

The Town Beyond the Modern

A Debate about Space, Time and Gestalt

Carl Fingerhuth



Working with towns and their space so that they become an intense reflection of their inhabitants' needs, goals, and dreams - in other words, creating and maintaining meaningful town space - has been my lifelong preoccupation. Towns are where I gained experience, learned, and developed.

In my professional life, from 1956 until today, I have had the opportunity to experience from within the framework of towns this dramatic change in human consciousness as we transition from the modern time into the current era. I came of age just as the modern dogma was coming into question. As such, I had to deal with, both inwardly and outwardly, today's new, dramatic and yet unnamed age. My best guess is to call our time the era beyond the modern.

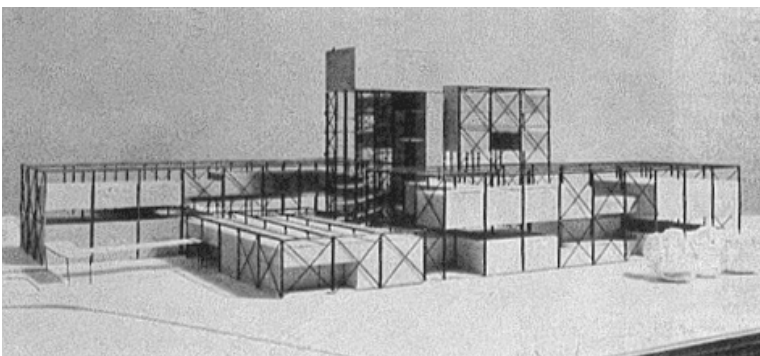
I believe that my background makes me especially aware of the c transformation we are experiencing. To use the world of the town to draw attention to this shift makes a lot of sense: like art, religion or politics, towns are also one of the most intense reflections of our being, our aspirations, and our past. Perhaps because they are so close to us, we do not acknowledge this meaningfulness.

A biography as a history book



1

My first town-related assignment was in 1958, working in the "office pour la construction des tours de Carouge" in Geneva. Next to the Carouge historic center, five "Machines à Habiter" were to be built according to the rules of the Athens Charter, Le Corbusier's post-World War II treatise that at the time had come to represent ultimate town-planning dogma. The project clearly demonstrated the consciousness of the time: functionality, rationality, purity, and transparency were the key issues. This meant a clear separation of housing, work, traffic and recreation, ignoring the existing town, and celebrating "form follows function" and "less is more".



2

For my diploma in architecture in 1960, I was asked to design a technology museum with the stipulation that each department within the museum could be extended or reduced independently. There was no specific site; it should function as a prototype that could travel all over the world.



3

My quest for a more complex view of towns began with a job as an archaeologist in Egypt. We were charged with finding remnants of past cultures before they were lost, due to the construction of the new high dam at Assuan. Our primary focus was a temple built during the rule of Ramses II.¹ During the site's first excavation in 1920, the early Coptic Church, situated in the courtyard of the temple, was deemed a nuisance and torn out without anyone recording its existence.



4

The extraordinary Nubian villages, doomed to disappear

¹ Ricke, Herbert mit Beiträgen von Carl Fingerhuth, Labib Habachi und Louis v. Zabkar; Ausgrabungen von Khor-Dehmit bis Bet el-Wali, The University of Chicago Press, 1967

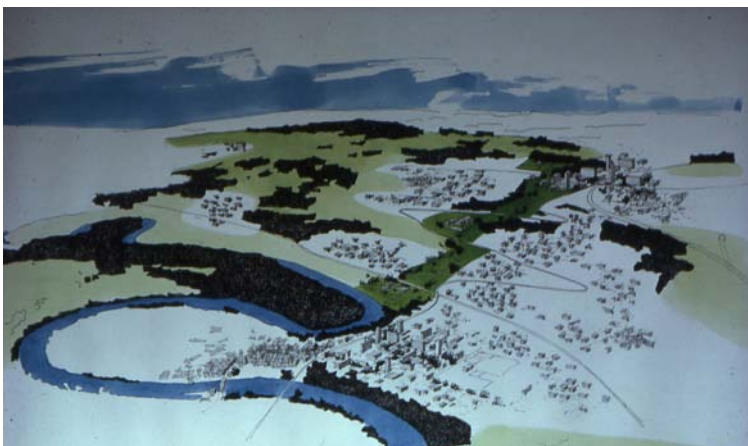
under the water of the new high dam, met the same fate. Archeology at that time meant deciding which layer was the relevant one and removing anything that might detract from the splendor of the “royal” culture.



