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The Dance of Disassembling and Gathering

This book explores the significance of recent continental theories for planning, architecture, and urban design. As I began this project, I realized that it would involve significant variations and disagreements. I understood that the often contentious positions led to very different practical implications for critical research and practice. Powerful thinkers such as Heidegger and Derrida would help us make sense of the realm of high technology that produces the huge landscapes of transportation systems and at the same time aspatial information networks. Foucault and Eliade would show us how to appreciate and to change or preserve the ordinary environments, both beautiful and ugly, that too often are overlooked because we take them for granted. Working out these alternative environmental interpretations by applying the theories to houses and hallways, villages and campgrounds, museums and conservatories was as lively as expected.

This subject matter is complex, to say the least. That is why we have problems. It is hard to know what you are doing or need to do. Trying to figure out what deconstruction, post-structuralism, and hermeneutics are, what difference they make, much less how to apply them or whether to approve or descry them, is in itself a big job.

As with the Berlin wall, it is hard to understand the sudden collapse of the established disciplinary boundaries, the radical subversion of what institutions had enforced for hundreds of years (of course, there is a rear guard working to repair and bolster those structures). It is hard to fathom the fascinating cross-traffic among philosophy, literary theory, history, geography, anthropology, and the professional practices of psychiatry, architecture, planning, urban design, and law. The interest in non-discursive practices intertwines with studies of discursive formations. Here emerges a new sort of cultural heterotopia, a postmodern, post-Freudian, postcolonial, and post-Marxist bazaar of exchange.

It is difficult to try to plan and design and make sense out of the environments that are emerging through new buildings with “the plumbing on the outside” or with their elements all askew, or through credit systems with, apparently, randomly shaped and located transaction machines and, somewhere, data glowing on display screens before unknown managers. Simultaneous with exploring these new technologies and ways of living there is a “counter” surge to reembrace local and regional traditions that specific cultural groups have shared. People advocate returning to buildings that have recognizable and interesting forms such as roofs that look like roofs, rooms that we can use, towns that have a balance of intelligible private and public space, and fields and gardens that are ecologically and symbolically sustainable.

Similarly, while many would privilege the house and rootedness, others are restless, seeking a nomadic, mobile form of belonging that alternates satisfying places for staying and periods of lingering with the choice and change associated with the road and open-ended identity and possibilities.¹ As Karsten Harries observes, the challenge is to critique our lives and world and “to make our building more thoughtful,” which can only be done if we manage to avoid the misleading and dangerous nostalgia for what has “perished”—as opposed to what endures and “continues to speak to us with an immediacy.” He argues, “The world presupposed by such [nostalgic] building not only lies behind us, but we cannot responsibly wish for its return. . . . Authenticity today demands a yes to the still uncertain promise of our future and that includes a more wholehearted yes to technology than allowed by Heidegger’s own broken ‘yes’ and ‘no’.”²

What are the necessary critiques, justified criteria, and appropriate responses? Where are they to be found? Essaying this territory is my central task. Among the routes that weave across the emerging post-structural landscape, one that is especially interesting goes from American problems and environments over to Continental theory and then comes back to applications in the American scene. I frequent this passage way because here the major strands of my work and interests converge.³ Passing over to and back from others’ perspectives is beneficial because it dissipates smug and judgmental attitudes by promoting a new tolerance and understanding of differences as well as fresh insights into what was at home all along.

After almost thirty years of trying to learn how to do hermeneutics (which, generally, is simply called the theory and practice of interpretation), I was able to come full circle, back from the long journey of interpreting texts to interpret the natural and built world.⁴ In thinking through the relationships among the natural and humanly made aspects of the world, culture, language, and texts, *the essays took up the old, previously suppressed movement of hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics not only distinguishes, it also helps join

things that belong together. Accordingly, it has shuttled back and forth between texts and the world for over two thousand years.⁵

Initially, hermeneutics was a way to understand “profane” and “sacred” texts and a created world. In classical antiquity, Greek and Jewish thinkers, encountering the great myths and stories of their or each others’ past, wanted to find and salvage a useful moral sense or spiritual meaning in what, though it conflicted with their beliefs, nonetheless seemed to be profound.⁶ The real development of the approach, however, was for the purpose of finding a way to interpret what God had said and written in The Book. The Bible, so the account goes, was important because whereas once humans had understood directly the meaning of the world given by God when He created it, after humans sinned we lost that relation and ability. So God gave a second and indirect key for understanding or reading the world by giving us the Bible.

