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The Abetment Of Nihilism: Architectural Phenomenology's Ethical Project

But you did not and could not toss out of your heart that part of you from which the God notion had come.
— Richard Wright, *The Outsider*

Phenomenological theorists of architecture are admirably attuned to the ways in which our experience of the built environment is rich in meaning and value. Emphasize pure space and form, and questions of meaning won't arise. Think of architecture as mere technology and they won't either (one asks how to use a hammer, and for what, not what it *means*). In the middle of the 20th century, as Jorge Otero-Pailos writes, a group of architect-theorists retrospectively designated as the architectural phenomenology movement, and who "thought individual experience had been impoverished by the process of industrialization and became disillusioned with the modernist faith in technology," rose to prominence: "Out went the conviction that technology drove history, and in came the sense that architectural history was driven by the search for authentic, original human experiences."[1] More recently, phenomenology has inspired an even broader theorizing of architecture by thinkers like Karsten Harries (from philosophy) and Alberto Pérez-Gómez (from architectural history and theory) of a specifically ethical bent. Both Harries and Pérez-Gómez are dissatisfied with the current status of architecture, which they perceive as subservient to technology and in which they see an abdication of architecture's ability, even responsibility, to represent – that is, display back to us – meaning. Pérez-Gómez writes in his most recent book, *Attunement*, of ours as "a world designed for a technological way of life," as "a flattened world that . . . enhances our sense

1. Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xi.

2. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 210.

3. Ibid., 8.

4. Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 2.

5. Ibid., 4.

6. Readers might object to this use of *we* and *us*. I follow it throughout this essay because I am attempting to offer an internal critique of Harries's and Pérez-Gómez's projects, one that grants them as many of their assumptions and premises as possible while revealing a deeper problem.

7. Karsten Harries, "Theory as Ornament," in *Relearning from Las Vegas*, ed. Aron Vinegar and Michael J. Golec (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 89.

8. Ibid., 90.

9. Ibid., 89.

10. Ibid.

of nihilism."[2] He aims instead to promote an architecture that "may enhance our human values and capacities, which we might also term our spirituality."[3] Both he and Harries believe that architecture has the potential to help us resist nihilism, but think that it currently does not. Harries begins *The Ethical Function of Architecture* with the claim, "For some time now architecture has been uncertain of its way."[4] He believes we need to put architecture on a different path, so that in turn it can reorient us: "Should architecture not . . . help us find our place and way in an ever more disorienting world?"[5] I take it that by "us," Harries means humankind as moderns in the broad sense.[6] Both he and Pérez-Gómez are concerned about our contemporary susceptibility to nihilism, and see in architecture a way of finding meaning and a place in the world. Their project, however, by assuming a transcendent conception of meaning while admitting that it cannot be justified, abets nihilism rather than helping to resist or overcome it.

In "Theory as Ornament," Harries reflects on the rise of theory in architecture, ascribing the enthusiastic reception of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*, with its emphasis on textuality and other extra-structural forms of symbolism, to "a nostalgic longing, tinged with irony, for an architecture that, challenging the perceived muteness of so much modernist building, would once again speak and say something significant."[7] In his telling, the International Style exhausted itself, "producing countless buildings that were increasingly boring and mute."[8] The possibilities of postmodernism celebrated in *Learning from Las Vegas* almost literally spoke – that is, became discursive – abandoning pure form in favor of text and images, decoration and ornament, symbols and the play of meaning. For Harries this turn away from pure form is a kind of return to the aesthetics of the 19th century, which modernism had rejected: "What modernism had scorned as decadent today speaks of an innocence many of us have come to envy."[9] Harries includes himself only partially in this envious "us": he too wants an architecture that "once again says something significant," but does not find it, as others do (or at least did) in the postmodern. In a moment of great rhetorical complexity he asks, "Is bad faith strongly held not better than no faith at all?"[10] What Harries's question suggests, I take it, is that the overt symbolism celebrated in *Learning from Las Vegas*, apparently meaningful, ultimately isn't. Yet he holds it better to believe in something, even if ultimately unjustified, even if we're deceiving ourselves, than to believe in nothing at all.

11. Ibid.
12. Giedion quoted in Karsten Harries, "Philosophy and the Task of Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 40, no. 2 (January 1987): 29–30.
13. Harries, "Theory as Ornament," 90.
14. Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, 4. Likewise in Harries, the Gothic cathedral "represents the heavenly Jerusalem." See Harries, *Ethical Function*, 118.
15. Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, 5.
16. Ibid., 4.