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Upon my return to Switzerland, I was not sure where to go. So I declared myself an expert in town and country planning. This was a new and unknown field, open and undefined, which at the same time was attracting growing public awareness.

My first job involved establishing an agency for town and country planning in the state of Wallis, a very conservative world that harbored a lot of skepticism toward new ideas. A primary issue of contention concerned creating zoning laws in order to be able to connect sewage to a water treatment station. But almost overnight, everything changed. The old times were gone and we suddenly faced catastrophe: a typhoid epidemic broke out in the famous ski resort of Zermatt. People died because of water pollution. I was confronted with one of the first enigmatic signs of the upcoming environmental crisis.



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When I turned 28, I decided to end my “apprenticeship” and

open my own town planning and urban design company. I focused on bringing elements of space together: housing, public buildings, traffic, landscape, and developing new ways to engage people in public planning processes.



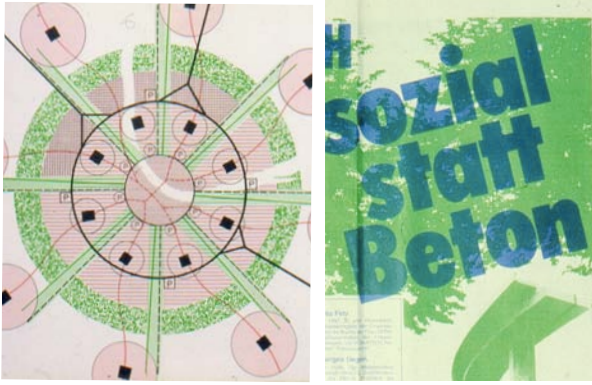
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This period ended with a contract to design the capital of a newly created state in Nigeria. The governor of the state told me he wanted a city like Paris or London. We tried to look for African identity; it was a fascinating and very conflictual assignment!



8

At 42, my time as an “expert” was finished. I was offered a position as state architect for the city of Basel, Switzerland. I was no longer a consultant. I was given political, economic, and social responsibility and a lot of money to invest in the transformation of a two thousand year old town.



9 - 10

I stepped right into the middle of a cultural and political battle. On one side were the old planners, staunch supporters of the modern town vision with its high-rise buildings, private cars, parking houses, and urban highways right through the center of the historic city. On the other side, a new generation of citizens who opposed any change at all of the existing town.



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Finding consensus, bringing together form and structure - or gestalt - to represent a town beyond the modern, was a fascinating job. The project I developed on the Hebelstrasse with the architects Herzog & de Meuron became a worldwide icon.



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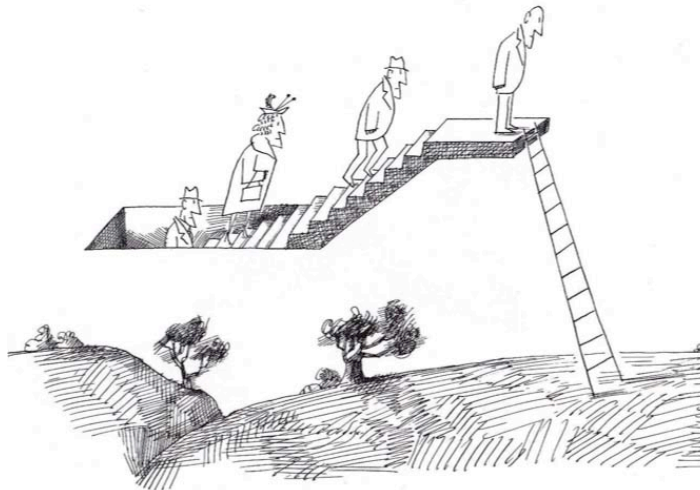
In 1992, after fourteen years in politics and administration, I returned to a life of personal independence. I am now, once more, a consultant for towns, I teach at universities and try to write about the town.



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In the process I I became more and more drawn in the interaction and interdependence between the new emotional and spiritual world of our new time and the physical manifestation of our towns. It appeared in discussion about Feng-Shui lines in Kunming, China, when I was invited to join discussions about space and spirituality at universities or how to develop new forms of dialog in processes connected with taking care of the transformation of towns.

The new world



14

Saul Steinberg's drawing is a wonderful reflection of the challenge of our time. Here we are in the middle of nowhere. How do we get back to earth? How do we bring our society's new consciousness, new sensuality, emotionality and intuition into the physical world? How do we transform into gestalt, that which is formless, within the stomachs, hearts, and minds of today's people?

