

# Heidegger, Aalto, and the Limits of Design

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*It is not in things, but in man's attitude toward  
life that we find the final standard of measurement.*

Alvar Aalto

## 1.

In spite of the common tendency to treat him as a nostalgic anti-Modernist, when it came to architecture and design, as with painting and sculpture, Heidegger seems to have had a keen interest in, and appreciation for, some of the key Modernist figures and their works – certainly this appears to have been so with respect to Le Corbusier,<sup>1</sup> and, according to Heinrich Petzet, Alvar Aalto.<sup>2</sup> As Petzet tells it:

Heidegger's lecture, ['Bauen Wohnen Denken'], ... to an unusual degree, caught the attention of one of the greatest architects of our time, Alvar Aalto. On Aalto's writing desk, friends noticed the volume containing the text of this lecture and reported this

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<sup>1</sup> Dieter Jähnig reports that Heidegger said of Corbusier's pilgrimage church at Ronchamp that it was "a holy space" – see Günther Neske, *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger*, Pfullingen 1977, p. 136. Moreover, although Petzet tells us that during the visit to the site, Heidegger left Petzet and his companions to an "examination" of the architecture', while he, Heidegger, went to hear a new mass being used for the pilgrims (see Heinrich Wiegand Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger 1929-1976*, transl. by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, Chicago 1993, p. 207), Petzet also talks elsewhere, in terms that fit with Jähnig's comment, of Heidegger's 'exuberance from his impressions of the pilgrimage church by Corbusier' (Petzet, *Encounters*, loc. cit., p. 150). This does not mean, however, that Heidegger would have regarded *all* of Corbusier's work with similar enthusiasm, especially given the significant shifts in Corbusier's work from early to late.

<sup>2</sup> One might argue that the work of Aalto and Corbusier – especially a work such as Ronchamp – contain elements that do not adhere to the standard Modernist creed (and some of these elements will be important in the discussion below), but it is hard to claim that the two therefore cannot be counted as key figures in the Modernist movement.

back to Freiburg. When I was coming back from Finland, I ran into some young Finnish architects who were likewise talking about that lecture. When soon thereafter I reported this to Heidegger, he was very pleased; and he gave me the assignment of taking his greetings to Aalto when I repeated the trip as planned the following year. But the death of the great architect kept me from making a connection between the two men, which I would have only too happily have done.<sup>3</sup>

There is admittedly something a little strange about Petzet's remark here: Aalto died on May 11, 1976, but Heidegger himself died on May 26 of the same year. Even had Aalto lived, it seems unlikely that the additional two weeks would have provided Petzet with much more of an opportunity to make the connection to Aalto. Did Petzet misremember the incident or perhaps the timing of it? Petzet's account is also tantalisingly brief – he offers no more detail than is given in this one passage, and there seem to be no other sources, from Heidegger's side or Aalto's, that could offer any additional corroboration or elucidation.<sup>4</sup> We thus know nothing of the extent of Heidegger's knowledge of Aalto or of Aalto's of Heidegger – it is not even clear what weight should really be attached to the presence of that volume by Heidegger on Aalto's desk. Nevertheless, the main point of the anecdote – namely, that the philosopher and the architect might each have had an interest in and even respect for the work of the other – is in accord with a widespread understanding that associates both with a similar mode of architectural and design thinking: one that is phenomenologically attentive and situationally responsive, and that takes as a central focus the relation between human being and its environmental context. Yet for all that it is commonplace to assume such convergence, there is little in the existing literature in the way of any direct and detailed investigation of the relation between Heidegger and Aalto, and often, when the two are treated together, it is as

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<sup>3</sup>Petzet, *Encounters*, loc. cit., p. 188.

<sup>4</sup>There was certainly no direct connection between the two men, and the Aalto Archives contain no record of any correspondence between them.

part of a much broader treatment,<sup>5</sup> rather than in terms of a more direct focus on the work of each in relation to the other.

There is also a further complication: the Heideggerian mode of thinking that is at issue is frequently viewed as exemplifying and promoting a backward-looking conservatism that privileges problematic notions of identity and belonging over the uncertainty and mobility that are seen as characteristic of modernity. For many writers, this opposition is itself read in political terms, one that reminds us of Heidegger's own political commitment during the 1930s, and in a way that views notions of home, belonging, and place, as inevitably tending towards political danger – towards the extremities of fascism and the horrors of Auschwitz.<sup>6</sup> What, one might ask, given the supposed commonality of Heidegger and Aalto, should we take this to imply about Aalto's work? Does it also fall victim to the same critique – does it give a more problematic tenor to, for instance, Aalto's association with a specifically Nordic or Finnish architectural style (and with aspects of Finnish national identity)? If not, then does Aalto's work indicate the possibility of a different way of reading the issues that are at stake in Heidegger – and so a different way of understanding Heidegger's thinking on architecture and design?

Whether or not they arrive at a positive or negative appraisal of his thinking, discussions of architectural and design in Heidegger invariably begin with the essay mentioned by Petzet, and in which Aalto seems to have had an interest, 'Bauen Wohnen Denken'. It is this essay which is also taken to carry with it the problematic connotations mentioned by Heynen. But we might ask how Aalto himself might have understood that essay – what is it that might, as Petzet puts it, 'to an unusual degree... [have] caught the attention' of Aalto? Rather than assume an answer here, there may be some value in re-reading this essay, and doing so in a way that would also bring it into closer proximity with Aalto, a way that would connect it more

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, as in Colin St. John Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: The Uncompleted Project*, London 1995. Although an important and interesting work, St John Wilson's volume deals with Heidegger and Aalto largely they contribute to the 'other tradition' that is his primary focus.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique*, Cambridge Massachusetts 1999, p. 23; and also Adam Schar, *Heidegger for Architects*, Abingdon 2007, pp. 112-114.

directly with Aalto's own understanding of architecture and design.<sup>7</sup> Doing so may indeed be instructive, not only in terms of an understanding of the anecdote Petzet recounts, but also in an understanding of Heidegger's own thinking, while it may also further illuminate Aalto's work.

