

Escaping the Cave: the communicative origins of architecture

Geoff Matthews

University of Lincoln
gmatthews@lincoln.ac.uk

Apology

The practical effects of postmodernity can be identified with the implosion of media and the hybridization of spatial phenomena.[1] The cool device in the palm of everyone's hand is a potent symbol for the connectedness of the wet and the hard-wired worlds, the reflexivity of cultural politics, the collapse of the event into an eternal present, all available, all of the time, at the touch of a magic screen—it seems the genie is profligate. And architecture, it seems, has become more complicated than the etymology of the word suggests it ought to be; the architect—*archi tektōn*: master builder—is now also a master of ceremonies charged with orchestrating the 'event,' the space of communication. In a peculiar sense building and writing have become one. But is this a new phenomenon or could it be the present-day manifestation of a much older, perhaps ancient, idea: that architecture has an inherent communicative logic?

Deleuze and Guattari's writings on deterritorialization and inscription first caught my eye in this regard, and they provide a shadow for this paper to chase. It moves from the atmosphere of the present—the hybridity of architectural space after the postmodern turn—back down to earth—the territory of the nomad—to see what may be uncovered or recovered in the process. It also dives deep into the mythographic by re-visioning—'entertaining ...old text[s] from a new critical direction'[2]—the unity of world and psyche as exemplified in later work of Jung and present-day ecological thinking.[3] The method is informed by two essentially pragmatic lines of thinking one from Rorty and the other from Vattimo. Rorty's writing on hermeneutics opens up the idea that making sense of human utterances, particularly where they appear to contradict, involves redescription rather than the recovery of a deep logic. 'In this attitude, getting the facts right ...is merely propaedeutic to finding a new and more interesting way of expressing ourselves, and thus coping in the world'.[4] This relates closely to the idea that philosophy comes essentially in two different guises, as a search for foundations and as edification, and that it is the latter that promises most in our condition of profound uncertainty—knowing that there are no definitive answers to be had, we just need something to help us cope. Vattimo's discussion of the return of myth in postmodern experience reminds us that all of the efforts to demythologize human understanding, undertaken in the name of the Enlightenment, ended where they were bound to, in the demythologization of the Enlightenment project itself.[5] Now, Rorty and Vattimo speak extremely well for themselves, so, here I assume my peregrinations will suffice to illustrate how I have interpreted their ideas. Logically enough, therefore, I eschew the comforting illusion that the linear, the rational, the analytic are what they purport to be, reliable and unproblematic means of investigation. The writing here exploits a different method, ironically perhaps, one that blends modern and classical forms tuned to the exploration, invention and discussion of ideas. It is episodic, layered and woven; it proceeds from *Aphorism* to

Essay to Dialogue, and each layer of the text broadens and transforms the preceding one through purposeful shifts in literary style.

Aphorism

Architecture is not a consequence of *geography*—a marking, marking out, inscription and writing of the earth—but is born out of the collision of geography and *scenography*—a masking, marking, inscription and writing of the skin. The invention of architecture, therefore, follows a communicative logic that psychologically and historically precedes building.

Essay

According to Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* humans first crave satisfaction of basic *physiological* and *biological* needs—air, food, water, shelter, warmth. Only when these have been satisfied does the attention shift to the need for *safety*—security, order, boundaries, stability—and then to the need for *love* and to *belong*—family, affection, friendship, group identity, a sense of place. From the perspective of an isolated human this hierarchy seems reasonable enough: how would one behave if suddenly pitched into the wilderness if not in this initially savage and desperate fashion? Once the body is under control, the attention moves to finding or making an environment—physical and social—that is under some kind of control. This is what humans do; they try to control themselves and they try to control the environment around them. How and when humans became motivated this way, that is, consciously separated from, and driven to interfere with, the world around them, is the subject of myth. It is often represented as a contest between Gods and heroes, and sometimes as the descent of Man.