Steinberg's drawing fascinates me in another respect. It tells in one picture one hundred stories, each one with ten thousand words. Words are hard and often one-dimensional. Pictures are open and multidimensional. (If I were permitted to rewrite the bible, I would propose changing the wording of John 1:1 from: "In the beginning was the word," to: "In the beginning was the picture.") Towers do not use words. They show themselves and tell their story with pictures, with gestalt - form and structure with a meaning.



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Towers; in Thailand, in Italy, in Switzerland in the USA. All four have a square ground floor. All four dominate their surroundings but each one tells a different story.

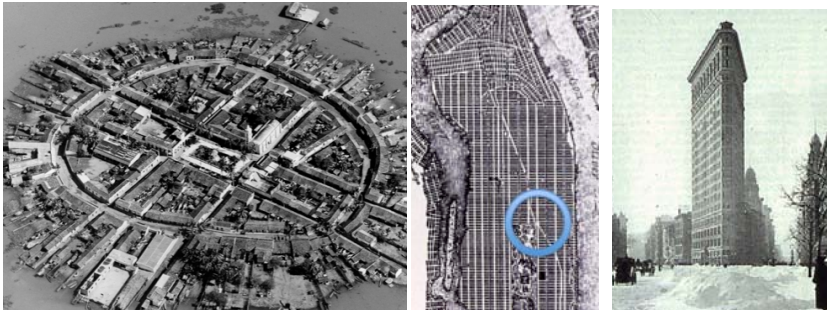
The tower in Thailand is a spiritual symbol. It reminds man of the unity of Earth and Heaven. On the way up to the sky the

square form of the ground floor, as a symbol of the physical, transforms itself into a circle, as a symbol of universal unity, which then dissolves itself in form of a pointed needle in heaven into pure spirituality.

The Tuscan tower refers to political power of a worldly sovereign. It was a stronghold, unapproachable and without windows. It defines a territory and is symbolically closed for any stranger.

This Basel high-rise apartment building scoffs at 19th century city housing blocks and shows off the boundless potential of the modern world. The inherent promise is that modern technology will eliminate all boundaries and social inequalities. It promises a glorious new town that will replace the dark old city and its restrictions.

The World Trade Center in Manhattan was the ultimate symbol of the importance and dominance of the economic power of western civilization, reducing the statue of liberty to a puppet, and becoming the main physical focus point of the whole of Manhattan, indeed, of the Western world. It did not make friends and celebrated through its gestalt the power of rationality and perfection. It did not have a “crown” like the Chrysler building. It was prepared to continue growing right up into the sky.



18 -20

The structure of Mexcalcitan could be a reflection of the inner world of the Aztec civilization. The universal circle was structured by an orthogonal order, as a first symbol of humanity, that human beings control the world.

The intersection of Broadway, part of an old Indian path connecting the Hudson River to the ocean, and Fifth Avenue, is a silent reference to the roots of New York.

We are entering a new era; we are in the midst of a radical transformation of consciousness. One of the many changes this shift entails is the perception of our collective self, from the physical body as incarnation of the self, to our souls as part of our cosmic origin. This produces a similar shift in how we perceive our towns. They are no longer regarded as simple piles of stones. Thus, towns are thought of as the “body” of society, connected to its collective consciousness and its cosmic origin.

Where are we and our towns and where are we going?

Bookstore display windows are filled with books about our inner and outer world. There are books about the ego, morphogenetic fields, polar ice caps, the difference between Islam and Christianity. The subject of towns is rarely integrated into any of these books. There are books about towns but mostly they are picture books, monographs, and guidebooks. They show images of the world or praise the latest hero of architecture.

My approach is different; Gestalt is my frame of reference. I seek to connect the gestalt of towns to the new energies which show themselves: the emotionality, sensitivity, and spirituality of our world today. Bridging the great divide between society and the technicians of our towns will allow cities to develop according to the needs, wishes and dreams of their inhabitants.

There is a fascinating coherence of phenomena between mankind, town, and the cosmos. Phenomena are defined as “facts that are observed to exist, especially those whose cause is in question” ². These particular phenomena are not new but they were buried, or discredited, because they were a nuisance in the context of the dogma of the modern era.