This is just the strategy that I wish to follow here. The first part of this essay will thus focus on Heidegger's essay, only then, in the second part, moving on to consider the relationship to Aalto. A key element in my approach will be the rethinking of a concept that is central to Heidegger's late thinking about architecture and design, the concept referred to by the German *Wohnen*. My aim is not only to arrive at a rethought idea of what *Wohnen* might mean, however, but also to use that idea as the starting point from which to arrive, through the juxtaposition of Heidegger with Aalto, at an account of the proper limits within which architecture and design operate and out of which they arise. Reading Heidegger in relation to Aalto in this way may also enable us better to arrive at a more concrete sense of what is at issue for Heidegger in architecture and design, and that may dispel some of the tendency for Heidegger's account (whether in relation to architecture and design or more generally) to be read in terms of 'arcane erudition', 'rare and exceptional states' or 'mystical raptures, reveries, and swoonings'.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it offers, at least as far as

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<sup>7</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz is one who might be thought already to have provided an answer in works such *Genius Loci, towards a phenomenology of architecture*, New York 1980, Christian Norberg-Schulz, *The Concept of Dwelling*, New York 1985 and Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Architecture: Presence, Language, Place* Milan 2000. There are similarities between the account offered above and that of Norberg-Schulz, but there are also some differences – most obviously in my refusal of the term 'dwelling' itself, but also in other respects that may not be immediately apparent. Norberg-Schulz has a more determinate conception of the character of place and our relation to place than my account allows (part of my emphasis is on the indeterminacy and questionability that is at the heart of our living in the world – something that brings me closer on some points to a thinker such as Massimo Cacciari than it does to Norberg-Schulz), and this also means that I am less willing to talk of notions of identity and belonging, and especially authenticity, than is Norberg-Schulz himself, and when I do use these notions it is often in ways that differ significantly from his (for a critique of authenticity, see my 'From Extremity to Release: Place, Authenticity, and the Self', in: *The Horizons of Authenticity: Essays in Honor of Charles Guignon's Work on Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Moral Psychology*, ed. by Hans Pedersen and Lawrence Hatab, Dordrecht, forthcoming, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> See [Martin](#) Heidegger, *Parmenides*, transl. by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz, Bloomington 1998, p. 149: 'To think Being does not require a solemn approach and the pretension of arcane

the thinking of architecture and design are concerned, a way of reading Heidegger as engaged with certain simple and yet fundamental questions concerning the nature of a properly 'human' mode of living in the world, as well as with the manner of our attunement to such a mode of living.

## 2.

Heidegger's 'Bauen Wohnen Denken' was originally presented at a conference on 'Man and Space' attended by architects and designers (as well as philosophers – including the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset). Not only is the essay clearly concerned with issues of architecture and design, but it has also become a frequently-cited text in architectural and design theory. Yet in spite of this, the terms 'architecture' and 'design' figure in the essay only fleetingly. Architecture is itself encompassed within the term that Heidegger views as more fundamental, namely, 'building', and as such it remains present, but under another name. Design, however, seems to appear, if at all, in more obscure fashion, and the term itself, *Entwurf* in the German, is used by Heidegger only once – although the passage in which it does appear is an important one.

Towards the end of the essay, Heidegger tells us that building 'is a distinctive letting-dwell [*Wohnenlassen*]. Whenever *it is* such in fact, building already *has* responded to the summons of the fourfold. All planning remains grounded on this responding, and planning in turn opens up to the designer the precincts suitable for his designs [*den Entwürfen für die Risse die gemäßen Bezirke öffnet*].<sup>9</sup> As it appears here,

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erudition, nor the display of rare and exceptional states as in mystical raptures, reveries, and swooning'.

<sup>9</sup> [Martin Heidegger](#), 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, transl. by Albert Hofstadter, New York 1971, pp.143-161, here p.159. The entire passage in the original German reads: 'Das gekennzeichnete Bauen ist ein ausgezeichnetes Wohnenlassen. *Ist es dieses in der Tat, dann hat* das Bauen schon dem Zuspruch des Gevierts entsprochen. Auf dieses Entsprechen bleibt alles Planen gegründet, das seinerseits den Entwürfen für die Risse die gemäßen Bezirke öffnet', [Martin Heidegger](#), 'Bauen Wohnen Denken', in: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 8<sup>th</sup> edn., Stuttgart 1997, p. 154. Clearly

Heidegger's focus on 'design', *Entwurf*, seems to be on design as that which is the outcome of a planning or design process, rather than encompassing some broader notion of design as an activity, as something perhaps more integrally bound up with building.<sup>10</sup> But there is no reason to restrict the notion of design as it might be at stake here to such a narrow conception. Inasmuch as we can ask what design itself might be, what its grounds and limits truly are, so we may indeed take design to be already implicated in building. The key point of this passage, however, is that design cannot be understood as simply the opening up of its own space – instead the space of design is opened up in the responsiveness to 'letting-dwell' that is essential to building. Before we can take the inquiry into design any further, however, we need first to ask after the concept of 'letting-dwell' that is given such a central role here.

What is at issue in this notion of 'letting-dwell', or, more basically, in the idea of 'dwelling', that it can be so foundational? Rather than move immediately to a discussion of the account Heidegger develops in the body of the essay, it is worth reflecting on the terms at issue here and in particular the term 'dwelling'. The use of this term in the standard English translation of the essay, and in almost all subsequent English-language discussion, is seldom remarked upon, and yet there is something strange about it. Although the German *Wohnen* which appears in Heidegger's original text is a common term in ordinary usage, the English 'dwelling' is not (at least not beyond the use of the term in architectural and planning discourse to designate a place of residence), and the same goes for the English 'dwell'. The etymology of 'dwell' is also quite different from the German, and as a result, so are

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Hofstadter takes some liberties, as he does elsewhere in his translations, in the rendering of Heidegger's German into English.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that there is an easily overlooked complication here too, although one that is not crucial to the present inquiry. The German term *Entwurf* (which can mean design, but also outline, sketch, draft or 'project' – *entwerfen* being the verb form) appears in Heidegger's later writings only infrequently, even though it is the later works that are usually cited in discussions of Heidegger and design. But *Entwurf* is a key notion in earlier works, notably *Being and Time*, where it is often translated as 'project' or 'projection'. It seems likely that if *Entwurf* appears less frequently in the later thinking this is partly because of Heidegger's own shift away from the more active sense of *Entwurf* that is captured in the notion of 'projection', and towards the stronger emphasis on responsiveness evident in the passage at issue here.

some of its connotations. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists a number of meanings for the term, not only 'to remain (in a house, country, etc.) as in a permanent residence; to have one's abode; to reside, "live" ... to occupy as a place of residence; to inhabit', but also including 'to lead into error, mislead, delude; to stun, stupefy ... to hinder, delay ... to tarry ... to desist from action ... to abide or continue for a time, in a place, state, or condition ... to spend time upon or linger over ... to continue in existence, to last, persist ... to cause to abide in'.<sup>11</sup> Many of these senses of the term are specified as 'obsolete' (even in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* from 1933), including those that mean 'to reside, to inhabit or to live', and the sense of 'dwell' that is said to be 'the most frequent use in speech' is that which means 'to spend time upon or linger over' (as in 'let's dwell on that thought for a moment'). The difference between the English 'dwell' and the German *Wohnen* is clearly evident when one considers that while in ordinary German, if one wishes to know someone's place of residence, one asks *Wo wohnen Sie?*, in English one does not say 'where do you dwell?', but 'where do you live?' – and in fact the *Oxford Dictionary* notes of the term 'dwell' as it relates to 'live' or 'reside': 'now mostly superseded by *live* in spoken use; but still common in literature'.