The move from the garden to the cave is one such story.[6] The garden is a place of innocence and vitality, a place of living and dying, a landscape bounded by the limits of our senses, a space of conflict and cooperation played out in the full light of day. This experience of the garden is the *territorialization* process that Deleuze and Guattari associate with the 'primitive machine,' which 'subdivides the people, but does so on an indivisible earth'.[7] It precedes the invention and recognition of landmarks, and particularly, the perception of boundaries between free and forbidden space, living and dead space, or secular and sacred space. On first discovering the cave its potency as a boundary between the here and the beyond becomes suddenly and frighteningly apparent. The cave is of the earth, a dark place that smells of death and decay. When things die they return to the body of the earth. The cave is an incision into this mass of dead matter. It is the sphere of ghosts, as near to the underworld as any worldly place can be; and it may become a gateway to other worlds. Lewis-Williams identifies cave walls with this possibility, as a 'living membrane' between realms.[8] In the cave everything is near and in darkness. Sounds reverberate and are dissociated from their sources. Smells accumulate and become singular and overpowering. Everything is coarse, dank and uniformly cold to the touch. The cave is disorientating and terrifying. In this situation of relative sensory deprivation an '*intensified* trajectory of consciousness' generates delirium,[9] which the mind perceives as spirits appearing and disappearing through the cave wall.

Humans have evolved to see forward with both eyes, to see with acuity and to see into the distance. Their hearing is equally evolved to sense distance and direction, distinguish foreground and background sounds. Every sense makes us conscious of the bounds of our world; horizons matter to humans. Awareness of horizons requires an accumulation of knowledge, a sense of perspective and a propensity to imagine what is beyond. Humans ought to be at home in open space, in the landscape, in the garden.

The nomad travels in a world that is present to the senses, constant and still; horizons are where they should be, at the limits of sensibility. Despite this, the great irony is that humans appropriated the cave as a shelter only to discover there the possibility of confronting their horizons. Recasting Deleuze and Guattari's formulation: travel is extensive, it is defined by direction and distance; movement is intensive, we are moved by force, by others, and to action.[10] The nomad may travel the territory 'without moving', but at rest, in the cave, the nomad may move through the cosmos without travelling.

The cave was a space cleansed with fire, lit by fire and separated from the world outside by fire. By inhabiting a space where the constant battle for survival could be momentarily forgotten, fire created a bridge between reality and the imagination, in the '*normal* trajectory of consciousness',[11] a space for day-dreaming, invention, and storytelling. Yet the history of the cave remains; it is the place of concealment. To Odysseus his captor's name 'Calypso' was repulsive and terrifying; *kaluptein* means to conceal and 'conveys the idea of consigning the dead to concealment in the realm of darkness and death'.[12] In taking shelter in the cave, humans temporarily consigned themselves to this realm, they took on the role of the dead even as they continued to live. Only the dead can travel beyond the horizon.

Dialogue

1. The savage tribe, in its nomadic experience, territorializes a space. It wanders from point to point in smooth space—space without places—occupying, increasingly identifying with, and, finally, belonging to, the whole territory.[13] In this mode, shelter is ephemeral. Either it is assembled from local materials for one-off use and dispersed or left to decay when the tribe moves on—the igloo. Or it travels with the nomad; it is the stick that raises the djellaba to provide shelter whilst riding a camel through the desert; it is the tent unpacked at each resting point, repacked and carried to the next site—the yurt.
2. The cave, if it is inhabited at all, is the nomad's temporary retreat. It produces moments of spatial differentiation, which dissolve as quickly as they resolve,[14] in synchrony with the decrease and increase in speed of movement through the territory to which the nomad belongs.
3. When the barbarian arrives he does so to divide and conquer **space**, not people; invasion initiates the differentiation of smooth space which continues indefinitely. This deterritorialization invents the possibility of place-making by accelerating the assimilation of people into a new, sedentary, mode of being.
4. The distance between the savage and the barbarian is, therefore, manifest first in spatial practice. Imagine a scale representing all possible spatial qualities; at one extreme is the undifferentiated (absolutely smooth); at the other is the

chaotic (infinitely striated). On this scale the nomadic practice of territorialization gravitates towards the absolutely smooth end of the spectrum by responding to any differentiating activity with normative de-differentiating behaviours—moving on to pastures new. Barbarian invasion, on the other hand, acts on inhabited smooth space by producing, magnifying and reproducing differentiating activity—corralling and enslaving a workforce. And this practice of deterritorialization drifts away from the absolutely smooth end of the spectrum and gravitates toward a middle point.