I use the word “mankind” in a multidimensional way. It stands for the global and the individual. Today’s change of consciousness is a global one, with ramifications across many different cultures. But at the same time there is a strong reaction to the globalization, which reactivates specific local energies.

The term “town” refers to space that has been transformed by human intervention. It includes not only the densely built-up areas of the common towns but also all the transformation of nature inflicted by modern civilization: ski resorts in the Alps, shopping centers and gas stations along highways, electrical high-tension lines and pipelines.

“Cosmos” refers to the physical universe but also to mankind’s inner world.

² The Oxford Compact English Dictionary; Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, p.848

Common Phenomena of mankind, town and cosmos

The common phenomena of mankind, town and cosmos are all organized in holonistic structures. Every element is part of a more complex element and contains in it self less complex elements. A house is not a house if it doesn't contain rooms and a town is not a town if it doesn't contain houses.

They all require structure and form for their organization and identity. Language is ruled by grammar and orthography. The grammar of towns is defined by its systems: the sequence of its open spaces, public transportation stations, or the main pipelines of the sewage system. Houses and gardens are the words.

They are all a palimpsest with old, irrelevant text scraped off, replaced by new text. The old text is mostly imperceptible but it is still there.

Awareness of the polarity between all things was essential for all pre-modern philosophies. The era beyond the modern reintegrates this knowledge. It is no longer a matter of right or wrong, but a consideration of less or more. Too much change in a town creates a feeling of insecurity. Not enough change leads to a feeling of decay and hopelessness. Caring for the transformation of the town in the time beyond the modern means balancing these two polar energies.

Given the space limitations of this publication, I will only explore the subject of evolution. Both in theory and practice, integrating the new beyond the modern paradigm into how we care for our towns is an extremely neglected subject.

Evolution

The Polish philosopher Jean Gebser’s description of the steps of evolution—from archaic, to magical, to mental, and eventually to what he called integral consciousness—has become a standard interpretation of human evolution – and works wonderfully to understand towns.

Space and Time Relationship according to Jean Gebser
(Text in red added by the author)

	Structure	Dimensioning	Perspectivity	Emphasis	
Archaic:	Zero-dimensional	None	Prespatial Pretemporal		Cave
Magic :	One-dimensional	Pre-perspectival	Spaceless Timeless		Village
Mythical:	Two-dimensional	Unperspectival	Spaceless Natural temoricity		Town
Mental:	Three-dimensional	Perspectival	Spatial Abstractly temporal		Aglomeration
Integral:	Four-dimensional	Aperspectival	Space-free Time-free		Global City

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Gebser uses different “structures” to explain the steps of evolution. He begins by looking at our consciousness of space. Mankind’s understanding of space has evolved from a nonexistent awareness of spatiality to a four-dimensional consciousness. Five-dimensional consciousness is next; one day, we will have to find a term for that era! I eschew Gebser’s term “integral” for the current age. It sounds too final. There is no evidence that evolution will not go on. As a society, we do not yet have a fitting term for the current era. We used to define it as postmodern. Unaware of how autonomous and powerful these changes would become, architects discredited the word. Therefore I prefer to characterize our time as the era beyond the modern.

The zero-dimensional space of the archaic time

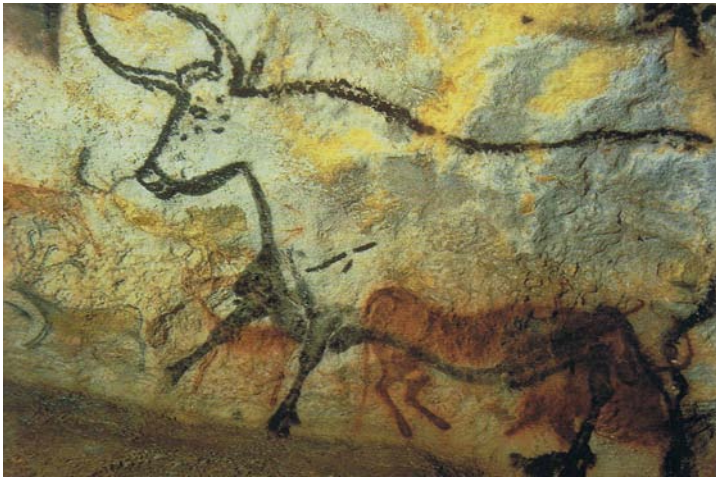


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Abbildung 18

The only physical clues we have of that time are some footprints in the East-African soil.