Because 'dwelling' is a relatively uncommon term in contemporary English (and has been so for much of the last hundred years or more), its use to translate Heidegger's *Wohnen*, although not unreasonable, nevertheless results in the transformation of a term that is ordinary in German into something unusual in English. Immediately, dwelling becomes something special and even rather strange – the very word suggesting a return to something archaic. Yet much of the point of Heidegger's discussion in 'Bauen Wohnen Denken' is to use a term that we think we understand – for German speakers, *Wohnen* – and then, as he so often does, render our understanding questionable. This does not happen in the usual English translations of Heidegger's essay – 'dwell' and 'dwelling' already appear as terms

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<sup>11</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford 1933, p. 733. The entry is largely unchanged from the first edition in 1933 to the present online version of the *Dictionary*.

that are unfamiliar – and so there is no shift from the familiar and the ordinary to the unfamiliar and the questionable. 'Dwell' and 'dwelling' have thus become words of art for many readers of Heidegger – technical terms that carry a special coding with them, and that also have echoes of the poetic and even the mystical. Yet these terms are also used, in spite of the oddity that attaches to them in English, as if their meaning was indeed already understood – so one finds architectural theorists and commentators writing about 'the question of dwelling' as if it was clear what this might mean.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than continue to talk of 'dwelling', there are good reasons to look for a different way of speaking – if one can be found (and given the contemporary prevalence of talk of 'dwelling' in Heideggerian discussions, the usage might be thought extremely difficult to shift). However, English has a rather more differentiated vocabulary around these topics than does German, and there is no single English term that matches, even closely, the German *Wohnen* in either its noun or verb form. 'Reside', 'inhabit' and 'abide', while they overlap with the meaning of the German term, like 'dwell', also differ significantly, while 'live' (as in 'Where do you live?') carries a different set of etymological and semantic links. An obvious way to handle the matter might be to look to some notion of 'being home', except that Heidegger himself contrasts being *zu Hause* (almost literally, being 'at home') with *Wohnen*. Heidegger's point, however, is to emphasise the difference between those places with which we are engaged in terms of an everyday familiarity and the places in which we actually live. So he writes that 'the truck driver is at home [*zu Hause*] on the highway, but he does not have his shelter [*seine Unterkunft*]', and similarly, 'the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place [*ihre Wohnung*] there; the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he

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<sup>12</sup> For instance Pavlos Lefas, *Dwelling and Architecture: From Heidegger to Koolhaas*, Berlin 2009. Lefas writes of how, in 'Bauen Wohnen Denken', Heidegger 'set the question of dwelling on a new footing' as if 'the question of dwelling' were something with which we were already familiar. Understood in terms of 'dwelling', however, the question at issue takes on a particular character that may well be thought to obscure rather than illuminate the underlying issues at stake. Perhaps 'the question of dwelling' should be viewed more as a peculiar by-product of the way Heidegger's thinking has been taken up in certain circles than a real question in its own right.



does not dwell there [*er wohnt nicht dort*].<sup>13</sup> We can certainly capture something of this in English, if in a different way: neither the power station, the mill, nor the highway are home to those who are 'at home' within them. We might also say, that in an important sense, neither the driver, the mill worker, nor the engineer *live* in the places in which they are nevertheless 'at home'. Still, even though we can find ordinary English terms to fill the role of *Wohnen* here,<sup>14</sup> we lack any single term that exactly matches the German, and so rather than simply translate *Wohnen* with 'dwelling', as if the one were an exact match for the other, perhaps we should accept the need for more than one term, sometimes 'home', sometimes 'living', adjusting the term to the context. Perhaps too, if we are to retain the neat symmetry of Heidegger's title 'Bauen Wohnen Denken' while also being true to the sense carried by the German, then we may need to look to an English title closer to 'Building *Living* Thinking'. Certainly, when we look to compare Heidegger with Aalto, it may well be that the latter translation will turn out to be a more useful and enlightening one.

In this latter respect, while admitting that the translational issue admits of no easy solution ('living' undoubtedly carries some awkward ambiguities of its own), my own practice, in the discussion that follows, will be to eschew talk of 'dwelling' in favour of terms like 'living' and 'home'. One reason for doing this is not only to facilitate the engagement with Aalto, but also to approach anew the question of the understanding of architecture and design in the Heideggerian context. The key point here is to see 'Bauen Wohnen Denken', not as introducing some strange new concept, but rather as aimed at a rethinking of something with which we are already familiar – at a questioning of what is at stake in the otherwise ordinary language concerning

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<sup>13</sup> [Heidegger](#), 'Building Dwelling Thinking', loc. cit., p. 145. Interestingly, Heidegger immediately goes on: 'The buildings house man' – the reference to 'these buildings' includes the power station, the spinning mill, and the highway.

<sup>14</sup> Translation is always possible even though it does not always allow of simple one-to-one correlations between terms. This makes for special difficulties when one wishes to mirror stylistic and rhetorical forms – which is why the translation of poetry is less a matter of translation than a certain sort of poetic 're-creation', and also why the attempt too closely to mirror stylistic and rhetorical devices from one language to another can give rise to translational inadequacies (something that often plagues English translations of Heidegger).

the places in which we 'live', the places that we call 'home', and an opening up of a further questioning as to how this might relate to 'building', and to 'thinking'. Not only is it important to keep open the question as to what is at issue here – what is it to be 'at home', what is it to 'live somewhere'? – but it is also important to keep in mind that in talking about home here we mean something quite ordinary and mundane. In the first instance, that may mean the very ordinary sense we attach to 'where we live' and 'home' as just our ordinary place of residence. That is certainly a starting point for Heidegger's discussion, but although it may well be where it begins, it need not be where that discussion ends – neither for Heidegger nor, as we shall see below, for Aalto.

