower, again echoing projects of the French Utopians; even the symmetry of the internal enfilade of the spatial organization brings to mind classicist ideals. Solo House in Cretas (Teruel, Spain, 2009-) poses yet another centralized image of a strongly cantilevered square on a rather closed base stretching out towards views and the horizon.

It seems evident that after the intense series of thick wall houses that brought them international fame, Mauricio Pezo and Sofia von Ellrichshausen are now decisively widening their approach and testing various alternative strategies to provide meaning and experiential weight to contemporary construction. By doing so, they are joining the determined circle of architects of resistance around the world, who are defending the dignified art of architecture against the cultural and mental erosion of value and meaning which constantly threatens architecture in our surreally materialist, self-centered and quasi-rational culture.

“In the fusion of place and soul, the soul is as much a container of place as place is a container of soul, and both are susceptible to the same forces of ‘destruction’.”(9)
Notes


4 The authors of the house are Mauricio Pezo, Sofía von Ellrichshausen with the collaboration of the artists Eduardo Meissner and Rosmarie Prim.


6 Mauricio Pezo’s and Sofía von Ellrichshausen’s letter to the author dated May 25, 2011.