The one-dimensional space of the magic time



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Very sophisticated paintings of animals appear , painted 13 - 14 000 years ago, out of nowhere. Mankind starts to perceive the world and memorize its gestalt. Human beings begin creating places in space.

The two-dimensional space of the mythical time



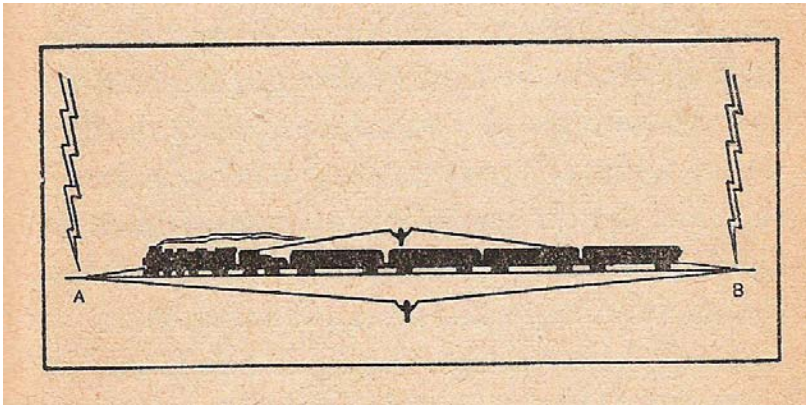
About 4,000 years ago, settlements appear around the world, structured along lines corresponding to astronomical information. In India, China, Italy, Mexico, town layouts transform from organic sprawl, into circles, then into rationally defined squares.

The three-dimensional space of the modern time



Around 2,000 years ago, a new consciousness develops worldwide that embraces the third dimension of space. Our perception of planet earth morphs from flat to globe shaped. Towns begin building towers and artists discover perspective.

The four-dimensional space beyond the modern time



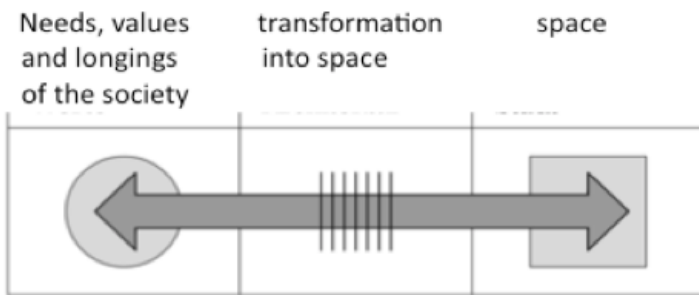
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With Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, the limitations of three-dimensional space disappear and are replaced by a time/space continuum. Space is now seen as a dynamic system. Einstein's drawing with a person on top of a train and a person standing next to the train refers to the connection of time and space. The two persons will perceive the flashlight atop the speeding train at different times. If the train is running at the speed of light, the observer on the train will never see it. Simultaneousness is relative.

Caring for the transformation of towns beyond the modern must integrate this change from a static perception of space to a dynamic perception of space.

Understanding the time beyond the modern

The needs, values, and longings of our world are changing dramatically. Our consciousness is more complex. We must integrate the new realities into the gestalt of our towns and find the appropriate form and structure. We must give form to the formless.



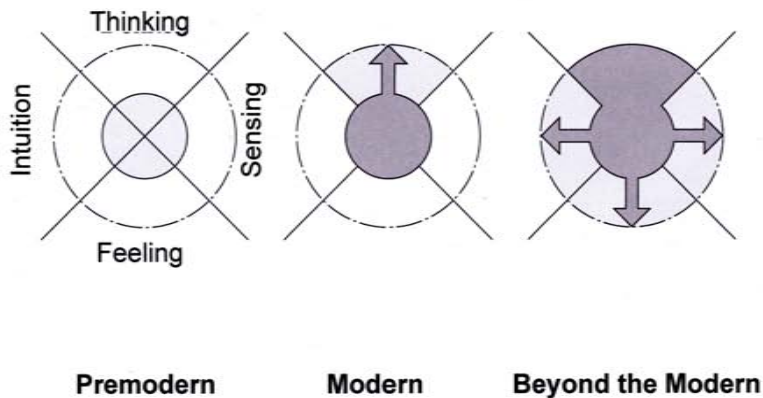
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One of the major problems of our time is that in architecture, urban design, and town planning, politicians and professionals hesitate to acknowledge or even discredit this paradigm shift - the new set of values that define our collective thinking, feeling and sensing, today.