It would certainly be a mistake to suppose that what is at stake in Heidegger's discussion of *Wohnen* is just a matter of identifying the need for there to be some one place that stands out above all other places as the sole foundation for our living in the world – as if it were a matter of our sedentary 'belonging' to some one place that is our 'home' – even though such an idea may seem to be indicated by some of our everyday ways of talking. If we are to use the notion of 'belonging' here at all, and we might well view the term as creating more problems than it resolves, then we must distinguish between two different senses of the term. One involves the idea, already suggested, of a longstanding and temporally extended association with a single place or locale – and it is, in fact, just this sense that is the most commonly assumed sense of 'belonging' as employed in this context, as well as the sense typically associated, especially in English, with Heideggerian 'dwelling' (a sense reinforced by the idea of the English 'dwelling' as a 'lingering' or 'remaining' – and also, perhaps, the association of 'dwell' with 'stun', 'stupefy', 'hinder' or delay). The other involves the idea of an ordered mode of living that possesses a certain coherence, and therefore a certain topological boundedness, but that is not necessarily worked out in relation to only one place nor to be understood in terms simply of a static temporally extended 'remaining'. It is this second sense of 'belonging', rather than the first, that is at issue here. What matters is not the number

of places that a mode of living encompasses nor even the enduring centrality of one single place. Instead the focus must be on the ordering of those places, and the coherence of that ordering. Within such an ordering, there will be a differentiation within and between spaces and places that itself embodies the differentiation of the mode of living. Within that differentiation, certain spaces and places will take on greater centrality than others, and yet not only might that ordering change, but it is the overall topographical structuring that is primary, rather than any single place within that structure. Our belonging to place is thus a matter of the topographical articulation of our mode of living, and not of our sedentary fixation in a single locale.

It is this notion of our living in the world, and so with it of home, as a matter of a complex and dynamic topographical articulation that is fundamentally at issue in Heidegger's talk of *Wohnen*, and that is elaborated through his idea of the gathering of earth and sky, gods and mortals within the Fourfold – *das Geviert*. Indeed, in general (and not only as articulated through the Fourfold), the way *place* appears in 'Bauen Wohnen Denken', as in much of Heidegger's thinking, is not in terms of any single locale that is the unchanging site of 'home'. The character of place itself is such as to resist any such reduction. Every place enfolds and is enfolded within other places, while the boundaries that determine a place, like the place itself, shift according to what is brought to appearance within it – or, as one might also say, what is brought to appearance shifts according to its boundaries, according to its place. Thus, if we talk of place *as* home, then what that place is may vary from a single dwelling to a street, a stretch of countryside to a country, a path to a set of pathways, a region to a world. Yet inasmuch as any and every mode of living is indeed topographically articulated, so it always requires a certain boundedness, a certain relatedness to place and places, as that in which its coherence as a mode of living is realised and made possible. This is the real meaning of the idea that to live in the world is to live *somewhere* – to live in the world is to essentially *to be placed*, so that living, *Wohnen*, is also, one might say, a *placing* or *being placed* – Heidegger's account of the Fourfold being an elaboration of this mode of placing.

There is no form of human living in the world that is not bound to place in this way, and that is not, therefore, also itself *bounded* (such boundedness being understood, in the way Heidegger understands it, as 'constitutive' rather than merely 'restrictive'<sup>15</sup>). Indeed, the shaping of human life, both individually and collectively is a shaping that occurs in and through particular places. Even the most eloquent contemporary exponents of modernity's homeless character do not find themselves living a life completely without boundaries, completely unplaced, never having a care for the places in which they find themselves and in which their lives are shaped. Even among those whom we refer to as the genuinely 'homeless', those who through poverty or alienation have no shelter or other place of residence that is their own, still they find ways to shape their own 'sense of home' on the street or the countryside – a 'sense of home' evident in both the overall structuring of their mode of life and in the ordering of the places around which their lives are organised. Indeed, if and when such a 'sense of home' really does break down, then so does the life itself. In general, the care for oneself that is central to being a self – which remains even in situations of homelessness and alienation – is also a care for the places in which one's self is articulated, in which it is embedded, and with respect to whose boundaries the self is itself shaped and expressed. That care, whether for self or for place, may not always be well-formed or well-directed – sometimes it may be distorted or 'misplaced' – but it is always present. Thus when Heidegger talks of *Wohnen* as a matter of a 'sparing and preserving', of 'taking under our care', what he is referring to is a 'sparing and preserving', 'a caring', that we can see implicit in the concern for one's own being that was already a starting point for Heidegger's consideration in *Being and Time*. In 'Bauen Wohnen Denken' it becomes clear that care for one's own being is also care for the world as that is given focus in the places

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<sup>15</sup> 'A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing', [Heidegger](#), 'Building Dwelling Thinking', loc. cit., p. 149. This understanding of the idea of boundary is central to Heidegger's thinking, and especially to his thinking as *topological* – see [Jeff](#) Malpas, 'Ground, Unity, and Limit', in: *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*, Cambridge Massachusetts 2012, p. 73-96.

in which one's mode of living is brought forth as an issue.<sup>16</sup> It is because we find ourselves already given over to the world, as it appears in the specific places in which, and with respect to the things among which, we live, that we are already given over to caring for those things and places.

Modernity, according to Heidegger is characterised by homelessness. Often this is taken to mean that modernity has itself rendered any idea of the sort of ordered mode of living in the world, of any sort of 'home', impossible, and that therefore the concern with home is representative of a desire that cannot be fulfilled, that we have no choice but to abandon. Massimo Cacciari, in particular, has advanced this as a claim Heidegger himself makes,<sup>17</sup> and it is an idea that frequently recurs in much contemporary discourse – often taken to be reinforced by consideration of the rise of digital technology and globalisation.<sup>18</sup> To some extent, this reading depends on already understanding Heidegger's discussion through certain conceptions of place and home – particularly those that give priority to modes of sedentary belonging – that are not only problematic in their own terms, but also give rise to difficulties within the framework of Heidegger's own thinking.

In this respect, it is especially important to recognise that the question of home – understanding that as one way of characterising the question to which *Wohnen* refers us – is itself a question that arises only because we are already given over to a mode of being in the world that is itself configured in terms of home (one might say that it is this, whether recognised or not, that underpins all of critical engagement with home – including that which is suspicious of the notion). Even though we may be threatened with homelessness, both empirically and metaphysically (as Heidegger constantly reminds us), the loss of home only threatens inasmuch as it stands within

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<sup>16</sup> The interconnection of self with place that is invoked here is something for which I have argued and elaborated upon in a number of works – most notably in *Place and Experience*. It is an interconnection that I have argued is also present in Heidegger – in 'Bauen Wohnen Denken' as well as elsewhere. On this see Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*, loc. cit. and also *Heidegger's Topology*, Cambridge Massachusetts 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Massimo Cacciari, 'Eupalinos or Architecture', in: *Oppositions* 21 (1980), pp. 106-116.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Neil Leach, 'Forget Heidegger', in: *Designing for a Digital World*, London 2002, pp. 21-30.

the frame of a mode of being that nevertheless always stands in a relation to home. This reflects a more general structure that appears throughout Heidegger's thinking – a structure in which a loss or absence always arises in relation to an ongoing presence. Thus in 'Bauen Wohnen Denken', in a passage that emphasises the way in which human being is always a being among things, and so also within the Fourfold, Heidegger tells us that 'the loss of rapport with things that occurs in a state of depression would be wholly impossible if even such a state were not still what it is as a human state: that is, a staying *with* things. Only if this stay already characterises human being can the things among which we are also fail to speak to us, fail to concern us any longer'.<sup>19</sup> Heidegger's point is that only if we remain with things, can we also experience an apartness from things. Similarly, only if we remain in a relation to home, can we experience homelessness. Homelessness is a *loss* or *lack* of home, and so carries home within it as just such a loss or lack. At the same time, home also contains homelessness within it, both as a possibility and a presence. Home and homelessness are not two different modes of being, then, but one.<sup>20</sup> The real danger of modernity, and of the particular character of the homelessness it brings, is that it refuses and obscures this fact – in doing so it refuses and obscures the question of home, of our living in the world, and with it the question of place. If this is not so obvious at first sight it is only because of the way in which modernity obscures its own contradictory character.

