

TU Delft, AR 2810: Philosophy of the image and architecture (2009-2010) by Patrick Healy.

## The dark side of Architecture

What is the magic in curtains?



Figure 1 Phoenix studio (2008)

by Doris Nielen, 1257684, January 2010, Delft, The Netherlands.

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**What is the magic in curtains?** Why is it that as soon as the walls of a room are covered with curtains it feels more free, it gets grandeur, a comfortable kind of rich feeling like when inside a theatre? Curtains consist of folds which makes parts of the curtain more visible than others; light hits the fabric but not everywhere with the same intensity. The curtain, as opposed to a flat wall, has a dark side. This dark side is the aspect which happened to catch my fascination.

The curtains in a theatre create a second layer to the wall. The space between the curtain and the wall is used to create the wings at the side of the stage where the actors hide in suspense before they have to perform on stage. When the walls of a theatre are covered with curtains it is as if the minds of the people can travel freely around the room, not shattered by a large straight wall, but rather softly caught in the darkness of the curtains and bounced back into the room where they can grow. The curtains soften the hard surfaces and edges of the space, as in nature there are no hard borders. The theatre is a stage for art, a place where people can come up with new ideas and awareness's. This is why curtains are ideally suited there; they give a grandeur yet free feeling, at the same time they offer great acoustic performance during the show.

In front of a window curtains are a second layer within the separation of the outside and the inside. Due to the curtain the window can be visually closed, the curtain is a shell within the transition. During the day the window gives the inhabitants a view to the outside and the entrance of light into the room. In the evening, due to the lights inside, the window becomes an opening that makes people on the street able to see what happens inside the house. It's nice to walk in the street and try to look at the different interiors inside houses; people are curious about each other's way of living. However the inhabitants prefer not to be in a shop-window and curtains can give them that privacy.

The direction of a room is mostly determined by the placement of the window, where the light enters the space. In the evening when the curtains close, the direction of the space changes. The window no longer determines the direction of the space and it turns more inwards, to the center, the fireplace. The curtains make the home a protected area within which people can slumber by the fire, dream and curtain off the outside world until tomorrow. In these times, the center position often has been taken over by the television and the world still enters the home through it in the evening, but as it is a screen nothing has to be done with and it can be switched off whenever it is desired. The house is still a protected place where to come to rest, in part thanks to the curtain.

Curtains can be used inside a room, creating flexible architecture which can change a space regarding the needs of the people at the time. Curtains offer the possibility to create 'in between spaces'. This 'in between space' created by curtains are often used by children playing hide and seek. Aldo van Eyck states in 1960 concerning his design of a orphanage in Amsterdam about this 'in between space'; architecture needs spaces for in between spaces, between polarities (big-small, inside-outside, light-dark, movement-tranquility, part-whole, open-closed, individual-community and stable-changing) to create a space to appeal to feelings. Since feelings are not black and white, architecture should not be either. (van Eyck, 1960: p 343-346)

In order to find out what architecture should look like, there is need to take a closer look at the role of the designer. Nearly everything around us, since they day one is born, is designed. Even nature itself, at least in Europe, is shaped in time by humans who try to destroy or preserve it. The forests Europeans walk in are mostly fields of lumber, planted and maintained by humans. Among practitioners of organic architecture there is a common believe that there is a relation between the feelings and behavior of human beings and their environment. Regarding this aspect an architect, an industrial designer or a landscape architect has a huge responsibility in what the world will look like, how people will live, think and maybe, in time, even how their consciousness and behavior develops.

Designers need to provide the things people need to develop themselves. People have basic needs in living. One of the most important is the need for shelter, protection against rain, wind and cold. In order to make this sheltered place as comfortable as possible there are other demands, such as daylight and insulation. Beside these basic needs, there are mental needs as well. There is the need for a place to call 'home'; a place to call your own and decorate in your own way, with the objects and furniture that make the inhabitant feel comfortable. A house reflects the identity of people. In bookcases books are displayed which have not been read, just to show the inhabitants interests. People show a part of their identity with their interior. For the need of identity however an architect can contribute. People can choose an architect with a style that fits the identity they like to present.