The expansion of our consciousness



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The modern era was an expedition into the depths of our thought potential. This obsession was so strong that other potentials - feeling, sensing, and intuition - were neglected or even aggressively discriminated against.

Today, more and more phenomena appear which point to the overbearing focus on our rational potential of the modern time.

Strong energies appear which draw our attention to this default. The scientific world is scared by these phenomena. I will try to point out some of the main themes of this new quest. Due to the limitations of space for this article they only will be spotlights on a vast territory.

In his work the Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung over and over again stressed the importance of this assignment:
“I can only take the reaction which begins in the West against the intellect in favor of Eros, and in favor of intuition, as a mark of cultural advance, a widening of consciousness beyond the too narrow limits set by a tyrannical intellect.” Written in 1931.³

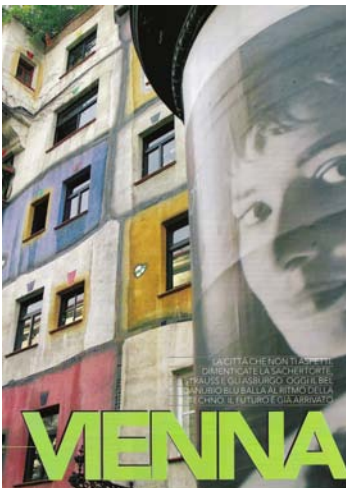
³ Wilhelm, Richard/Jung, C.G.; Geheimnis der Goldenen Blüte, Diederich, München, 1990, S.64, übersetzt von Sarah Gonser

The longing for the reintegration of feeling and sensuality



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Our collective yearning for the reintegration of feeling and sensuality has a tremendous impact on how we deal with our towns. One of the huge challenges of our time is to qualify this longing, to transform spatial “pornography” and coarseness into sophisticated and loving sensuality.



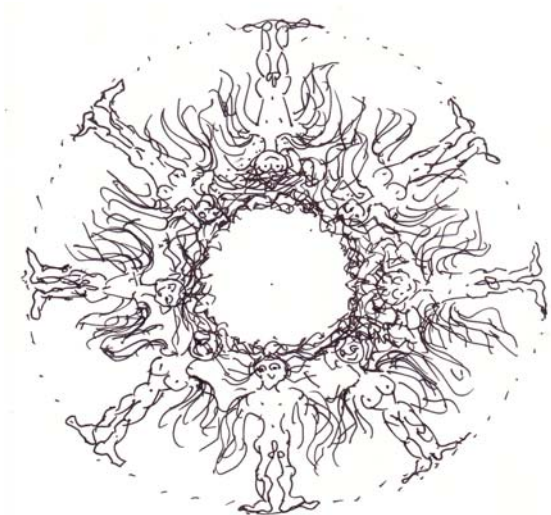
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In 1972 the Austrian painter Friedensreich Hundertwasser started painting houses as wonderful colorful fantasies. Then he proclaimed that the painters had to build the houses, because according to him beautiful houses had disappeared. 1977 the city of Vienna asked him to build a house on the Löwengasse. In the first years it was visited by more tourists than the castle of Schönbrunn.

The title of an exhibition he had in 2005 in the German Museum for Architecture in Frankfurt was “Built dreams and longings”. In the review of the exposition the journalist Dieter Bartetzko wrote: “Irritating like a dilettante but accurate like a caricature, Hundertwasser’s orgies of Kitsch denounce the lacks of today’s architecture. One does not have to take the buildings seriously but reflect on their popularity.”⁴

⁴ Bartetzko, Dieter; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 29.11.2005, S. 35