What Harries envies, then, are the missed opportunities of modernism, if not its decayed and mute later forms: "Can we today be confident that architectural modernism was wrong when it defined itself in opposition to the decorated sheds of the nineteenth century?"[11] Harries defines his project against the renewed, playful eclecticism of his then-present, as well as against the production of meaning not by architecture itself but by the grafting of theory onto it. Architecture is an impure art, in which buildings become something more: practical shed plus aesthetic decoration. In modernism, ever so briefly, this "plus" was overcome, sublated, and meaning no longer grafted onto form through decoration but found in form itself, thus rejecting the constraining dichotomy of practicality and beauty. Harries repeatedly affirms Sigfried Giedion's claim that the task of contemporary architecture is "the interpretation of a way of life valid for our period."[12] In his own terminology, architecture's primary function is neither practical nor aesthetic, but *ethical*: it must represent a valid *ethos*, or way of being. Looking back at the Bauhaus, Harries sees a "wonderful but naïve pathos," a movement "discredited" because it "overestimated the power of reason and underestimated the power of history to provide human beings with adequate psychological shelter."[13] In other words, Harries believes that modernism set the right goal but sought to achieve it in the wrong manner. But absent modernism's substantive ideals, what ethos should architecture represent?

Pérez-Gómez – whose work overlaps in many ways with Harries's – tells a similar story. "Historical architecture managed to express order," he writes. In earlier epochs, "architecture functioned primarily to frame religious life – one that was lived and felt as religious through and through – revealing cosmic and transcendental meanings in material form and space."[14] Like Harries, Pérez-Gómez sees such possibilities as enticing, but also as discredited: "Political institutions drew their legitimacy from assumed transcendental principles" and "house[d] a significant public life that today we may find suspect, and its exploitative means of construction even abhorrent."[15] Pérez-Gómez also uses a broad "we," writing of "our present distrust" and of what "we can recognize."[16] We, as moderns, reject as unjustified the ordered conceptions of the cosmos represented by traditional architecture. Pérez-Gómez makes this point in his earlier book, *Built upon Love*: "It would be truly unethical to pretend that there exists a unique and absolute set of values to be represented in architecture, articulated in one mythology, dogmatic religion, rational

17. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 206.

18. Ibid., 6.

19. Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn*, 260.

20. Harries, "Theory as Ornament," 89.

21. Harries, *Ethical Function*, 133.

22. Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, 8.

23. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, "The Space of Architecture: Meaning as Presence and Representation," in Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Steven Holl, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture* (San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 2006), 9.

ideology, or technology."[17] Absent a legitimate sense of order, it is unclear what architecture would represent. One can thus see, building on Pérez-Gómez's thought, why contemporary architecture so often seeks to do no more than fulfill one or another set of shallow preferences, whether personal or corporate. Even though Pérez-Gómez rejects absolute values, he holds that "the fundamental existential condition to which architecture perennially responded remains as pressing as always: the profound need for humans to inhabit a resonant world they may call home."[18] Like Harries, Pérez-Gómez wants architecture to fulfill an ethical task, but he can provide no content beyond abstract placeholders for it to represent to us. As Otero-Pailos argues, recent phenomenologists of architecture (he specifically names Pérez-Gómez and Harries) are ever too quick – especially when challenged – to reach for "old clichés" about authenticity, wholeness, and originary experience.[19] I would add that these concepts are not just clichés but also abstractions, rarely given enough specificity to indicate what kind of architecture would even correspond to them.

Consider again Harries's complicated rhetorical question, "Is bad faith strongly held not better than no faith at all?"[20] He both accuses others of bad faith for replaying 19th-century eclecticism as postmodernism and expresses some sympathy for them, while also admitting to his own bad faith – albeit grounded in a different nostalgia for modernism's unrealized promise. Contra Harries, bad faith is *not* better than no faith at all, however. Both Harries and Pérez-Gómez speak abstractly, and programmatically, of the greater meaning they hope architecture might represent, even as they are sure to signal their awareness that such meaning can no longer be taken for granted. Harries writes, "To hold that there is nothing that transcends human beings and speaks to them, that reality itself is mute and meaningless, means nihilism."[21] For Pérez-Gómez, even setting aside "discredited" religious views and "acknowledging the disenchantment of the human environment brought about by a rational proclamation of the death of God, there are numerous occasions when all of us, regardless of what we believe, feel beyond doubt that life is worth living."[22] But he too has called ours a nihilistic age: "In this age of incomplete nihilism . . . we simply cannot afford to give up our quest to identify what constitutes a meaningful order for human life, the promotion and perpetuation of which has been the inveterate concern of architecture."[23] Granting Harries and Pérez-Gómez their characterizations of the problem, they still offer no solution: in bad faith they