So far as home and place are concerned, modernity presents two different and, for the most part, separated faces. On the one hand, home is at the very heart of modernity and its promise. Modernity itself arises out of a desire for and a belief in

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<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, 'Bauen Wohnen Denken', loc. cit., p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> As Heidegger wrote some years before 'Bauen Wohnen Denken': 'We reside in the realm of being and yet are not directly allowed in. We are, as it were, homeless in our ownmost homeland, assuming we may thus name our own essence. We reside in a realm constantly permeated by the casting toward and the casting-away of being. To be sure, we hardly ever pay attention to this characteristic of our abode, but we now ask: "where" are we "there", when we are thus placed into such an abode?' Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, transl. by Gary E. Aylesworth, Bloomington 1993, p. 75. Here the questions of home and place are put in a way that shows them not as questions that arise due to a complete loss of either, but only as we remain in a relation to them even as we experience our estrangement from them.

the possibility of a home without homelessness – here is modernity in its most clearly utopian character. In the modernity of the present, this appears in the rise of the private dwelling, and all that is associated with it from interior decoration to home entertainment, as a key focus of social and cultural life, as well as in the development of information and communication technologies that seemingly allow the home (in the shrunk-down form of the mobile phone) to be taken out into the world and the world (through television and the computer) to be brought directly into the home. On the other hand, modernity also operates, often by the very same means, in ways that are destructive and destabilising of home, and so in favour of a mode of homelessness, that is perhaps greater than we have seen before.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the Holocaust – in the attack on the very possibility that Jews, and others with them, might find a home in the world. The Holocaust was not merely about the extinguishing of individual human lives, but about the extinction of the possibility of a human mode of living, the possibility of home in the very deepest sense, for whole communities of human beings.<sup>21</sup> One might argue that the Holocaust is a distortion within modernity, rather than strictly representative of it, but no matter how one views the matter, one can easily point to phenomena that seem to exhibit the apparently homelessness of modernity in other ways. Indeed, the most common term with which to understand modernity is in terms of its character as a state of homelessness. Here the reference is not to the displacement of persons that is such a feature of the contemporary world, but rather to the way in which the very same technologies that seems to promise home also seem to take us away from home. Modern technologies appear to disintegrate the boundaries between home and world, making home a more ambiguous place at the same time as the world itself seems to be transformed into a single homogenous plane in which the very distinction between home and its other has disappeared. Moreover, the rise of this form of 'homelessness' is not a rise in the capacity to ask

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<sup>21</sup> See Jean Améry, 'How Much Home Does a Person Need?', *At the Mind's Limits. Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, transl. by Sidney and Stella P. Riosenfeld, New York 1986, pp.41-61.

what home is – to question home. Instead home is either taken for granted or denied. It is not that modernity draws both together as Heynen argues, but that it juxtaposes without connecting them, both drawing us toward home at the same time as it draws us away – and yet seldom, if ever, acknowledging the tension that is present here.<sup>22</sup>

It is for these reasons that Heidegger's inquiry aims to put the idea of home, of our living in the world, in question. What it is to be at home, what it is genuinely to live in the world, is itself to be capable of raising the question of home and of living (here the 'question of being' understood as a question in which our own being is always at issue appears anew), but this means that our questioning and our relation to home, and to place, are bound together.<sup>23</sup> This is why *Wohnen*, as Heidegger emphasises at the end of 'Bauen Wohnen Denken', is that which we must always learn anew. This, he says, is the real plight of *Wohnen* – the plight of living in the world, of finding a home in the world. Of course, if home were completely lost to us, then there would be no longer any question of home, no need to learn what it is to be at home, no need to learn how to live in the world, no need to respond to the call that is made here ('the summons ... that *calls* mortals into their dwelling'<sup>24</sup>). But the plight at issue here is one from which we can never truly escape – so long as we are in the world then home is an issue for us – yet it is also a plight to which modernity blinds us. It is thus that the plight at issue, the plight of home and of homelessness, takes on a special character in the face of modernity. Moreover, as our living in the world is a matter of *building*, so within modernity, the question of building, and with it of architectural

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<sup>22</sup> It might sometimes seem as if what occurs here is the rise of a new form of home (this seems to be Heyman's view) – one that is no longer tied to place. 'Home' thus seems to become a mobile phenomenon. Such an interpretation often depends, however, on the assimilation of a topological mode of thinking to the sort of sedentary model that I criticised above, or, more fundamentally, on failing to recognise the way in which even mobility is articulated topologically, and even mobility operates within certain bounds. In fact, no one is everywhere, and every life operates within certain bounds and certain places.

<sup>23</sup> As Heidegger puts it: 'Man's relation to places and through places to spaces, inheres in his living [Wohnen]' [with modifications to Hofstadter's original translation], Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', loc. cit., p. 157.

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', loc. cit., p. 161.



construction, takes on a special character, a special urgency even – and so we are also brought back by this route to the question of design.

### 3.

The importance of the idea of human life as always a living somewhere, a 'being home', even in the face of modernity, is important here not only because of Heidegger's focus on the question to which *Wohnen* refers us, but because it is quite clear that this is also a key concern for Aalto. One might say that this is partly evident in Aalto's own interest in residential construction and design – and not only in the design of homes for the wealthy, but also in the production of more modest dwellings.<sup>25</sup> The concern with residential design is, of course, something present in the work of many Modernist architects, and one might argue that this very focus exemplifies the way in which the home has become a theme within modernity. To some extent that is true of Aalto (it also reflects the need for mass housing following the Second World War – the very context in which Heidegger's lecture was presented), but it is also the case that, for Aalto, the focus on residential design is part of a larger question about design – and not only the design of buildings but also lighting and furniture – as it relates to human living.