5. The inhabited cave, in this process, takes on a very different significance, no longer that of temporary retreat but that of permanent refuge or prison.[15]

6. Perhaps the response of the nomad to the barbarian can be understood by comparing two caves encountered by Odysseus. The *Odyssey* tells the story of Odysseus' return home from war. The caves that he encounters are the dwellings of solitary beings; one seduces men and persuades them to provide companionship, another entraps and consumes them without regard to their humanity. The contrasting stories of Odysseus's encounters with Calypso and with Polyphemus illustrate the different senses in which the cave provides shelter to one who projects a limited dream of the world.

7. For the journey to begin Odysseus must restore his *nostos*, his love of home, by resisting the seductress Calypso. This beginning defines what it means to choose one's path. Calypso offers him a life of luxury, obsession and isolation—a living death. The alternative requires courage and vision, the strength of character to leave and venture into the world again, to rejoin the sphere of life and death, and to redeem himself. This project amounts to an 'ascent of the soul from the cave'. [16]

8. Calypso is an exile. The mouth of Calypso's cave lies hidden in the thicket. The landscape is a fertile rural one from which the necessities of life simply can be gathered. On the other side of the vale, and only a little distance into the future, lies civilization; for Calypso the city is a dream.

9. Polyphemus, by contrast, is one of a race of barbarians that has descended into savagery. The Cyclopes have turned their backs on 'progress.' The caves of the Cyclopes have no prospect on the city; they face the mountains or, as in the case of Polyphemus' cave, the sea. Polyphemus does not dream; he lives from moment to moment, consuming whatever comes before him.

10. In smooth space one needs no stars by which to navigate; all journeying is accomplished without movement and with greater or lesser speed—placement, *dis*-placement, *re*-placement.

11. Within the cave one cannot see the sky in any case, only fix memories of it on the ceiling through an act of imaginative projection. This projection into the space of the cave represents the transition from colonization to inhabitation, from a timeless *being-there* to a time-consuming living *taking-place*. As the memory is projected outwards, the place is taken into the imagination. Consequently this communicative transaction is productive—the cave enables projections to be shared.

12. The inhabited space offers certain comforts. Beyond the satisfaction of basic needs for shelter, safety and security, the inhabited cave becomes the *embodiment* of belonging; place and people are bound together by the communicative process of inscribing the cave's interior. Scenography produces

comforts of a higher order and, once realized, these are difficult to give up and to forego.

-
13. But much more difficult for the *migrant* than for the *nomad*. The migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him are relays along a trajectory.[17]
 14. When the time comes to journey on, as it always does, the loss of a belonging-to-place has its effect. For the nomad it provokes a mild sensation of regret at worst, but for the migrant, through a life-time of journeying, journeying alone and journeying together, the loss becomes increasingly difficult to bear.
 15. In the imagination, and in actuality, the traces of tiny inhabitations transform smooth space into striated space. As the attractions of a belonging-to-place become stronger, the migrant tends to journey from A to B and back again,[18] rather than A to B, and some time later B to C. And the nomad's contract with nature begins to disintegrate, although it can never be completely broken—once a nomad, always a nomad. The idea of settlement emerges from—is an integral aspect of—the nomadic as much as the migrant life.
 16. Nomadic life is complex, not opposed to sedentary life, but entwined and entangled with it. When it is time to move on, to return to the open and accept again the trails and trials of smooth space, the settler motivates (rides on the shoulders of) the nomad. When it is time to seek shelter, safety and rest, however briefly, the nomad motivates (directs the attention of) the settler.

-
17. When Odysseus beached his fleet on a fertile, wooded island inhabited by goats he sailed one ship away to explore the coast opposite. There he found the Cyclopes, a race of fierce, one-eyed barbarians. The Cyclopes had 'lost the art of smithcraft known to their ancestors who worked for Zeus'.[19] Further than this they had become solitary cave dwellers, shepherds 'without laws,[20] assemblies, ships, markets, or knowledge of agriculture'.[21]
 18. This identification of cave dwelling with the splitting up of people and the consequent loss of social behaviours is important to understanding one of the dimensions of the concept of architecture. Architecture tries to improve upon the cave by enabling humans to reproduce the ideal cave anywhere on earth.
 19. Simultaneously, architecture is a striving for the social, an attempt to regain what humans lost when they abandoned the open—the ephemerality of the shelter to be found there—and entered the cave in the first place, seeking security: the immediacy and joy of social intercourse. In this limited sense all architecture is utopian.

