



FOREWORD – A PURSUIT OF AUTHENTIC EXISTENCE
Scott Poole

*"Architecture continues to have an irreplaceable human task: to mediate between the world and ourselves, and to create a horizon by which to comprehend the world as well as ourselves."*¹
Juhani Pallasmaa

Juhani Pallasmaa is a curious man. In fact, he is the most curious person I have met in my life. His inquisitiveness seems to have no limit. But it does have definite focus. It orbits, in ever-expanding arcs from the core of a complex philosophical question: how does the experience of architecture help us to more fully grasp meaning in our existence?

If there was a singular answer for this question Pallasmaa would have abandoned it long ago. It is precisely because this existential question is so difficult, so complex, so infinitely extensive and so perpetually intriguing that he has continued to come back to it for more than a half-century. His cycle of inquiry and engaged action—making, thinking, reading, writing, and speaking—have become authentic extensions of his being. In fact, he would admit that it is largely through these activities, through sustained making, astute and informed observations of art and life, voracious reading, prolific writing, and constant lecturing that he, has, in fact, constructed himself.

The architectural dimension of his self-construction is expressed through works that range in scale from tiny door pulls that sensuously conform to the grasp of one's fingertips to an entire urban district in the center of Helsinki. Although his versatility as a maker extends from architecture and product design to graphic design and exhibit curation, he is primarily known for his discourses on architecture.

As a public intellectual, his numerous books, essays, and lectures are not a natural extension of his architecture; they are another kind of edifice altogether. To convey the existential significance of architecture to his audience, he rarely references his own works. Instead his ideas reflect a lifetime of first-hand encounters and ongoing dialogues with architects, philosophers, artists, scientists, and other colleagues across the continuum of time and around the globe. While the titles and subtitles of Pallasmaa's writings vary, the subject matter continually returns to the experience of architecture and the manifold ways that it imparts meaning and purpose to our lives.

The authority of his voice comes from more than the eloquence of his writing. Using straightforward language, Pallasmaa deftly fuses his own subjective experiences, ideas, and intellectual rigor with the accumulated wisdom of philosophers, the intuition of painters and sculptors, and the sense of life captured by film directors and poets, to name a few of his myriad artistic sources. Whether he is discussing existential space in cinema, embodied memory in literature, atmosphere in painting or silence, time and solitude in music or poetry, he is thinking, again and again, about the ways that art and architecture overlap and intertwine, about the deep connections between artistic phenomena and the mental essence of architecture.

In the conversation that follows, the reader will encounter the intellectual agility, subtlety, and precision of Pallasmaa's mind. While he is a gifted writer, he is at his best in dialogue. The unscripted format of conversation allows his ideas, beliefs, and even candid confessions to flow fluidly. Now and then, in the course of the conversation, Pallasmaa will refer to a philosopher, writer, or poet. He carries them with him wherever he goes. Especially the philosophers. They are not part of a disengaged intellectual repertoire; instead they are authentic aspects of his being, deeply incorporated in his memory and imagination, his thoughts and dreams, his feelings and perceptions.

Throughout the dialogue the reader will experience many aspects of Pallasmaa's existential odyssey. For existentialists, existence is, in a word, meaningless. Meaning is not inherent in us or in the world, it is an *achievement*. Each of us establishes our own unique identity—our essence—by choosing to find a purpose in life. Through situations, through lived experience, through our work, we establish values, beliefs, and meaning for our lives.

The primary substance of the dialogue that follows is grounded in Pallasmaa's choice, his calling: architecture. More specifically it discloses his relentless search for the significance of architecture. With characteristic humility he calls himself a "farm boy phenomenologist." In a strict sense of the term, he is a phenomenologist. His ideas are based on a first-person point of view emerging from his consciousness of the world, his engaged action, his unique experience, and his distinctive thoughts.

While the experiences Pallasmaa draws on are personal, his ideas are not private. They aim for universal significance and global discourse. He asserts, for example, that the human inhabitation of space has an irreplaceable human task grounded in generosity: "*A meaningful building*," he writes, "*does not argue or propose anything specific; it inspires us to see, sense, feel, and think for ourselves.*" Instead of a message or some other type of intentional content, architecture "*...inspires us to dream, helps us to see the beautiful garden and feel the silent persistence of an ancient tree, and sense the presence of other deeper significances of our lives. But the work does not indoctrinate us.*"²

Nor does Pallasmaa, himself, indoctrinate us. Instead, he encourages us to work on ourselves, to take responsibility for our own self-construction. His advice in this small book is profound: "*As great works always do, they dignify our own sense of self. Take advantage of seeing through the senses and hearts of these artists. It is dignifying, and you can sense your inner growth.*"

NOTES

¹ Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Existential Task of Architecture (2010)" in *Encounters 2, Architectural Essays*, ed. Peter MacKeith (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Publishing, 2012), 104.

² Juhani Pallasmaa, "Experience, Emotion and Thought, The Artistic Encounter and the Emergence of Meaning (2007)" in *Encounters 2, Architectural Essays*, ed. Peter MacKeith (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Publishing, 2012), 123.

³ Juhani Pallasmaa, *Rooted in Experience, An encounter with Juhani Pallasmaa*, ed. Scott Wall (Knoxville, University of Tennessee, 2019), pp. 31-32.