The focus on residential design does not mean that we are returned, however, to a narrow concern with 'home' as instantiated in a particular built form – with the home as residence. Certainly, from the perspective already set out above, the problem of home, of human living, is not only a problem concerning residential design. When Heidegger says that the truck driver is at home on the highway, but does not make it his home, Heidegger is not suggesting that we should only be

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<sup>25</sup> As Markku Lahti notes, Aalto designed around one hundred single family houses during his career, including houses for family and friends, houses that formed part of larger institutional or corporate complexes, and more standardised homes that were wholly or partly mass-produced (of which around one thousand were built) – see Markku Lahti, 'Alvar Aalto and the Beauty of the House', in: *Alvar Aalto: Towards a Human Modernism*, ed. by Winfried Nerdinger, Munich 1999, p. 49.

concerned with residential dwellings as opposed to highways, and that only the latter has any relevance to the form of our living in the world. Indeed, both are encompassed by Heidegger's notion of what it is to build, and so also by what it is to live in the world, since *Bauen* is itself a form of *Wohnen*. Heidegger's concern is rather to emphasise the way in which the 'being at home' that may seem to be immediately evident in our ordinary coming and goings, our ordinary activities, is not the same as the 'being at home' that provides the ordering of our mode of living as such. Although we can distinguish between the different places and regions within which our lives are articulated, and in particular between the places in which we live and those with which we are merely familiar, this does not mean that our living in the world is restricted to or expressed in just those places that are intimate to us. The question of our living in the world, of the manner in which we find ourselves at home, is raised also by forms of building and design beyond the intimacy of the residential, and can so be seen as extending out to encompass more 'public' forms of building and design – including highways, power stations, and spinning mills. Although we may get to the question of home through an initial concern with the home as residence, this nevertheless leads us back outwards to a more encompassing concern with the way in which human living is given form across the whole range of human activity. In Aalto's case, this means that we should not see the question of living, of home, as at work only in his residential projects, and, indeed, it is significant that his own thinking about design, and the relation between the design and human living, includes, for instance, hospitals, libraries, schools, and concert halls, as well as larger built configurations from the housing complex to the city, no less than it does individual dwellings.

That Aalto is indeed concerned with the larger question concerning the mode of human living in the world is evident from Aalto's own emphasis on the human and the 'humanistic' even within the frame of Modernism. Thus he writes that 'true architecture exists only where man stands in the centre. His tragedy and his comedy,

both',<sup>26</sup> and elsewhere that architecture is that which 'most closely strives to realise a true humanism in our world, to create the very limited happiness one can offer man'.<sup>27</sup> Aalto's willingness to talk of 'humanism' might seem to be at odds with what is commonly assumed to be Heidegger's own rejection of humanism in the famous 'Letter on Humanism' from the late 1940s. Yet Heidegger's critique of humanism in the 'Letter' is specifically directed at humanism in its *metaphysical*, and so for Heidegger also, its *nihilistic* form.<sup>28</sup> Heidegger himself leaves open the possibility that his own position can be seen as embodying a more fundamental and radically different mode of humanism that more properly attends to the essential character of the human (which means, in Heidegger's case, to its essential finitude).<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in Aalto's case, 'humanism' implies an attentiveness to the actual character of human living, and to a mode of architecture that is similarly attentive and attuned. This does not mean, of course, that it is exclusively concerned with the human alone, or that the focus on the human is meant to rule out a concern with what might ordinarily be thought of as going beyond the human. Just as Heidegger's notion of the Fourfold encompasses earth, sky, and the divinities, as well as mortals, so too does Aalto understand nature, in all its forms, as that to which the human stands in an essential relation, and as having a value and significance that goes beyond mere utility or instrumentality.

Aalto's attentiveness to the human also means thinking of architecture, not in purely aesthetic terms, nor in terms of formal or technical considerations alone, but

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<sup>26</sup> Alvar Aalto, 'Instead of an Article', in: *Sketches*, ed. by Göran Schildt, transl. by Stuart Wrede, Cambridge Massachusetts 1979, p. 161

<sup>27</sup> Aalto, 'The Architect's Conception of Paradise', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> See 'Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism'', in: *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell, New York 1993, pp.193-242, esp. pp.245ff. – see also Jeff Malpas, 'Nihilism, Place, and "Position"', in: *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*, Cambridge Massachusetts 2012), pp. 97-112.

<sup>29</sup> On the issue of finitude, in particular, see Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology*, loc. cit., pp. 41-43 and also Jeff Malpas, 'Death and the End of Life', in: 'Ground, Unity, and Limit', in: *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*, Cambridge Massachusetts 2012, pp. 189-196. So far as the connection to the human is concerned, I am in agreement with those many commentators (including, for instance, Derrida) who argue that Heidegger's supposed 'anti-humanism' does not displace the human as a central Heideggerian concern, but I disagree with those who argue that this means Heidegger remains fundamentally anthropocentric.

rather through what he terms its 'functional' character, where function is itself understood in relation to the larger structure of human living in the world. Aalto's conception of 'function' is thus not to be narrowly construed in the manner that was common among many of his contemporaries,<sup>30</sup> but is much more encompassing in its conception. As Aalto wrote in 1940:

During the past decade, modern architecture has been functional mainly from the technical point of view[...]. But, since architecture covers the entire field of human life, real functional architecture must be functional from the human point of view. If we look deeper into the processes of human life, we shall discover that technique is only an aid, not a definite and independent phenomenon therein.<sup>31</sup>

It is worth noting that the functional conception at work here implies not only a conception of architectural *design* as both constrained by a set of holistic and relational considerations (functionalism is a form of relationalism, and in this context, where there is not one function but a unitary complex, it must also be understood as holistic) that goes beyond the built form alone, but also a conception of the human that is similarly holistic and relational. Why should the building be ordered in functional terms? Because the mode of human living is itself functionally, that is holistically and relationally, ordered – a mode of ordering that is also exemplified in the natural realm where it is associated with a multiplication of form:

Nature, biology, is formally rich and luxuriant. It can with the same structure, the same intermeshing, and the same principles in its cells' inner structure, achieve a billion combinations, each of which represents a high level of form. Man's life belongs to the same family. The things surrounding him are hardly fetishes and allegories with mystical eternal value. They are rather cells and tissues, living beings also, building elements of which human life is put together. They cannot be treated differently from

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<sup>30</sup> One of the most famous expression of functionalist thinking is undoubtedly Le Corbusier's assertion that 'a house is a machine for living in' (Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, transl. by John Goodman, Toronto 2008, originally published 1923, p. 151). Such a characterisation seems not to be one that Aalto would have accepted, at least not in his more mature thinking, although he undoubtedly shared, especially early on, some of the functionalist commitments present in Corbusier as well as Mies van der Rohe.

<sup>31</sup> Aalto, 'The Humanizing of Architecture', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 76. Here Aalto broadens the concept of functionalism just as he also broadens (or 'deepens') the concept of rationalism.

biology's other elements or otherwise they run the risk of not fitting into the system; they become inhumane.<sup>32</sup>

Implicit in Aalto's approach is a conception of human living – of being home – as itself expressed and articulated in spatialized, materialized, and also built, forms.<sup>33</sup> Thus Aalto writes, in a discussion of art and technology, that 'the most important thing is always how the whole community is formed, what we make with our own hands of the material through which our lives are finally to be channelled'.<sup>34</sup> The mode of human living is realized in its spatialized, materialized forms – something that might seem obvious to an architectural perspective such as Aalto's – but the point is also at the heart of Heidegger's focus on the connection between *Wohnen* and *Bauen*, and, with them, space and place, as developed in 'Bauen Wohnen Denken'.