24. On the religious origins of architectural phenomenology, see Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn*, xxv and 25ff.
25. Harries, *Ethical Function*, 132.
26. Ibid., 130–31
27. Ibid., 132.
28. Ibid., 140.

cling to larger meaning without justification, simply because they feel such meaning is necessary.

Despite their disavowals, theirs is an essentially religious way of looking at the world and architecture's relation to it.[24] Even if our condition is a fallen one, filled with uncertainty, they retain faith that our feelings and needs relate to a transcendent realm of meaning: "Even if this [Christian] symbolic language lies behind us, even if Scripture no longer offers us the key to decoding the hidden meaning of things, even if the very idea of a hermeneutics of nature may seem preposterous, nevertheless in some fashion things still 'speak' to us," Harries writes.[25] He distinguishes between "natural symbols," which "have their foundation in those aspects of our human being in the world that have remained more or less constant throughout history," and "conventional symbols," which gain their meaning contingently from particular traditions.[26] As particular traditions (such as Christian scripture) and their conventional symbols become discredited, Harries calls for "a recovery of the natural," writing, "Buried in every conventional symbolism lies a natural symbolism, which still speaks to us if we are but willing to listen."[27] He fails to see, however, how difficult it is to not see a cross (a natural symbol grounded in the vertical and horizontal) as a Christian cross (a conventional symbol). Indeed, our very sense of what symbols are natural is forever contaminated by the particular conventions to which we are accustomed. For Harries to insist that "mythopoeic intent is part of all architecture worthy of its name" is not to take seriously such a recovery of natural symbols.[28] The confidence that we know what the order of the world is, or should be, is gone, but the assumption remains that it is through such an order that life, and specifically architecture, would have meaning and thus resist nihilism. The implicitly religious nature of Harries's and Pérez-Gómez's orientation toward architecture appears repeatedly in the details of their work. Harries wrote a book called *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism*, and both he and Pérez-Gómez again and again proffer examples of religious buildings to substantiate their analyses of the kinds of buildings that once represented, and still come close to representing, the order of the world. More broadly, their manner of interpreting even nonreligious buildings is transcendental. Pérez-Gómez's signature rhetorical approach – particularly in *Built upon Love* – is to offer extended commentary on myths to reveal the deeper potential meanings of architecture. A myth is a religious story that

29. Similarly, Harries offers an extended reading of the biblical fall. See *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, 137ff. Pérez-Gómez actually inverts this order, inflating what was a fiction into a myth, in his *Polyphilo, or, The Dark Forest Revisited: An Erotic Epiphany of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

30. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1968), 124.

31. Among numerous other definitions of nihilism, Nietzsche includes "the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability" and "that the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollindale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 7–9.

32. Of course, one way to resolve the tension would be for them to defend one specific way of life. Pérez-Gómez seems to be moving in this direction by concluding *Attunement* with the claim that "true psychosomatic health depends on attuned environments." "Psychosomatic health" remains an abstraction, however, and there is no sense of how this "true" won't run afoul of "tak[ing] into account the values and habits of the diverse cultures on our compressed planet." See *Attunement*, 232; 215.

33. Harries, *Ethical Function*, 178.

has been drained of credulity, though not completely stripped of justification, and still retaining greater force of meaning than a mere fiction.[29] Unlike "the old saint in the forest" in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, who "has not yet heard anything of this, that *God is dead*," Harries and Pérez-Gómez *have* heard, and indeed are eager to acknowledge the news lest they appear unsophisticated, nostalgic, or reactionary, yet they carry on largely as before, and are thus in bad faith.[30]

