

Hugo Kükelhaus: Constructing Places of Perception - a Utopia?

The meaning of the German word '*Wahrnehmung*' (perception) is essentially two-fold: it unifies physical sensation (*Wahrnehmung*) and thought (*Wahrnehmen*); it signifies both the process and the result of perception (*Wahrnehmung* and *Wahrnahme*), it is about becoming aware of something and having insight.

Language considers perception (*Wahrnehmen*) as an action. Merely occupying one's senses and perceptual capabilities is not the same as truly perceiving, in the same way that language generally requires interaction, i.e. 'taking' (*nehmen*) to be a form of 'giving' and 'giving' to be a form of 'taking'.

Because of this and because of industrial society that has made people stop giving and serving (their fellow man), but instead, from early childhood, encouraged them to "take and pocket it", people's characteristic ability and need to procreate in order to be able to live is woefully unlikely to be fulfilled. There is no point bemoaning this. And there is absolutely no sense in getting 'scientists' and scholars look at this sore problem. What makes sense, however, is the attitude of the man who, even if he knows that the world stops turning tomorrow, plants a tree and settles his debts today, nevertheless. Of the man who, without asking for the effect and the benefit of it, concerns himself with the way life is perceived in the present, most especially where it is most current, and where it is in a state of germination and blossoming, i.e. among children and young adults.

I

Imagine you were to walk a long distance down a dead straight, even and brightly illuminated concrete road that had no obstacles. It is easy to understand that after four or five kilometres of such monotonous walking you are exhausted. However, it is also easy to see that covering the same distance walking through a forest would make a clear difference. There the paths are not straight but winding. It goes up and down across country. The path may be wet and slippery. The forest is dark. You have to keep balancing your way across. You are all eyes and ears; your lungs fill with fresh air as you breathe in: there are so many scents especially from the ground; there is birdsong, there are flowers. The after-effect of your walk through the forest will be: you are refreshed; you feel like a new person.

II

Picture yourself in a dark room surrounded by black walls. Imagine there is a dazzlingly lit, great white sphere hanging from the ceiling. It is not difficult to understand that, under these conditions, you perceive the sphere as a flat disc. But it makes a difference if the same sphere appears out of the dark triggered by a dim light coming from the side. It is easy to understand that it will then hardly be possible not to perceive the body in the shape of a sphere.

III

As children it gave us great pleasure to balance on railway tracks, beams and ropes. Doing this we learnt that you can only keep your balance by fixing your gaze on the far distant horizon rather than the rail, despite the danger of losing sight of where to place your next step. With a little practice you could walk for as long as you wished along a narrow track and what is more, you could just as easily do this over dangerous drops.

These three examples have something of great significance in common. From the first example we conclude that what exhausts us is monotony-induced uniformity depriving us of our complex physical and perceptual capabilities and powers. When these are stimulated, we are replenished and refreshed. The best way to stimulate them is by using the challenge we

face in striving to overcome the obstacles placed in our path that involve numerous risks and put us off. It is the absence or insufficiency of this challenge which “un-does” us, or drains us, an absence or insufficiency which is caused and forced upon us by the elimination of variety in our surroundings or the establishment of uniformity.

In the second example, the principle underlying the movements in the first example is applied to the process of seeing. The unpredictability of the forest path in the first example is as much a challenge to our senses as are the dim beams of light sent out from sections of the sphere and the resulting shade with its vague contours in the zone unexposed to the light. Walking along the forest path, we used all our senses, muscles and joints together to achieve a maximum of positive energy necessary for our body's complete equilibrium. Likewise, in the second example, our eyes are challenged because they cannot see the whole sphere. However, using their full potential, they conclude that there is the whole sphere or indeed the sphere as a whole. Doing this, however, we perceive ourselves as a whole, for it is not our eyes that see but it is us being ‘all eyes’, it is us who see and whose minds perceive. It is not the ear that hears but it is us who are ‘all ears’. It is not the body that moves but it is the person that moves; it is the moving and moved human being.