In contrast, the humanly acquired knowledge that philosophy and the other sciences could give us, though actual, was understood as little more than darkness. As the Franciscan St. Bonaventure said in the thirteenth century:

Man before sin had complete knowledge of created things and by this knowledge he was led to God, to praise, adore and love Him: for this was the only purpose of creatures and thus through man they were united to God. But man fell, and having lost this knowledge, there was no one to bring things back to God. Therefore this book, the world, became incomprehensible; the key to its understanding was lost. Hence another book was necessary by which man might be enlightened to grasp the metaphorical meaning of things. This book is Sacred Scripture, which again places before our eyes the analogies and metaphorical properties of the things written in the book of the world. This book of Scripture restores to creatures, so to speak, their voice by which they might make their Lord known, praised and loved.⁷

The Bible put into human language a more or less explicit gloss on the meaning of things: how they came to be, how they are to be used, what we are to believe, and especially how we are to act and to what we may look forward. In order to live in the world in a loving way and for the sake of saving our immortal souls, humans needed to interpret the Bible and thereby the cosmos. What could matter more?⁸

While it was the philosophically and theologically sophisticated who discerned the fine-grained senses of scripture and thus creation, the basic interpretation was available to everyone since it was transmitted by ordinary language and shared symbols. Not only monastery rituals and university lectures, but sermons and morality plays and visual phenomena such as sculpture and stained-glass windows on cathedrals spread and maintained the understanding.

Then a turn occurred. Though derived from the tradition that one could fathom the meaning of things, modern science became powerful—and exclusive—by successfully contending that the real meaning of phenomena could not be found in the written or spoken *word*, but only through abstraction that reduced phenomena to univocal concepts understood *mathematically*.

In 1623, three hundred and fifty years after Bonaventure, Galileo would write,

Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.⁹

Of course, there had been a previous mathematical tradition from the ancient East and the Greek world that had run parallel to the literary one. But, this old mathematics became as obsolete as the other kinds of texts in the era of the new mathematics and science. The new mathematics did not work with geometry toward constructed or physical bodies such as carefully drawn Euclidean figures, models of circular planetary motion, or harmoniously proportioned temples. Rather, it reduced bodies to conceptual mass points (Galileo) and operated with relational notations, as seen in the absorption of the old geometry into analytic geometry, that is, into algebra (Descartes).¹⁰

With the powerful gains of modern science and technology there thus was a simultaneous loss. Not everyone could understand the world through this new mathematics; even fewer could actually carry out the procedures themselves, which were much harder than using ordinary language. So, while there were specialists in both the ancient and modern traditions, in modern mathematical science one could not really translate or accurately disseminate understanding into the vernacular. Luckily, our souls did not depend on the faultless operations of the experts—though soon thereafter, large numbers of people ceased to believe in the existence of the soul. In any case, the complex, ambiguous languageful interpretation of the spiritual, literary, and human dimensions of the world went in one direction and the univocal, clear and distinct method of interpreting physical matter in another, though not without clashing. In the end, of course, the sciences eclipsed the humanities and arts; the qualitative yielded to the quantitative.

The fruit of mathematical science has been harvested in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the phenomenal heavens and earth and the modern classical conceptions of space and matter have given way to a macro and micro universe understood through non-Euclidean, n -dimensional geometry, through space-time relativity, and through incredible nuclear and electronic information technology. But, some of the harvest is bitter. Not only is the world reduced to mathematical abstractions, and substantial dimensions of "nature" lost in the process, but so too is the human sphere. Hence the acrimonious relation between the hard and soft sciences where "pretenders" such as sociology, psychology, and linguistics strive for the precision and results—*not to mention power, prestige, and funding for research*—of physics and chemistry. Hence the assumption that the scientific protagonists share: the humanities and arts are so far removed from mathematical truth as not to participate in the contest at all.