This incompletely abandoned religious worldview abets, rather than resists, nihilism. If, as in Nietzsche,[31] nihilism is a loss or lack of values and meanings, then to pine for the possibility of something that transcends humankind, while at the same time acknowledging that one could never justify such beliefs, is to conceive of this lack as central to human existence. It is to assume that the only kind of thing that would give us meaning is something that we cannot have. The essential shape of Harries's and Pérez-Gómez's ethical approach to architecture is this: they begin by offering an account of how, prior to modernity, when more people thought the world was ordered and that certain ways of life were valid, architecture not only could facilitate and edify those ways of life through practical forms and beautiful ornament but also represent the order of the world. But, according to Harries and Pérez-Gómez, we moderns no longer view the world as ordered, nor do we hold certain ways of life as justifiable above others.[32] Rather than abandon their account of architecture's purpose, Harries and Pérez-Gómez abstract it: architecture can no longer represent *the* order of the world, but it might represent *an* order. But because no particular order can be justified or truly believed in, this representation can never be realized. Thus a certain misplaced nostalgia will occur in looking back at architecture's history, and a certain misplaced hope when looking forward, all expressed in terms so abstract ("human value," "dwelling," "authenticity") that they remain seemingly unobjectionable.

Given Harries's and Pérez-Gómez's understanding of nihilism as "the inability to understand the world as a dwelling" – and their fear of it – it makes sense that they would cling to the possibility of some greater meanings beyond us, even if in bad faith.[33] Perhaps this isn't quite the right way to understand nihilism, however. To simply deny that there are any values or meanings beyond humankind is not to be a nihilist. Likewise, simply to find that one is not at home in the world is not yet to be a nihilist. The denial of anything beyond humankind has to be paired with the further

34. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 5ff.

35. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 4, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), 4.

36. Ibid., 5.

37. See Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Existential Task of Architecture," in *Encounters 2: Architectural Essays*, ed. Peter MacKeith (Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 2012), 98–104.

38. Juhani Pallasmaa, "Architecture and the Obsessions of Our Times: A View of the Nihilism of Building," in *Encounters*, ed. Peter MacKeith (Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 2005), 98.

39. Stanley Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game: A reading of Beckett's *Endgame*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115–62.

40. Simon Critchley, *Very Little … Almost Nothing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 211.

assumption that such transcendent meaning is necessary – thus positing the human condition as one of necessary failure. Analogously, to be a nihilist, one must not only find that one isn't at home in the world but also think that one should be. According to Nietzsche, who (with the possible exception of Dostoyevsky) surely thought more deeply about nihilism than any other Western thinker, this is indeed our condition in modernity: the religious worldview, especially that of Christianity, has waned, and one can no longer justify traditional values and sources of meaning. Yet this religious cultural legacy was so influential that it has inscribed into us, believers and nonbelievers alike, the assumption that such values are necessary.[34] As Heidegger writes, Nietzsche sees nihilism as a historical process that has not yet played itself out fully: "Nihilism is that historical process whereby the dominance of the 'transcendent' becomes null and void, so that all being loses its worth and meaning."[35] If one understands nihilism as an as-yet-incomplete process, then one can see it as not dooming us to failure but as freeing: "The fact that earlier aims now disappear and former values are devalued is no longer experienced as sheer annihilation and deplored as wasteful and wrong, but is rather greeted as a liberation, touted as an irrevocable gain, and perceived as a *fulfillment*."[36] If we are to overcome nihilism, it will be by descending into the valley of meaninglessness to come out on the other side, not by clinging desperately to the slopes above it.

Juhani Pallasmaa, an architect/theorist who draws on many of the same phenomenological sources as Harries and Pérez-Gómez and shares their basic approach,[37] writes that modern architecture, and modernity in general, "aspires towards meaninglessness" by cutting itself off from history.[38] But if we as moderns want to free ourselves from unjustified sources of meaning, perhaps the negative valence of this claim should be reversed. Commenting on Stanley Cavell's reading of Beckett,[39] Simon Critchley writes of the need to see meaninglessness not as a given, much less a failure, but as an *achievement*: "On Cavell's reading, Beckett is not telling us that the universe is meaningless, rather meaninglessness is a task, an achievement, the achievement of the ordinary or the everyday."[40] The problem is not a lack of meaning but an overabundance of it, paired with the demand for something beyond humankind, something transcendent that secures our place in the world. Odo Marquard names such a demand the "emphatic concept of sense or meaning" – "something that is important, that makes one fulfilled, satisfied, happy,