-
20. Human beings have two eyes, one on the present—the near-to—and one on the past—the background—from which understanding emerges. Human vision is, therefore, perspectival; it enables humans to imagine their place in the world, to create a meaning for what they see from that position, and therefore to speculate on other possible perspectives. The vision of cave dwellers, however, is impaired; they have one eye on the near-to, their own immediate interests, what hovers before them in the flickering light of the fire, but they have no second eye. Therefore, they lack perspective; their world is a closed-off, ever-present and meaningless moment. Bacon's warning against the Idols of the

Cave describes such captivity, such captivation, succinctly by the opposing Heraclitean and Platonic perspectives on truth.[22]

...men of this kind, if they betake themselves to philosophy and contemplations of a general character, distort and colour them in obedience to their former fancies.[23]

21. Herakleitos celebrates 'flux, time, difference' and identifies truth with 'process and becoming, obtained through observation...'[24] Plato campaigned vigorously for an absolute and hidden truth, which is identified explicitly with the disciplining power of the despot. When Plato characterizes the Sophist as one who may *apprehend* the truth without *possessing* it, he recommends that, 'we should arrest him on the royal warrant of reason, report the capture, and hand him over to the sovereign'.[25]
 22. The disciplining power of the despot is overtaken by architecture—spatial formations encourage compliance by producing a self-disciplining collective[26]—but this power is not replaced.
 23. Architecture is a partial substitution for imposed discipline *and* for the liberatory moment, the decision to move on. Spatial formations extend beyond the cave, dissolve the boundaries between inside and outside, ease the transitions between dark and light, light and dark, accommodate *being-with-one-another* and *being-for-one-another*. [27]
 24. Architecture is an ideological compromise in which dystopian and utopian motivations coexist. It is the forlorn attempt to reconcile the dark of the cave—the seduction of the near-to—with the light of reason—the fearful unknown of the horizon.
 25. For example, whenever they can, architects love to flood interiors with daylight, to puncture the skin, to disrupt the integrity of the original cave, even as they strive to recreate its solidity as a refuge. As the window admits light, it also affords a tolerable if limited view of the world beyond. The inhabitant is thus inscribed as schizophrenic and must oscillate between attention to dark and light, the near-to and the horizon, waking-dream and reason.
-
26. In the cave, surfaces are all that the eye and hand perceive. Inscribing a surface is therefore an intensification of perception and an exploration of what may be beyond the surface. To make contact with the surface is to break through it with the imagination. To break through the surface physically is to connect interior and exterior.
 27. The ever-present and unanswerable question is whether to face the window or the wall upon which admitted light falls. The smaller the window the more like a camera the cave becomes, the more the focussed light resolves into an image of the world (inverted). The greater the number of windows, the greater the potential for confusion in the resulting montage of the distal and proximal, the arbitrary-fragmentary-shifting view and the emergent-merging-interfering image. The hopeful consequence of their juxtaposition and layering is their mutual inversion—image inverts view, view inverts image.
 28. The cave is at first a refuge, later it is colonized, and then inhabited by the body (kin) and by the imagination (collective). Such inhabitation, because it is thoroughly shaped by communicative behaviour and secure from the world, is seductive, compulsive, orgasmic. Nostalgia, a longing for a return to the garden,

is corrupted by the experience of the cave, and transmuted into a compulsion to build a substitute, a simulation, and ultimately the perfect simulacrum.

Architecture is invented.

Epilogue

The city is a dune swept by strange winds—the patterns of communication that shape and constitute collective behaviours. These winds struggle against the frozen forms of human invention. And nothing lasts for ever. Architecture is not immobile. Forms appear to persist, but in reality they move, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes catastrophically, through the repeated articulation and erosion of their surfaces. The nomad lives with the granularity of shifting sands even in the city, where architecture preserves territorial possibilities even as it orders and stratifies habitation.