The last aspects to mention, for the fulfilling of human needs, are the ones where the architect becomes most important. Their needs are about shaping the relationship of inside and outside space, about the light and dark, the transitions, the relationships between rooms, the relationship of the room within the house and on top of these aspects, there is the need for the side of the shadow. It is valuable to have both the light and dark represented within the object of the design, the house or the public building. The dark is what gives architecture its poetry, the poetry of the curtain.

The side of the shadow of architecture is well represented in old houses. Old houses often have a rich quality caused by several things; first there is the refinement of the detailing; old houses had many ornaments in for example the masonry and in woodwork, such as doors and staircases. Second there is the magic of discovering new things, secret places; an empty room in the attic, a little door that had not been noticed before or a beautiful leaded window. The third element that gives the old house its quality is the life that has been around it for such a long time, the incidents in time, the memories which are carried by the house. Camille Mauclair stated in 1933 that a house is not finished until people have been born and died there, until it is populated and hallowed with memories. (Mauclair, 1933: p 235)

Gaston Bachelard wrote in 1957 about the poetics in a house. He claims that due to the way humans live in houses, the image of the house has become the topography of the intimate 'being'. The most important attributes of human beings, attributes with the most original bond of connection, reveal in the most primitive function of living. The house shelters and protects the dreamer. The places people have dreamed in join humans for the rest of their lives, the houses of our past are within us ever lasting. For the knowledge of intimacy the localization is more important than the determination of dates. This is why a house needs roots, it needs space around it, it needs verticality, it needs a cellar and it needs to shudder in a thunderstorm. (Bachelard, 1957: p 310-313)

Comparing an old house with the modern family houses of today there is a big difference, the new houses miss a lot of this mysterious quality. This phenomenon shows due to several factors. One part is because time has not left its traces yet, the house has not aged yet. And another is due to the price of labour which has increased immensely over time. This results in the fact that there is little detailing in the modern house.

Another thing is the different use of spaces. The pitched roof, which in the past was cold, dark and sheer, was used for storage. At the same time it was a place of great adventure. Here one could find, especially as a child, all kinds of hidden secrets; there was room to play. Nowadays, thanks to new building technologies, insulation, dormers and skylights, the attic has been made usable as living space. This new usable space is valuable. Families need more space than in the past, every child nowadays has its own bedroom and parents have the possibility to work at home more often. The attic could, for example, be an extra bedroom or a study room. It might even be questioned why the pitched roof still exists, since the space beneath a flat roof, will be even more usable. It is a melancholic longing to the past, to the pictures of Anton Pieck, figure 2. At the same time it still is the easiest way to drain away water and, especially in northern countries, snow. Living beneath a pitched roof gives a special quality to the space; the atmosphere of the attic enters the bedroom, study or even living room.



**Figure 2 Anton Pieck, Holland, Hattem, 19th century.**

While in the modern single family houses the function of the attic has changed, the atmosphere of the place still gives us a nice feeling, it reminds us of the attic in our grandmother's house. Even if every attic used as an attic, will disappear, and a new born child will not have the memory of it anymore, the place still has a special atmosphere. It is because of its position, because of the beams and the feeling of being close to the sky, being able to hear the rain fall down on the roof and the whisper of the wind.

The same development of the attic has happened with the cellar. In the past it was a dark and cold place, even in summer, vegetables and other provisions were stored and spiders and mice lived their lives. These old cellars have now become suitable for living as well. By making the ground floor a little bit higher, a basement with the entrance of light from above is made possible and due to building development, the danger of the basement being flooded with ground water has reduced. In the cellar, although it has lost its original function, there is a special atmosphere as well, the feeling of being in the ground, the more tempered temperature and the view on the street from below. Aside from the attic and the cellar there are some other playful places in the old house, such as the place underneath the stairs, the pantry and the shed in the garden. Although the atmospheres have

survived and there has become much more usable space, there is a loss of adventure in the house. The places where children love to play the most are gone. The places that give them the possibility of not being under the eyes of the parents for a moment, playing with dolls, build a hut and to develop their own identity.