The third example shows the condition that must be fulfilled when you embark on risky ventures (of whatever nature, to do with seeing, walking, hearing, or life itself) and when you rise to a challenge (of whatever nature...). To put it in a nutshell, you must overcome the fear of taking the next step by trusting the distance and relying on the expanses and the distant horizon with every left or right step you take: Every successful move you make will be the successful counterbalance of a fall. (Incidentally this is a matter of common experience when people ski, ride a bike or drive a car.) The root of all exciting challenges is change, the abundance of differences and the variety through which we can perceive ourselves and the world in which we live as an integrated whole.

The light is the light only because there is darkness (that which is not light). An eye is an eye only in so far as it helps us perceive this relation of reciprocity, this dialectic. We discover the truth of the concept of ‘broad’ only by considering its opposite ‘narrow’. Likewise, we learn about warmth by comparing it with cold; about height as it relates to depth; about top as it relates to bottom; hill and dale; left and right. It is relations, conditions, connections that turn things into what they are.

However, what will become of this meaningful whole, this interactive system in which the parts are determined by the whole and the whole is determined by its parts, if it is deliberately prevented from unfolding and developing its potential in a place where it is nearest, where it is embodied, where it affects and concerns us most of all: in our *Leiblichkeit* (corporeity), our organs, organ systems and physical processes? There have been several distinct attempts by scientists and scholars to study the effects of isolating humans from any form of life-enhancing and life-preserving challenges.

For example, a German emperor from the Hohenstaufen dynasty believed that humans were innately endowed with common sense and language so that both characteristics would develop automatically. Therefore, he had orphans grow up in total isolation without any sense of direction given to them from the outside world. The result was that the children's minds were dulled.

Another example is: when space technology was still in its infancy, scientists in the USA conducted experiments in extreme conditions to try and measure the physiological reaction of human organs when exposed to zero stress and when their function is no longer required. (The test persons were to spend long periods in (vibration) isolation chambers in complete darkness and silence under the condition of simulated weightlessness, with the room temperature kept at body temperature, etc.) The tests had to be stopped just after a quarter of an hour because they may have resulted in life-threatening damage. Disturbances included humoral and hormonal disorders; both the control system of the hormonal balance

failed and the cybernetic balance could not be maintained.) Above all, the monitoring and control function of the organism was waning resulting in vasoconstriction and tumours. You could just as well say that the economic, social and political structures, virtually represented by the organism, were in a state of disorder.

At its beginning, five or six generations ago (in our age, at the dawn of our world this is), the industrial age was striving for a replacement of physical labour with labour-saving machines and to achieve an increase in labour productivity in all areas. However, this came at a price: the generation of the necessary energy by breaking up elements into atoms held together in molecules by the sharing of electrons. We have gone to the extreme of generating nuclear energy by fission of heavy atomic nuclei. That is the end or the beginning of where we are today. A point of which Einstein said, "*It (the unleashing of atomic power) has changed everything, except our way of thinking.*"

It all began with the naïve idea "*to reduce the burden of physical labour*". But what has become of it? We have seen that, in life in general, in the human organism in particular, everything is connected to everything else. Therefore, industrialisation, initially focused on the human body (physical labour), has not remained confined to it. This can be confirmed by examining what generations worldwide have experienced over the past 150 years. Our mental and intellectual powers, our brains have long since been sucked into the undertow of the beginning. This has resulted in the appearance (of credibility) given by the phenomena experienced (and imagined) in the above-mentioned three arbitrary examples and described and depicted in the specific human experiments. The difference is that it does not concern the human being as an individual, it, moreover, concerns the human race, the earth's population. However, since the concept of everything being connected to everything else is also true and more than ever so for the relationship between human beings and their environment formed and controlled by them. According to both the technological and the industrial demands, this environment, synonymous with the whole *body of the earth*, is also affected by the above phenomena.