A large part of the story of the end of the last century and of most of this one has been the revolt against the dominance of absolutizing philosophies and mathematical-logical science, which were shown to be inadequately grounded and guilty of overblown claims to knowledge. In addition, great efforts have been made to recover a non-reductive, multilayered understanding of the wonderfully messy and vastly complex "natural" world and the humanly made "environments" in which we live. This resistance occurred on all fronts: by scientists such as Gödel and Heisenberg; by philosophers from Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard to Husserl, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derrida; by historians and theorists of science; by literary and artistic theorists, critics, and practitioners.¹¹ *The shift has attempted to open us again to indeterminacy, to undecidability, to ambiguity, to polysemous meaning.*

The danger, of course, is that with so many meanings there is no way to discern one from another; we risk shifting from an overbearing dogmatism to a useless skepticism and relativism. The question, as Scheler, Frye, and MacIntyre argue, is how to have plural meaning and yet a basis for saying that not just anything goes.¹² This is a pressing issue for theory and praxis. The question is how to interpret now, for our needs and time, the philosophical, scientific, and literary texts, and through them, the natural environment and landscape, our homes and cities.¹³ The way we think and understand through texts and discussions dynamically interacts with the way we interpret planning and design, the way we build physical and cultural environments, the way we open and develop our own lives and possibilities and, since the rest of the planet seems to lie within the zone of our power, those of all living beings. What could be more important? Or more interesting?

In working out the alternative hermeneutical theories and specific environmental interpretations presented in this book, I assumed that the many differences would resolve into a fundamental disagreement. For example, behind the scientific points and general tactics advanced by deconstruction, archaeology, genealogy, phenomenology, and the varieties of hermeneutics would be a quarrel over whether or not our world has some sort of "objective" meaning that we can discern and use in order to non-arbitrarily plan and build as well as we can. This basic tension between those who deconstructed and those who tried to retrieve originary meanings did emerge. Clearly, it is *crucial* to understand this difference and to choose how to proceed in regard to what is at stake. As a result and as I had hoped, after charting the relevant territory, I found that the general noise from simultaneous movements resolved into a din from the two distinct camps. Unexpectedly, the contesting sounds further resolved into something far more unified and compelling, as do complex melodies in music—and not a kind of music I might have expected.

What surprised me in passing back and forth between these differing positions and in listening to them was how syncopated the passage became. Each counterpoint displaced what the other had taken to be dominant and regular; each stressed precisely what the other had taken to be weak. As each group temporarily subordinated what the other emphasized, it became apparent that they were singing different parts in the same song. To be precise, both groups unexpectedly took up and elaborated the *alternating integrations and exclusions* that characterize much of human thought and action and the encompassing *epochal disclosures and concealments* that unfold in the history of culture. For example, it appears that, as interpreted by the best thinkers on both sides, the American story of desired belonging and individuality occurs as a localized version of an ontological *disassembling and gathering* and of archetypal *cycles of transformation* that play through human life. The same would be true of the character and our complex experiences of *loss coupled with gain* in the development of technology which changes the earth.

The differences, while substantial and critical, also finally appear as radically opposite stresses within one larger song, as countermoves to its tune. The apparent cacophony resolves into a polyphony where both sides sing together and to which they dance in their different ways. Finally, then, *the alternative environmental interpretations move within this dynamic of personal and cultural displacements and of appropriate responses that attempt to facilitate "replacements."*

The vital action is not to be missed, even by those who would rather look on than actively participate. Try to imagine the complex song that both sides are singing and to which they are dancing, in a kind of powerful, syncopated rhythm.

The Song of Displacement and Appropriate Response

Deconstruct	Reconstruct	Alterities	Same
Heidegger	Gadamer	Eliade	Jung
Nietzsche	Derrida	G. Deleuze	Sartre
Disassemble	Difference	Identity	Place
Jacques Lacan	Kristeva	Irigary	Freud
Wittgenstein	Lakatos	Feyerabend	Kuhn
Disassemble	Difference	Identity	Place
M. Foucault	DeCerteau	Benjamin	Barthes
Baudrillard	Lytotard	Habermas	Marx
Deconstruct	Reconstruct	Alterities	Same