A longing for the reintegration of spirituality

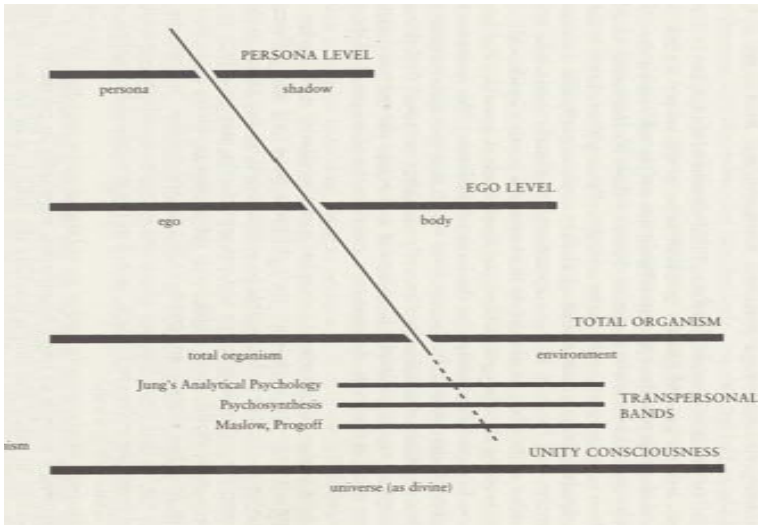


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Spirituality no longer represents the opposite of materialism. Instead it symbolizes a new consciousness of the unity of all things; a dream, that embraces all aspects of life. As such it becomes a comprehensive term for all the potentials of the mankind. This newly emerging spirituality is independent of all religions. The religions are not anymore dogmas but paths to a spiritual consciousness of the holiness of all things.

In this understanding the town is not any more just a pile of stones. Accepting the concept of the holonic structure it is a reflection of our self on a comprehensive level. We have to take care of the town in the same way as we take care of ourselves.

A longing for the unity of man and nature



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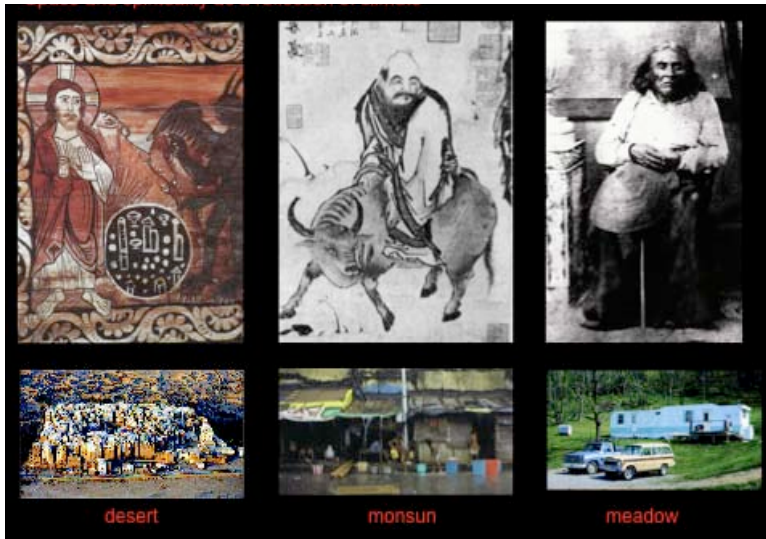
This schema is copied out of a book from Ken Wilber with the title “No Boundaries”. He describes this specific theme of separation in the modern society: separation of persona and shadow, body and soul, mankind and nature. Our new spirituality feels different. We are longing for union on all levels and also in our towns.



34

The town beyond the modern faces the same challenge. Apartments crave to have loggias, balconies or terraces. Houses would like to have gardens. Towns long for trees and parks.

About the origins of separation



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Preparing a speech at the Japanese-German Institute in Berlin I found a fascinating approach to this theme. In 1948 the Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro wrote about the interaction between climate and religion.⁵ He described religions as a product of mankind's trust in nature.

Christianity has its origin in the climate of the desert. Nature was hostile. Man will not be fed, if he doesn't work – "in the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground" (1. Moses, 3.19). Man had to create his own urban paradise, with walls to protect him from nature – its physical and spiritual dangers. He built churches like fortresses and towns with stone walls around them.

The religion of the north Asian, European and American continents had its roots in what Tetsuro called the meadow climate. Nature was friendly. Man was sure, that in spring the apples and nuts would again grow for him. He was not chased out of paradise, so he did not need walls to protect himself. The holy place was in nature, under the tree. As he was part of all, he did not need to separate himself from nature.

Buddhism was a product of the monsoon-climate. Nature provided food and water in abundance. But you could not trust. Periodically nature became so destructive, that everything was washed and blown away. The settlements on earth were an unsecure and provisional place. The best solution is to try to find your way to Nirvana, a "place of oblivion to care, pain or external reality" as fast as possible.⁶ So there was no reason to invest in a solid town.

⁵ Watsuji, Tetsuro; Fudo, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1997

⁶ Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary; Merriam-Webster, Springfield, p.799

In our time beyond the modern, religions are gradually replaced by a global spirituality. In this consciousness nature is basically not regional but global. The climate is seen more and more as the earth's situation. Important is the status of the seas, the forests, the overall temperature or the ozone shield. Everything is interdependent. The global nature provides the energy, the sun, the wind, and the tides and the rain.