The human organ that plays an important role in human consciousness and abstraction is the cerebral cortex, the outer layer of the cerebrum which developed last in the process of evolution. "*Give me a place to stand and rest my lever on, and I can move the Earth,*" is the gist of what Archimedes said. Given a point outside the Earth to stand on and a lever with a long arm- and, with the Earth attached to the lever's short arm, it shall be possible for a man to move the Earth. This proves that a system can only be controlled (or universally accepted) from a distance (or a point outside). According to logic a system cannot prove itself. For both the human being as an individual and the human race this implies that the outer layer of the cerebrum, which developed last, gives one the capacity to distance oneself from one's self (or allows the 'making- oneself- subject- of -one's- self' from a distance) This intellectual capacity comes into effect through the attempt to extract and remove something from a context by chipping off the context and dissolving it.

The brain stem, which human beings and some of the lowest forms of life have in common, is the nucleus from which, in the history of organic life, the human brain evolved in the course of billions of years. The human brain has the capacity of abstract thought, the faculty of self-consciousness, i.e. the sense of being aware of its experiences and of itself as a conscious being. Man has not fully developed the potential of his genotype. The brainstem as the central trunk of the mammalian brain is genetically determined from the beginning of embryonic life, from the union of a single sperm with an egg, cell division and cluster cell growth through a well-nigh divine natural law of controlling patterns of cell symmetry, polarity, number, oscillation and gravitation.

The aim of cults and religion was to integrate and relate the two essential poles of human genesis: the capacities for abstraction and for rationality. That worked up to the point when the ideological concept underlying this bond was bound (or condemned-as myths have it) to

grow weaker. The release of atomic energy in Hiroshima (1945) revealed the degree of weakness: to expect from the organ capable of abstracting the retrieval of a conglomerate fit for life is an illusion which is what makes this organ design objectives and future plans in all areas (science, economy, society, education, politics...). Pent-up pressure for information and the drain on people caused by disparate activities and organizations subsumed by a single authority (centralism) ensue. It is all about controlling the capacity for controlling. This, however, is not the result of endeavours to do with objectives and plans but the automatic product of a form of behaviour.

“Learning is remembering.” (Plato) Cognition is re-cognition. This philosophical statement is based on the fact that growth and development in time as well as disembodiment from organic life take place in the form of a gradual recollection of initially set up patterns anchored in our memory (comparable to a cybernetic cycle). Not only with regard to physical spatiality but also with regard to the rhythm of time is everything connected to everything else so that spatiality is determined by time and time is determined by spatiality.

The evolution of embryos shows that organs such as hands, the heart, eyes, the cerebral cortex developed through differentiation, through cells continuing to grow and taking on specific functions with the brain as the coordinating centre. The cerebellum controls the execution of the movement of the hand and the fingers. Likewise, seeing is part of a complex vegetative process. The midbrain (encephalon) contains cells concerned in eye movements; the embryo can hear because his heart beat and the distinctive rhythm of his mother's are correlated. Accordingly, the cerebral cortex, the outer layer of the cerebrum that has the faculty of abstraction requires the brain as a complex unity of mind, the sensuous manifestation and rational spirituality that has the faculty of remembering.

To do this, we need to curb our future-oriented plans and ventures, we need to keep a tighter rein on our endeavours to concentrate on the present which we shape and which shapes our behaviour from beginning to end. What is nearest is the present. I am the nearest. I can touch what is nearest. I can make out the size grabbing hold of it and putting my arms around it. A property of the present is its smallness; its potential for germination, its weakness. Its delicacy and non-violence. Our behaviour towards the present is just like that of a mother towards her child; that of a bird brooding over its eggs. The question is not, “What things can be undertaken (*‘unternehmen’*)?”, but we need to take hold of, feel and comprehend (*wahrnehmen: per capere*) the things happening. We need to perceive. We need to preserve and take care (*wahren*). The question is not what we can do but what we feel is happening. We have to nurture our nature.