41. Odo Marquard, "On the Dietetics of the Expectation of Meaning," in *In Defense of the Accidental: Philosophical Studies,* trans. Robert M. Wallace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33–36.
42. Critchley, *Very Little*, 211.
43. See, for example, Harries, *Ethical Function*, 140.
44. Marquard, "Expectation of Meaning," 35.
45. Harries, *Ethical Function*, 152
46. Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love*, 191.
47. Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement*, 8.
48. Ibid., 9.
49. I would worry, however, that even "everydayness" is well on its way to being turned into a cliché and transcendent term, in the same way that many of the foregoing terms have.
50. Harries, *Ethical Function*, Part III.
51. Harries acknowledges this point, even as it seems to then have no effect on his larger argument. See Harries, *Ethical Function*, 203.

and does not make one despair, something that is emphatically related, as their value and purpose, to human life, history, the world" – and understands the disappointment of not finding such meaning in life as arising not from getting too little but rather from expecting too much.[41] "What passes for the ordinary is cluttered with illusory narratives of redemption that conceal the very extraordinariness of the ordinary and the nature of its decay under conditions of nihilism," Critchley writes.[42] The illusory need for something greater leads us to devalue everyday meaning. If that is the case, then what Harries describes as "the human need to experience the social and natural world as a nonarbitrary meaningful order" perhaps should not be met, but defused, exorcised, done away with through philosophical therapy.[43] The question of meaning should neither be avoided nor rejected; rather, "having become emphatic and intoxicated with lamentation," as Marquard writes, it might need "some sobering up."[44] If we can free ourselves from the need for emphatic meaning, if we can complete the historical process of nihilism and achieve meaninglessness, we might create values of our own, freed from false assumptions about where they need to come from (beyond us) and how they are justified (transcendently). The ways that Harries and Pérez-Gómez read myths and religious texts, their insistence on the necessity of "dreams or stories about an ideal architecture,"[45] their appeal to experience "too deep for words,"[46] their equating (and thus inflating) of "human values and capacities" with "spirituality,"[47] their invocation of architecture as a gift or blessing,[48] all show them clinging to the very assumption that fuels nihilism: that meaning, if it is to be true, must come from beyond us. To counter nihilism, phenomenology first needs to admit that we are not at home in the world and do not deserve to be. If we can first achieve meaninglessness, then we might be able to reconceive, and thus re-achieve, meaning, now in a more everyday manner.[49]

Many architects and phenomenologically minded theorists of architecture, Harries and Pérez-Gómez among them, have taken up Heidegger's notion of dwelling.[50] All too often, it is deployed to mean little more than a feeling of being at home in the world. One of the central claims of *Being and Time*, however, is that it is moments of failure, when we do *not* feel at home in the world, that reveal our being to us.[51] According to Heidegger, we usually move through the world as skilled copers focused on our projects and tasks, the tools that we use as a means to those ends all but absent from our

awareness. But when those tools fail, they become conspicuously present to us. And in rare moments of anxiety, the sheer contingency of this entire structure of significance becomes apparent: as soon as we stop seeing the purposeful connections that make up our world, the justification for any action whatsoever disappears. It may be true, as Harries writes, that "we find it hard to live in a place, 'that is not our own, and much more, not ourselves,'" but that does not mean such comforts are deserved or justified, or that our feelings are not merely mistaken.[52] Harries approvingly quotes Heidegger: "Not yet are human beings mortals."[53] But Harries in fact demonstrates how difficult it is to move beyond religious and other forms of transcendental thinking, to be merely "mortal."

As much as one might admire – against other faddish approaches – the project of an ethical architecture, if it is to re-present our ethos to us, as Harries argues it should, it will only reinforce false assumptions about where meaning comes from, thus leaving us mired in nihilism. But might not architecture make, rather than *re*-present, a way of life? Neither ignore our history nor repeat it, but engage with it critically in order to free itself, and us, from our nostalgia for meanings beyond ourselves? What would an architecture akin to Beckett's literature – "a radical de-creation of these salvific narratives, a paring down or stripping away of the resorts of fable," as Critchley puts it – look like?[54] An architecture not of failed transcendence but attempted immanence? Amidst so much architecture trying to make us feel at home in the world, perhaps what we need first is an architecture that helps us to achieve meaninglessness. Indeed, if we are to take this task seriously, perhaps we should not even seek meaning until we have achieved meaninglessness. Until then, we can have no idea what a better concept of meaning would look like. For if we take the task of achieving meaninglessness seriously, we have to be willing to descend into the valley of nihilism without knowing if there is anything on the other side.

52. Ibid., 136. The internally quoted line is from Wallace Stevens.
53. Ibid., 165.
54. Critchley, *Very Little*, 211.

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