The 'functional' approach to architecture that we see in Aalto bears comparison with a similarly 'functional' conception that is present in Heidegger's analysis of the Black Forest farmhouse in 'Bauen Wohnen Denken'. There the different aspects of human living in the world are seen reflected within the building – the ordering of the building thus gives a material form to the ordering of life and world as it is also part of that same ordering. This encompasses the way the house is sited ('on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring'), the way its external form is structured to meet the challenge of the elements ('the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow and ... shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights'), and the way the internal arrangement of the building accommodates the different stages and activities of human life ('It did not forget the alter corner behind the community table; it made room ... for the hallowed places of childhood and the 'tree of the dead' ... and in this way it designed for the different generations under one

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<sup>32</sup> Aalto, 'Rationalism and Man', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> The emphasis on the spatial here should not be assumed to exclude the temporal either – there is no space that is not dynamic, while the functional conception is also one that is inherently temporalized. See Jeff Malpas, 'Putting Space in Place: Relational Geography and Philosophical Topography', in: *Planning and Environment D: Space and Society* 30 (2012), pp.226-242.

<sup>34</sup> Aalto, 'Art and Technology', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 127.

roof the character of their journey through time').<sup>35</sup> If Heidegger does not present us with a critique of the social arrangements that are themselves encoded within this building (he does not acknowledge, as is often pointed out, its patriarchal character – something of which, with respect to older building forms, Aalto was well-aware<sup>36</sup> – then the reason is simply that this is not germane to the point of the example.

What Heidegger aims to show by reference to the Black Forest farmhouse is just the manner in which the form of the building is grounded in the form of 'living' – and so too, of course, the way the form of living is embodied, materially and spatially, in built form. Consequently Heidegger says of his use of this example, as Karsten Harries has also emphasised, that it 'in no way means that we should go back to building such houses; rather it illustrates by a dwelling that *has been* [einem *gewesenen Wohnen*] how *it* was able to build'.<sup>37</sup> That the farmhouse does illustrate this so clearly is partly because the built form that is evident here is so directly derivative of a specific mode of living in the world, of a specific mode of 'home' (it is also a mode of living in which the home itself encompasses almost all of the activities relevant to that mode of living – the homeplace is also the primary workplace – and is situated at the heart of the larger landscape that supports that living). Indeed, the same will be true of other 'indigenous' built forms – in each, the same direct relation will be discernable between building and living. It is not that this relation does not exist in 'modern' forms of building, but that the relation is often more complex, more mediated, and therefore less easy to discern and to delineate. Heidegger's use of an indigenous architectural form, the Black Forest farmhouse, is echoed in Aalto's work by his own interest in traditional Finnish building, including the *tupa*, or central space of the traditional Finnish house, as well as in his

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<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', loc. cit., p. 160.

<sup>36</sup> See Aalto, 'The Dwelling as a Problem', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', loc. cit., p. 160.

discussions of farmhouse construction from the Finnish heartland of Karelia<sup>38</sup> – in the latter case especially, Aalto is as interested in the design of the building, and the timber construction methods employed, as well as the way buildings are clustered, as in the way the building's particular form is shaped by, and so is fitted to, the mode of living that it also exemplifies. Nevertheless, in both cases, in Heidegger and in Aalto, one can see why the return to an indigenous, and even archaic architectural form may be relevant to an understanding of the nature of architectural practice, or more generally 'building', as it relates to (is indeed a mode of) human living.

Inasmuch as Aalto is an architect and designer, and Heidegger is not, so it is unsurprising to find that Aalto's treatment of 'functionalism' includes considerations that may be thought to operate at a more mundane and technical level than do Heidegger's. Similarly, Aalto is also concerned, as Heidegger is not, with the direct investigation of the functionality of particular built forms – something that Aalto views as possible, not only through scientific inquiry into the biological and other constraints on human being, but also through architectural experimentation. In this regard, one of the examples to which Aalto frequently refers is the Paimo Tuberculosis Sanatorium. The design considerations at work in this case involved, as Aalto describes it: 'the relation between the single human being and his living room... [and] the protection of the single human being against larger groups of people and the protection from collectivity'.<sup>39</sup> A similar experimental mode of inquiry, though one less constrained, is exemplified in Aalto's design of the explicitly designated 'experimental house' at Muuratsalo on Lake Paijanne (see fig. 1). Here Aalto emphasises the role of play in architectural design, although since he also warns that a reliance on play alone would be to treat architecture as if it were a 'game' played 'with form, structure and content, and finally, with people's bodies and souls', he insists that 'we should unite our experimental work with a play

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<sup>38</sup> See Aalto, 'Architecture in Karelia', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., pp. 80-91. The interest in traditional vernacular architecture is one of those strands in Aalto's work that runs contrary to the broader tendency of architectural Modernism.

<sup>39</sup> Aalto, 'The Humanizing of Architecture', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 77.

mentality and vice versa'.<sup>40</sup> He goes on 'not until architecture's structural elements... and our empirical knowledge are modified by what we seriously call play, or art, will we be proceeding in the right direction. Technology and economy must always be combined with life-enriching charm'.<sup>41</sup> The Muuratsalo house thus combines a series of experiments that relate to matters of construction, spatial sequencing, and siting, as well as internal plan and functional arrangement, set against a proximity to nature that is a source of inspiration, as well as relationally encompassed within the building itself. It is significant that Aalto views his experimental investigations as always tempered by a spirit of artistic playfulness, and this is indicative of the extent to which even his experimental inquiries do not take his thinking completely away from a proximity to Heidegger's more philosophical concerns. Indeed, even when concerned with the 'scientific' or experimental investigation of the 'functionality' of the built, Aalto retains a focus on the larger and more encompassing questions that also preoccupy Heidegger – questions concerning what Aalto refers to in terms of the human 'soul' – although always approached, in Aalto's case, from the specific mode of engagement of architectural design.

In this latter respect, the holistic or organicist elements that are evident in Aalto's *reflective* engagement with architecture and design, and that underpin his concept of functionalism, are equally evident in his practice, including his experimental practice, and in the built form of his designs. Not only does he make use of certain patterns and forms from nature – including the famous Aalto 'wave' – but his buildings also exemplify modes of organisational and structural unity that depend, as in nature, on the interplay between otherwise independent and sometimes counter-posed elements. The result is a dynamic conception of design that rejects any idea of a single uniform conception to which all else must rigidly conform.<sup>42</sup> This

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<sup>40</sup> Aalto, 'Experimental House, Muuratsalo', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 115.

