

Book Review 3: Malpas, Jeff. *Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger, Place, Architecture* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021

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Dwelling as a Space of Possibility

Philosopher and professor Jeff Malpas is certainly well-known in architecture academic circles for his insightful work on the interconnections between architecture and philosophy. In his latest book *Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger, Place, Architecture* (Bloomsbury, 2021) he seems to discourage his architectural audience by placing a disclaimer in the introduction that posits his work may be too philosophical for architects. But are these two, architecture and philosophy, that disconnected from one another?

A careful reading of the book certainly proves the opposite. *Rethinking Dwelling* focuses on key issues concerning the philosophical understanding of architecture, reminding us that the acts of building, dwelling and living in place are at their very core philosophical acts. This strong reminder comes primarily (but not solely) through Martin Heidegger's famous essay, "Building Dwelling Thinking" (1951). Malpas departs from this essay and creates a book in two parts. The first part focuses on architecture in topological

thinking. Its three chapters touch on Heidegger's essay more closely and discuss the very notions of place and dwelling, the contemporary condition of homelessness, and issues of authenticity. The second part, consisting of seven short chapters, considers architecture as topological practice and discusses themes like parametric design, memory, truth, interiority, and verticality through both Heidegger's and other philosophers' (e.g., Edward Casey, Walter Benjamin) thought. The chapters can be read independently, as all of them explore one main topic: the mode of living that allows one to find "a 'home' in the world, in which one attends to the world and to one's place in it."¹

In order to find a home and be at home in the world, place emerges as paramount. As outlined in the pages of the book, place is primary to dwelling, while dwelling brings to the fore the way in which place and the human are implicated with one another. The author calls us to understand that dwelling is not a simple passive status of staying in place. It is rather a dynamic act, full of movement that is defined by and defines place. He explains why the term dwelling, that has prevailed as the translation of the German verb *wohnen*, is a translation ill-adapted to the original text (yet paradoxically is almost never remarked upon). Heidegger purposefully used *wohnen*, which is a common term in ordinary German use and thus easy to understand. Given that dwelling is a relatively uncommon term in contemporary English Malpas takes it upon himself to explain how it is connected with our everyday, placed and situated living, inviting the readers to question things they take for granted in building and architecture.

To mention just a few examples, Malpas begins by affirming that building, if it attends to dwelling, must also attend to thinking, meaning that "building must be itself thoughtful."² Investigating homelessness, he observes that it is a condition associated with a loss of 'groundedness' or 'rootedness' which is characteristic of modernity. Examining building in relation to memory, Malpas reminds us that memory is always nostalgic (and thus melancholic) as it involves a sense of loss, the loss of what is no longer present as it was. In that respect, to attend to what is remembered, through building architecture, "is to attend to the dynamically unfolding character of place."³ When looking at common practices of making architecture he corrects our associations about parametric design with our digital age. Given that the basic idea of parametricism is to define the set of parameters that create variations among a range of outcomes, Malpas claims that "a designer who sketches variations on a basic design form using paper and pencil may effectively be operating parametrically even if not in any formalized fashion."⁴ He continues explaining why parametric design does not connect architecture with place, and, more passionately than many contemporary architects, he argues that buildings should be genuinely *responsive* to the place in which they arise. Mentioning a number of well-known examples, he criticizes high-rises for their lack of relationship to place. Most importantly, Malpas clarifies that place is not a product of subjectivity, as many contemporary architects tend to support undermining place's importance. Instead, he posits that place "stands in an important relation to subjectivity (...) properly speaking, it is subjectivity that is 'determined',

in the sense of being made possible, by place.”⁵ Malpas extends the conversation on place to language, proving clearly that place is structured and opened up by language, as places are suffused with stories and narratives (from simple stories of how to get to a place, to complex stories of self-formation, anticipation, hope, fear, alienation or loss).

In *Rethinking Dwelling* architects can find many more relevant insights or clarifications of ideas and concepts that are mistakenly taken for granted in present architectural discourse and practice. In that sense, the book is a necessary read. If there is an element that could have made the work even more pertinent to an architectural audience, this would have been the inclusion of more contemporary and underrepresented architectural examples. The majority of the architectural projects discussed, in relation to the different philosophical arguments, are ensconced in the Western architectural canon and probably too well known. The inclusion of more recent and diverse examples would have been an asset.

After having read this book architects can approach building and place anew, from a perspective that is inquisitive and reflective. They are encouraged and inspired to investigate in greater depth basic but foundational conditions of dwelling and thinking, of a thoughtful dwelling that is meant for and addresses our human needs, dreams and aspirations. As professor Malpas poetically reminds us, the human being, although conditioned “in certain important ways, is never settled, never ‘completed’, but always remains to be worked out – the space that dwelling opens up is thus a space of possibility.”⁶

Notes

- 1 Jeff Malpas, *Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger, Place, Architecture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 183.
- 2 Ibid., 48.
- 3 Ibid., 110.
- 4 Ibid., 139.
- 5 Ibid., 141.
- 6 Ibid., 46.

About the Author

Angeliki Sioli is an assistant professor at the Department of Architecture, TU Delft in the Netherlands. She previously taught at McGill University, in Montreal; Tec de Monterrey, in Mexico; and Louisiana State University in the U.S. Her research connects architecture and language. She has edited the collected volumes *Reading Architecture: Literary Imagination and Architectural Experience* (Routledge, 2018), and *The Sound of Architecture: Acoustic Atmospheres in Place* (Leuven University Press, 2022).