

Poetic Discourse:
*Paper Architecture as a Site for Thinking,
Writing and Spatial Agency*

Tordis Berstrand

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

Thinking along the lines of the paper on which I write
with its four sides lined up with words in an improvisational fashion
an argument builds while the pages turn – on the table if not yet the screen
This writing before writing is like the setting out of a house
a site for thinking and writing delineating the architecture of an argument to take form

what kind of argument will I design?

If paper arguments are manifestations of the endless ways that houses hold and paper folds
sheets with letters and lines in spatial formations of words and drawing
sentences that complement the structuring of houses that thinking undertakes
then the firm foundation on which reason seemingly *stands*, the edifices held by this *ground*,
are structures for thinking about structures for thinking, and possibly about building and writing too

what do architects have to say about the design of structures for thinking?

Architectural metaphors are integral to thinking, thinking needs a structure, a house and this house requires a thinking, a theory – it seems philosophical thinking as a structure of support, in words and writing, or the house will fall architectural building as a structure of support, in stone or steel, or the argument will fall intricately linked then, thinking and building, both with gravity, *gravitas*, a certain weight

proper articulation of the argument or collapse!

The building, which cannot stand on its own, requires support from thinking
The thinking, which cannot support itself, requires a structure to hold it

I am thinking along the walls of rooms and houses, then, to try to imagine this writing that holds the edifice in and of paper, drawn and described by means of lines, letters, words, geometries not hovering above the ground because too inflated, not buried in the basement because too loaded, not simply a house as we think we know it, but rather *another* kind of house, an *argument* and possibly in writing – a space for thinking about building an(d) architecture a process of reasoning – *clearing, proving, accusing* – yes, but more creative

not an upside-down house where meaning will soon fall out
not a downside-up house with a too firmly paved foundation that just keeps sinking
perhaps not a house at all

To think from the other end, then, from outside down, inside up, across the boundary of my paper where a point of return is approached once a knot has been tied
where weaving suspends a net across the gap in knowledge that cannot simply be paved over
where this hole is so wide that sentences become too short to stretch across
where the abyss is so deep that meaning cannot escape its darkness
here, I cast on a stitch, on either side, between which the knitting of a bridge begins
suspended in thin air without footing, nothing to stand on, no structure for support
here I hang while weaving across, traversing the void with my feet treading air

I keep going since if I stop, I could fall through
the spider web construction – tentative but also with determination
if not quite an emergency in the short term, then possibly in the long

Weaving a house becomes the weaving of a blanket before all four sides are connected
a soft, openly stitched fabric through which I can still look into the abyss below

and if Chinese reasoning weaves like a journey through parallel worlds unfolded over the duration of a scroll-like mental landscape, then it makes me think of a thinking that extends in a network of relations – like a blanket, relational, softer where the notions of memory and experience are at work in an open constellation where thinking speaks and reverberates within its own space for centuries to explore the possibilities of what is being said, one is perhaps left to appraise and comment only forever confirming the endless richness of the statement and thereby enhancing and extending it

thinking and writing is a convoluted affair – can/should I do one without the other?

I am thinking about writing while writing about thinking, and I am already inside as I speak out what writing means for thinking as a kind of site for something to be figured out, (un)tangled literally, drawn out and into the open, illuminated, delineated, held, pinched, inhabited writing as a means to transmit, structure, prepare thinking – for action, construction, support paper – folded, printed, virtual – as a medium for thinking, writing, drawing, lining up futures Another kind of *essay* then, closer perhaps to Montaigne's late sixteenth-century French *essai* if not yet a Chinese landscape scroll

*something less verifiable, measurable, conclusive, scientific
something more suggestive, tentative, speculative, flexible, open-ended
an attempt at writing the always incomplete thinking and a building that holds, if not stands
another kind of holding, less tight, more inclusive*

The *essay* as a space to structure this thinking, to practice the structuring of thinking like the design of a house, at the time of writing perhaps formless, groundless, open to the sky spatialised thinking and practiced spatial imagination, at the time of writing delineated in words informing the design process in a journey of spatial reasoning and blanket weaving

what can I say? how will I say it? what kind of saying is this?

If in architectural education, students are trained to think, write and design buildings then how to teach them to weave this house? to structure writing as a house? to design *this* building? with the architectural metaphor in play – in/on/of paper – construction is inevitable so how to teach students of architecture to construct this built argument? how to teach Chinese students to retrieve the spaces of their historical past? to make use of writing as a space for thinking about architecture and related questions to think through writing as a means to prepare for action, spatial agency and building in China

*what house for thinking will they be thinking of?
what thinking for housing will they devise and design?*

Will they think and write a Chinese courtyard house?

or which other structures and frameworks for thinking and argument might they retrieve/conceive?

places to dwell on architecture, ideas, relations, constructions of meaning and space

a tentative essay as an open form of configuration, constellation, articulation

I am thinking along the wall here, the walls of rooms and houses, like the framing of a courtyard

a framework for thinking with a central opening, if not an empty space

a framing of a space through the application of a lining of lined-up statements

an outline on a piece of paper, real or virtual, the white wall in front of me

ready for inscription, inhabitation, appropriation, a certain charge that makes it mine

mining it with meaning, purpose and argument in support of thinking as writing

A tentative constellation of words then, writing around notions of space, place and world

while framing what appears to be a central void already charged with potential

this openness that remains after inscription as a possibility for something else to take place

inexhaustible, never full, like another image placed in a passe-partout frame, replaceable

giving presence to something, making space for it, framing it, holding it, living it

Nota bene:

The text draws on the following sources for insights and references:

Derrida, Jacques. "Architecture Where the Desire May Live." In *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, edited by Neil Leach, 301-305. London: Routledge, 1997.

Jullien, François. *The Book of Beginnings*. Translated by Jody Gladding. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Norman Kemp Smith. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965.

Li, Xiaodong and Yeo Kang Shua. "The Propensity of Chinese Space: Architecture in the Novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*." *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review: Journal of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments* 13, no. 2 (2002): 49-62. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41757894>.

Oxford Dictionary of English (version 2.2.2, 203.1). Mac. Apple Inc., 2005-2017.

Sheringham, Michael. *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Wigley, Mark. *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995.

About the Author

Tordis Berstrand is an architect and lecturer in the Department of Architecture and Design at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, China. She teaches theory, criticism and aesthetics as well as design studio to students in the Bachelor and Master programmes. Tordis Berstrand studied in Copenhagen with further postgraduate and doctoral studies in London. Her Ph.D. on the construction of living spaces in works by Kurt Schwitters, Gordon Matta-Clark and Gregor Schneider forms the basis of current research on relations between artistic practice, dwelling and traditional Chinese thinking on space. Tordis Berstrand is particularly interested in writing as a critical spatial practice and tool in the design process and beyond.