The sounds of the chant and the moving feet echoing though our streets and off our buildings is almost primal. Mesmerizing. Intoxicating. The exotic dance winding though our academic and professional quarters, circles back on itself to gain even more energy and momentum, sweeps through the usually sober institutions so that they too sway, are spun about by the dance, lose their bearings and find not only their authority pickpocketed away, but themselves left embarrassingly naked, emperors without clothes. The dance is fanning out into our ordinary residential sections and workplaces, its rhythm echoed, often distorted, in the clatter of construction. Amidst the noise, corridors are built into mazes within new, skewed buildings and entire polyglot and heterotopic cities are thrown together. Silent inscapes of cyberspace await on the other side of video display screens and through communication networks whose electronic antennas cover hundreds of square miles of remote forest floor. Deafening landscapes are aglow with exploding laser-guided missiles and the smoke of hundreds of burning oil wells. The post-structural sublime opens beyond conceptualizing reason, beyond faded beauty now trivialized before vast power.¹⁴

This dance is a dance of disassembly, taking apart the imposed structures and actions of taken-for-granted and thereby governing institutions and codes, sciences and technologies. It also is a dance that may promise a freer and more careful mode in which people can belong to each other and to the sustaining earth. In the energetic course of the new dance, the old conceptual and imperial categories are forcefully flung out of our grasp and the willful controls and exploitations fall away or are freely tossed aside.

Everyone, every place, everything is caught up in this dance, this engaging music and movement. What is it? Where does it come from and where does it go? Will it suddenly stop or will it become more intense and irresist-

ible as it goes on? Shall we dance? Or not? Do we really have a choice? Shall we take up tambourines? Should we try to resist even as a potential partner pulls on our locked arm and braced body trying to drag us in against our will? Or, instead, as Odysseus, should we stuff our ears with cotton and wait patiently for our moment of deliverance? As Sampson, chained between pillars of transgressing power, should we be alert for a chance to bring it all down around us?

This dance is a dance of people in the world, of people and the world. Of their motion and rest. This dance is done in time and space. Therefore to dance the dance is move out of the past, through the present, and into the future. To think about it is to think about history and our insertion in the real environment of concrete, historical places. It is to question which of these should be demolished, which preserved, or which built.

This dance is done while singing. Therefore to dance the dance is to move within a languageful event. This dance of people and the world, in time and in space, involves movement between sayings and stories and texts as they lead in and out of our world. This dance occurs not only in the streets and the stamp of our feet, not only in our hearts and heads, but in the weaving back and forth between texts and world.

The disassembly of the previous willful and representational movement shows that *it never was a dance*. Rather, it was the *march* of reason which had triumphantly paraded, with scarcely a pause or obstacle, across the globe, down the royal road from ancient Greek logic and military formations, through modernity's renaissance and enlightenment with their scientific, mechanical, and political conquests, to today's postmodern cybernetic and logistical technology. This violent, forced march had suppressed the dance now being danced. The new dance is a revitalized form of an old rhythm, forgotten for two and a half millennium, but going on, at least periodically, in its own hushed way, beneath, between, behind that loud sweep of progress.

An aspect of the dance, then, a crucial part of the accomplishment and play of the dance, is its movement against its opposite: against a kind of reason that sought to still it and through which it again breaks. From within the motion of this oldest and now newly danced dance, the opposite may yet be seen as a partner in passing, a partner which while trying to push the dance aside for a more pragmatic and direct stride, was (without knowing it) part of the dance, affecting the steps and changing where and how the dance might go and end. This dance is now playing out in our landscapes, buildings, and poems. It may linger a while, or soon peter out, or suddenly be stopped.

This book seeks to move along with the dance, taking up one step, then another, trying to move in the shoes of different, often tensed, dancers as they follow their own music. Of course, neither the music nor the dancing are simple, but involve an almost bewildering complexity of many strains and moves.

I try to discern and follow some of what makes up this dance so that we may be able to follow how it goes, and thus be able to choose what to do as it swirls about us.

How should we think about the dance and responsibly act as we are caught up in it, whether as willing partners, conscientious objectors, or as obliviously shuffling along to music that we only half hear and that is at once familiar and indistinct? How can we dance, or even decide if we want to, if we can't quite hold on to the old rhythm that already is beginning to slip from memory and yet can't quite make out the new one either, since we are caught in-between? These chapters try to receive and amplify the song to get a clear and steady sound, so you can make up your own mind whether you want to hear more or not. The book as a whole is a kind of guide to the latest dance steps, so that you can try out, in the privacy of your reading and reflecting, the choreography that moves the mind and body. The chapters begin to assemble a pattern book for the streets and the dance halls of yet unimagined forms appropriate for the dancing. What kind of place should we make for the dance that we now welcome, or await, or resist?