

Dalibor Vesely and The Primacy of Orality

For someone fortunate enough to have been Dalibor Vesely's student, it is probably impossible not to feel that some manner of propitious destiny was at work. Dalibor's thought always appeared to his interlocutors with the force of certainty, as the clearest embodiment of an incandescent *alétheia*, in the ephemeral present of seminars. These spoken words have marked and often guided my academic and research work – with a force that no one simply reading his words out of a book can comprehend.

I came from Mexico City to Colchester in 1973. I was 23 years old -- with a professional degree in "architectural engineering" (basically architectural training with a technical emphasis), little professional and life experience, and yet with sincere questions about the cultural significance of architecture. Only later was I to realize that my questions, back then ill-defined in terms of an appropriate "style" or "space concepts," strongly resonated with my teacher's long-standing concerns. In my case, these questions were paradoxically propitiated by a very defective architectural education. My schooling, unabashedly functionalistic despite some expressed social interests, revealed to me the inadequacies of any sort of architectural practice that would not be able to respond to the manifold and rich cultural heritage of the hybrid hispano-meso-american cultures that constitute modern Mexico. I already suspected that a more responsible practice, however, could not be a simple formal historicism: I was committed to modernity and this created perplexing problems; so I concluded that I had to study much more seriously before I could be an architect. I realized that I needed to understand the philosophical origins of technology and its relationship to architectural ideas. The question was how to articulate the problem and connect it to practice. I groped around for some answers, reading all I could find, perhaps most importantly the vitalistic philosophy of Jose Ortega y Gasset that opened doors to existentialism, phenomenology and the importance of history. But enormous gaps needed to be filled.

I found the Essex MA course described in a few lines, buried in a massive catalogue I consulted at the British Council offices in Mexico City. I recognized Joseph Rykwert's name as the author of familiar books, but the second instructor, Dalibor Vesely was unknown to me, only qualified in the catalogue by his interest in phenomenology. I took my chances and landed in Colchester, utterly disoriented but hopeful. Dalibor's first assignment, as if conceived specifically for me, was to research Husserl's concept of the crisis of European science. I was at first terribly put off by Husserl's prose -- so different from the smooth language of my beloved Ortega. But only a few weeks into the Master's course, I started to realize the unbelievable treasure that had been granted to me. With the help of Dalibor's brilliant interpretations of Husserl, followed by Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, in a few months I had my life work cut out for me. During the following years I devoted most of my waking hours to document the transformation of the uses of geometry and proportion in architecture, from their symbolic applications in pre-modern, Renaissance and Baroque theories, to their functionalization in the work of Durand and his contemporaries. This became my doctoral dissertation, helping me articulate how and why modernist architecture had become disconnected from its cultural roots. Eventually it also became a point of departure for my attempts at articulating possibilities for contemporary practice beyond the crisis, through hermeneutics, engaging problems of representation, ethics, and more recently, Romantic philosophy and the concept of *Stimmung*. Each and every time, my work has found resonance with Dalibor's concern for architecture as a communicative praxis.

Perhaps some among us have a more reasoned (or even critical) account of how our teacher opened doors. My own account is deeply emotional. The gestural precision of his language was

perhaps his greatest gift to me; a model for education privileging embodied, oral transmission that I have always sought to emulate as a teacher. The truth is he wasn't even my official supervisor. He unselfishly volunteered his time, and yet his advice was crucial for my work. He unwittingly provided the structure of my dissertation: which became my first book after many rewritings (*Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*). I saw him more regularly after I moved to London from Colchester, between 1974 and 1977, and after that, unfortunately, only in rare occasions, visiting Cambridge, and in the International World Phenomenology and Architecture Conferences for which he was an inspiration. During my time in London we met over coffee, or beer and Indian food, while we were both trying to cope with important personal upheavals. The communication was often cryptic. He would point at something, usually a sector of cultural history that needed studying from my angle like "gardens," or "mechanics," with a list of authors, and I would "do it," not even completely sure of what I was looking for. He certainly knew, and that gave me assurance. The result was an unusual, terribly ambitious dissertation that inevitably raised questions for examiners. Yet nothing in my life has given me more satisfaction than following his guidance. For the first time I felt I was truly learning, responding to questions that truly mattered to me, and grasping something about the most authentic tradition of architecture.

After I left London in 1977 Dalibor sporadically offered wise words about my research. Though I was generally shy about calling on him, we discussed Gadamer when he became friends with the great German philosopher. In a few instances he gave me precise advice -- he suggested that I read Walter Ong when I was struggling with Derrida's influence on North American theory, and more recently Leo Spitzer, whose work on the etymological origins of *Stimmung* became central for my latest book. I invariably felt that his advice opened new paths for my academic development. I had the honour of dedicating my last book to him.

The model of the Essex MA course, eventually exported to Cambridge, bringing together a careful reading of primary sources of architectural history (Joseph Rykwert's contribution to the course) and Dalibor's discussions on the philosophy of architecture, were a guide for the post-professional Master's program that I founded at McGill. The McGill course included an experimental design component and the reading lists of the courses eventually diverged; my interest in the Baroque and the 18th century had an impact, as has my recent concern for neuroscience. Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, however, are always present. The McGill course is still strong and continues attracting Master's and PhD students from all over the world.

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