The permanent refuge is a place of interiorization, projection and nostalgic reproduction. Mythographically Polyphemus and Calypso represent bipolar responses to the problem of dwelling in the cave—the savage and the civilized. The savage response *exploits* the cave purely as shelter and as sanctuary, a safe place to eat and sleep. The civilized response *possesses* the cave by decorating and furnishing it. The role of ornamentation, much derided in modernism, is therefore integral to architecture through the communicative function it performs in defining form and space as that of civilized habitation. And the return of the scenographic in architecture is no superficial matter; it signifies a concern for intensifying and accommodating the play of human life on the earth.

I suspect that human communication is primarily an environment-shaping behaviour, that building—by design—is merely a latter-day expression of a crisis in communication that occurred between Upper Palaeolithic and Neolithic times, and remains prevalent in the human psyche and embedded in the collective unconscious.[28]

QUIQUID ULTRA SPELUNCUM [29]

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my colleagues in the Cultural Contexts research group, Lincoln School of Architecture—particularly to: Dr. Nader El-Bizri, Douglas Gittens, Chris Hay, Prof. Jane Lomholt, and Prof. Nicholas Temple—for useful discussion during the development of this paper.

A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Peripheries conference, Queen's University, Belfast 27-29 October 2011.

Notes

1. 'At the end of the century, there will not be much left of the expanse of the planet that is not only polluted but also shrunk, reduced to nothing, by the teletechnologies of generalized interactivity.' Virilio, P. *Open Sky* (2008, London: Verso), p. 21.
2. Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', quoted in Vanda Zajko, 'Women and Greek Myth', *Greek Mythology*, ed. by Roger Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 387-406, (p. 401).
3. Patrick Harpur. *The Philosophers' Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination* (2009, Glastonbury: The Squeeze Press), pp. 37-8 and 45-8.
4. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 359.
5. Gianni Vattimo, 'Myth Rediscovered', in *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 28-44.
6. One take on the biblical version of the myth of Man separating from Nature – having eaten from the tree of knowledge Adam and Eve are banished from the garden to work the earth, Genesis 3:23. Aware of the frightening power of nature they hide in caves, Isaiah 2:19.
7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 160.
8. David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 214.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-6.
10. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 420-1.
11. Lewis-Williams, *op cit*, pp. 121-6.
12. Roger D Woodard, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, pp. 72-3.
13. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 419-22.
14. '...the nomad reterritorializes on deterritorialization itself.' *ibid.* p. 421.
15. Plato. *Republic*. VII, 514ff.
16. I am adapting Al-Farabi's interpretation of Plato's cave here. For the world-wise life in the cave poses no difficulty; its contents are seen for what they are: illusions. Odysseus, however, is foolish, if brave, he needs to wise up before he can return and feel *at home*. Robert L'Arrivee. Al-Farabi's Cave: Aristotle's Logic and the Ways of Socrates and Thrasymachus. Midwest Political Science Association Conference, Chicago, April 4th, 2008.
17. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 419.
18. Andy Warhol was the perfect migrant—hypochondriac manufacturer of images that revolved around the Factory cave. Warhol, A. *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (1979, Pan Books; Picador edition).
19. Robert Graves. *The Greek Myths: Volume 2*. Revised edn. (1960, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), 170.b, p. 355.
20. The idea of law that does pertain to the Cyclopes is *nomos*, which is associated with the mountains, the backcountry, and the open space outside the city. The Cyclopes were without the *polis*, the idea of law associated with the ordered space inside the city. Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. (2004, London: Continuum), p. 420.
21. Robert Graves. *The Greek Myths*, p. 355.

22. Francis Bacon, *Aphorisms* 39, 42, & 53-58. In Hollander, John and Frank Kermode eds. *The Literature of Renaissance England*, (1973, Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 945-50.
23. Francis Bacon, *Aphorism* 54.
24. Page de Bois, *Torture and Truth* (New York and London: Routledge), p. 98, quoted in Christopher Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 265.
25. Cited by Norris: Plato, *Sophist*, in *Works*, vol. 1, trans. J. Burnet (London: Oxford University Press, 1903).
26. Tony Bennet. The Exhibitionary Complex. *New Formations*, 1988/4, pp. 73-102.
27. The intention here is to identify *being-with-one-another* with the 'deficient and indifferent' modes, and *being-for-one-another* with the concerned and caring modes, of 'being amongst others'. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp. 157-8.
28. Freudian and Jungian interpretation of myth is well-rehearsed; that performed here is, at least in part, more Maslovian and pragmatic.
29. Is there anything beyond the cave?