Our orientation towards ‘later’, towards the future, must be controlled by what is happening now. It is characteristic of the dynamics of embryonic development that the organs do not develop for the purpose of taking on a specific function later on. Unlike machines, our organs do not form for functions; they develop through functions as functions. No ‘later’ without a ‘former’ as its beginning and end.

Therefore, in accordance with the mechanisms of organ formation, it makes no sense to contemplate the future effect of things before you contemplate what is necessary and required here and now, i.e. at present; it makes no sense to be focused on the abundance of great things yet to come. What makes sense is the attitude of the man who, even if he knows that the world stops turning tomorrow, plants a tree; has his own house built; settles his debts today, nevertheless. The attitude of such a man- provided this attitude is alive in an individual or a community consisting of individuals – will ensure that institutions are built which respond to the needs of man's sensuous elements as part of the unity of mind ; which allow perception according to its two-fold meaning of becoming aware and having insight, of perceiving and preserving.

These are institutions that make us remember the present. Institutions young and old people alike enter to help their eyes use their natural abilities (cf. our experience of the sphere);

where they see meaning with nothing but their own eyes. Institutions that have an appropriate room of sounds: in which gongs and drums can be hit, keys or chords can be struck, string instruments be strummed to produce sounds and rhythm, which – according to the extensive effectiveness of sounds- will stimulate the senses in that their sound waves resonate in different parts of the body (the head, the neck, the chest, the stomach...) at different frequencies and intensities.

Such a building of propagated sound should have an open workshop in which natural sounds can be produced. In public institutions there should be stone or wood floors, ceramic, tile floors, carpets made of natural materials, sisal floor coverings of various textures and high or low, tight or loose relief designs which, if you walked on them barefoot, would give you a sensation similar to walking barefoot along a sandy beach. We need areas in parks that have playground equipment such as (pendulum) swings, seesaws, rotating discs, spheres to practise balancing and coordination skills.

We need open and monitored spaces where the visitors, walking, sitting, lying or standing, experience the elements fire, water, air; and the characteristic light in the evening twilight periods resulting from atmospheric scattering. Carved into the stone above the entrance to Delphi temple was written:

“Man, come to know thyself.”

“Man, know thyself.”

“Man: be thyself.”

We need a new Delphi. We need to build it ourselves. We need to learn for ourselves that our concept of building will be embodied by the building. We need to recruit volunteers willing to build themselves up while building a building. They will be instructed by specialists in homes for senior citizens and build on their expertise. We need public buildings sending back an echo. Just like the words we shouted as children, echoing back from tunnels, well shafts, forests, the sound we produced playing the alphorn was reflected off the mountains and taught us: “You are not alone!”

We need places in which man comes to know himself, comes to perceive and recognize the ‘inner nature’ of his physical and sensual being through the ‘outer nature’ of physics, mechanics, as well as the geological and meteorological conditions and the biosphere. We need public buildings that give us reasonable opportunities to handle with care the phenomena through which we gain direct insight into the laws of polarity, of symmetry, periodicity, and of magnetism. We need such Delphic buildings from which we can learn how to design kindergarten buildings, children’s, old people’s, retirement homes for the mentally ill, schools, sanatoriums, factories, office buildings, universities and not least family homes worth living in. He who learns from the nature of his body and genotype will, in accordance with his knowledge of the nature of life in this world, on this earth, be capable of making history.

It is an illusion to think that you can remedy the world’s shortcomings in the same way as you repair the damage caused by industrial technology. You need to awaken your mind’s full potential, your innate consciousness that responds to the world as effectively as your organs and organ systems do in line with their physical nature.

We need restaurants where we can enjoy our meal and use our senses in harmony with a sensibly preserved nature.

Hugo Kükelhaus

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