I am fascinated by the presence of these different cultural backgrounds in the north European discussions about urban design and town planning. In an exhaustive publication about urban design and town planning in Switzerland⁷ two of the most prominent Swiss architects, Jacques Herzog and Marcel Meili, expressed their disgust about Swiss mankind: "They lack an urbanization of their souls. They prefer trees to walls!" It seems to me very clear that Swiss people prefer trees. Their "souls" emerged in the meadow climate and not in the desert.

⁷ Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog, Marcel Meili, Pierre de Meuron, Christian Schmid; Die Schweiz, Ein städtebauliches Portrait, Birkhäuser, Basel, 2006, S. 149

The impact of the four dimensional perception of space



19

In four-dimensional space, there are many different points of view and each has its own reason. We know things are changing dramatically but we are only slowly beginning to grasp the ramifications.

The new challenge



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Caring for beyond-modern towns is not radically different from how we cared for modern towns. Clean water and sewage are still delivered and removed in the same way. What is changing is our consciousness. As we confront new energies, we are developing:

- an awareness of the polarity of all things
- an awareness of the complexity and contradiction within towns
- an awareness of the imprints of past cultures within our towns
- an awareness of the importance of reintegrating the potentials of the self (sensuality, emotionality, spirituality), discarded by modernism
- a need to heal our separation from nature

This will change how we care for our towns. Architects must stop complaining that they are no longer heroic creators. They have to accept that they are midwives, translators, transformers working for the benefit of the population.

We are moving toward awareness without dogmas, where people accept the complexity and contradiction of our world, where they want to understand what is going on in Cairo, Stuttgart, or Beijing, and where they want to be respected and not exploited.

This will require new gestalt in form and structure of our towns and it will call for new “software”, new instruments, methods, and procedures, as we are entering a new era, beyond the modern.

Meaningful towns are aesthetic not anesthetic, they are beautiful not banal, they are in accordance with the needs, values, and longings of people. When they are all these things, they will also be spiritual towns. This is one of the big challenges of our time.

This text is the written form of a PowerPoint presentation within the international conference entitled "Meaningful Spaces" at the Theological Faculty of the University of Zürich in April 2011

Photographers/Copy right/References

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- 2 Carl Fingerhuth
- 3 Carl Fingerhuth
- 4 Carl Fingerhuth
- 5 Carl Fingerhuth, CH-Verbier, 1965
- 6 Carl Fingerhuth, Master Plan for the area of Bremgarten in the metropolitan area of Zürich in 1972
- 7 Unknown photographer, Presentation of the Master Plan for the Capital of Imo State Nigeria, 1975
- 8 Hochbauamt Kt. Basel-Stadt, Historic center of Basel
- 9 Baudepartement Kt. Basel-Stadt, Master Plan for Basel ca. 1960 and the
- 10 Election poster of the Green party,1980: "Social instead of concrete"
- 11 Carl Fingerhuth
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- 21 Gebser, Jean; The ever-present origin, Ohio University Press, Athens, USA, 1985, p.117
- 22 Advertisement of a shop for footwear
- 23 Norbert Aujolat, published in David Lewis Williams; The Mind in the Cave, Thames & Hudson, London, 2004, Plate 1; Auroch bull in the Hall of the Bulls in Lascaux
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- 27 Carl Fingerhuth
- 28 Burri, René, Le Corbusier designing the monastery La Tourette in 1956
- 29 Carl Fingerhuth
- 30 Unknown photographer; Installation by the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist in the church of San Stae in Venice at the Art Biennale of 2008
- 31 Poster promoting the town of Vienna
- 32 Carl Fingerhuth, in SEHNSUCHT, The book of Architectural Longings, German Pavillion at the Architecture Biennale 2010 in Venice, 2010, p.178
- 33 Wilber, Ken; No boundary, Shambala, Boston, 2001, p.9
- 34 Unknown photographer; House and garden in Freiburg i.Bsg, Germany
- 35 top left: Jesus and the Devil, ceiling of the church in CH-Zillis, 1114
top middle: Laotse on his buffalo riding west
top right: Chief Seattle 1864 in Washington
below left: Feiner, Jaques; Shibam, Yemen
below middle: unknown photographer; Slum in India
below right: Fingerhuth, Carl; West Virginia
- 36 unknown photographer; The flying French painter Yves Klein around 1950
- 37 unknown photographer; Tahir Square in Cairo, 2011