Then there is the modern phenomenon of huge buildings with one floor houses placed on top of each other: the flat. The elements described have completely disappeared in the flat; there is no cellar anymore, no pitched roof and no staircases. With the loss of these elements there is also the loss of the shadow side of the curtain. The dark place, the useless place which gives a house quality, which gives it space, the space everyone but especially children need. Living in a flat with children, what to do, hang a lot of curtains? Camille Mauclair wrote about the new phenomenon of flats appearing in Paris in 1933, translated from Dutch:

'I could never live in such boxes with bad acoustics, all with the same international system like domino stones. (...) There is no intimacy inside; it's bright and clear without the mystery of the shadow which fulfills every object with magic. (...) In this sterile world one could not die, it would not be like a natural death but like dying inside a clinic. (...) Inside there is no place for loving or suffering. (...) One would not know how to die there. There is no soul. There is thought about everything besides this.' (Mauclair, 1933: p 234-235)

A reaction on the introduction of functionalist flats came in 1946 by Asger Jorn. He positioned himself against the rationalism of Le Corbusier and states about him; instead of concerning about life he occupies himself with the concern of logic, everything besides is ignored. Everything that cannot be explained he makes into a shame. Jorn states rationalism is an enemy to the human being. Chaos, he says, means living, the fear of it sets the human being away from the elementary joys of life. These according to him are not 'sun, light and green trees', but the possibility of building a house, using it to exploit creative powers and talents, for the joy of the inhabitant and their environment. Not the view from a high storey on the tops of the trees but an active relationship with nature. Space for the most expressive and shaping form of life; spontaneity. (Jorn, 1946: p 268-271)

The resistance that Mauclair and Jorn felt against flats is nowadays still tangible, but it has no use anymore. Flats are nowadays completely intertwined in society, a lot of them have been build and it's just not possible to simply turn them all down. There has to be thought about how to take care of them, how to act when renovation projects occur and if new ones need to build new houses, what to do to make this concept a more livable one, a more human and a more durable one. It is better for people and for the environment. Seeing the dark side will make us able to make a step in the right direction.

Architects should not be afraid to make 'useless' spaces, the 'useless' space may even be the most special places in a building. It is not only valuable for houses but also public buildings can do a lot with 'useless' spaces. Over time these places will get their use, there is no need to put effort into the space getting used. In an office or a school it might be the place where a teenager gets his first kiss, the place where one could separate themselves from the group for a while, the place to shed a tear or make a little dance of joy, not for the boss or teacher to be seen. It could also be the place where sly things happen. A boss of a company might not want this, but it will make his building livable. The building cannot be completely controlled anymore, which might be needed to prevent it from becoming oppressive.

There are two different things: the 'useless' space which is 'left over' space and the space for which it is not clear yet what use it will get. These are both valuable. The 'useless' space can be as described (the cellar, the attic and the place beneath the stairs), but these are all places which cannot be re-introduced within a flat. For this theme everybody would live in a house with its own

ground floor with a cellar and a roof, but this is not very reasonable. These 'useless' spaces can be found in more than just these elements. For example, they can be found in a space between rooms, or in spaces within the transition, between the outside and the inside: the window. They can also be found with creative use of curtains. Balconies should not be economized and places should be made for flowers to grow.

Figure 3 shows an example on how, in a modern way, one could create 'in between' spaces and private places. By enlarging the thickness of the outside wall with closets, a place to sit is introduced. Because it's position in a flat, high above the ground and with the next flat at a proper distance, there is a lot of privacy. The curtain can be closed and in the wall there is privacy within which a child can play or an adult can quietly read a book without being disturbed. This is just one example, but there are many possibilities.

This new creative way of thinking about space could increasingly enrich today's architecture into a more livable, human architecture. A house does not have to be big, but there is always need for space. Space to hide, space for secrets, space for the joys of life, space for spontaneity: space to live.



**Figure 3** Curtained off sitting window

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#### Image sources:

- Figure 1; Phoenix studio (2008). <http://www.themidnightphoenix.org/theatre.jpg> (08-01-2010)
- Figure 2; Nationale Spoorwegen (2010). *Image of Anton Pieck* ; <http://www.eropuit.nl/uitje/musea/AntonPieckMuseum/>, Utrecht (NL): Nationale Spoorwegen. (05-01-2010)
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