<sup>41</sup> Aalto, 'Experimental House, Muuratsalo', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 115.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Goran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Early Years*, New York 1984, pp. 242-259. This is as evident in Aalto's approach to urban planning as in the design of single buildings – see, for instance: Aalto, 'National Planning and Cultural Goals', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., pp. 99-110, and Aalto, Aalto, 'Town Planning and Public Buildings', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., pp. 165-167.



conception of both the human and the architectural as having a relational, holistic, or 'organic' character undoubtedly derives in part from Aalto's early interest in vitalist philosophy, especially the work of Bergson, as well as his acquaintance with elements of anarchist thinking – particularly ideas deriving from the life and work of Piotr Kropotkin (a thinker perhaps best known for his emphasis on mutuality as a key element in social and political life).<sup>43</sup> It is also partly derivative of Aalto's artistic interests as evident in his own endeavours in painting and sculpture, as well as his engagement with art and artists more generally, not only within Finland, but also with contemporary figures such as Léger (with whom Aalto was friends), and figures from the history of art, of whom perhaps the most important is undoubtedly Cézanne.<sup>44</sup>

The role of art in Aalto's design thought and practice is particularly noteworthy – all the more so when one considers this in relation to Heidegger. Petzet and others have drawn attention to Heidegger's interest in art, especially painting (also of particular importance to Aalto), and Heidegger, like Aalto, had a special regard for, and interest in, Cézanne – 'if only one could think', said Heidegger, 'as directly as Cézanne painted'.<sup>45</sup> Goran Schildt argues that in Aalto's case, Cézanne is especially influential in Aalto's understanding of architectural space. Schildt writes:

If we look at a painting by Cézanne [...] we see how the space grows directly out of the forms placed on the canvas; individual elements with volume spread out towards the sides from an intensely modulated central zone. There is no abstract space here, merely concrete relations between forms and volumes, surfaces forming partly

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<sup>43</sup> Schildt draws attention to the connection to Kropotkin, but argues that it was based only in an interest and acquaintance with Kropotkin's autobiographical *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, and so related to Kropotkin's 'personality, philosophy of life and attitudes to certain basic moral values, not his intellectual theories' (see Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Early Years* loc. cit., p. 242). Clearly, however, Kropotkin's own organicist and mutualist commitments, which are foundational to his thinking, have strong resonances with important aspects of Aalto's thought and practice.

<sup>44</sup> See especially Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Early Years*, loc. cit., pp. 149-159.

<sup>45</sup> Hartmut Buchner, 'Fragmetarisches', in: Günther Neske, *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger*, p. 47; see also Julian Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge 2001, p. 151, and Christoph Jamme, 'The Loss of Things: Cézanne – Rilke – Heidegger', *Kunst & Museumjournal* 2 (1990), pp. 39-40.

overlapping solids, creating an impression of space which is neither uniform nor unambiguously coherent.<sup>46</sup>

As Schildt sees it, Cézanne also showed Aalto that architectural space, especially interior space, could be treated in a similar fashion, enabling the opening up of space within a building in a way that allows both its openness and boundedness, and the indeterminacy that belongs with both, to be present at one and the same time.<sup>47</sup> Space thus appears as itself dynamic (and so as already entwined with time) – and, if perhaps less obviously, it also appears in direct relation to place: 'Spaces receive their being from places', Heidegger reminds us, which is to say that the openness that belongs to space (its character as 'room' – *Raum* in German, *Rum* in Swedish) only appears within the boundedness of place.<sup>48</sup>

One might add that Cézanne also shows that what painting achieves is done not by beginning with the attempt to recreate a realistic representation, but rather by attending to the complexity of things in their placed, and so also spatialized, appearance – thus Schildt comments that 'Cézanne showed how to paint pictures without starting from stereometric abstractions'.<sup>49</sup> In Cézanne, especially in his late painting, this means that things appear as things, not through being present as clearly defined 'objects', but rather through their partial dissolution into bounded relations of surface, colour and form – invoking, as they also extend into, the larger horizontality in which they are placed, and that grounds their appearing.<sup>50</sup> What Cézanne demonstrates and exemplifies is also evident, though articulated conceptually rather than concretely, in Heidegger's own treatment of the thing as it stands within the gathered relationality of the Fourfold, as set out, not only in 'Bauen

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<sup>46</sup> Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Early Years*, loc. cit., p. 220.

<sup>47</sup> See Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Early Years*, loc. cit., p. 223.

<sup>48</sup> Space can thus be understood, in its primary sense, as the openness of place – see Malpas, 'Putting Space in Place: Relational Geography and Philosophical Topography', loc. cit., pp. 226-242.

<sup>49</sup> Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Early Years*, loc. cit., p. 221.

<sup>50</sup> It is this that can be seen partly to underlie Heidegger's account of the nature of Cézanne's achievement in terms of its realisation of the twofold unity of 'what is present' (*Anwesendem*) and 'presence' (*Anwesenheit*) – see Martin Heidegger, 'Cézanne', in: *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens 1910-1976*, ed. by Hermann Heidegger, Frankfurt am Main 1983, p. 223; see also Julian Young's discussion of this in *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, loc. cit., pp. 152-153.

Wohnen Denken', but also elsewhere, and especially in 'Das Ding'.<sup>51</sup> Here the thing is understood as standing in an essential relation to space, and so also to place, and space and place, in their own turn, in relation to the thing – and so to the larger structure that Heidegger understands in terms of the Fourfold, and that appears more ambiguously and variously in Aalto in terms of the idea of the ideal of the harmonious unity of the human, and of the human with nature.

While more general notions of holism and organicism undoubtedly bring with them ideas of relationality and unitary complexity of the sort that are present in Aalto, and to some extent in Heidegger also, taken on their own such notions can also lead away from a focus on the concrete and the immediate, away from things, away from the human (which is why they are sometimes taken to be associated with forms of political authoritarianism). In Cézanne's work, we see how such relationality and unitary complexity is itself articulated in and through the concrete spatiality and placedness of things. Only by attending to things, in their indeterminate and multiple unity, can we attend to the larger unity of the world, and our own human mode of living.

The focus on the thing, which must now be understood as also entailing a focus on complex structure of space and place, can be seen as evident in Aalto's work in a number of ways. It is surely connected with his close attention to materiality, and to the sensory and experiential qualities of building. Not only does this mean that Aalto is not seduced by the idea of architecture as some form of 'textual' practice, but it also means that he is especially attentive to the potential for materials to themselves function in ways that, through their materiality, and the sensory complexity that brings, to draw other elements into relation with them. The combination of material and formal elements are thus understood, not only in terms of their functionality in technical terms, but also in terms of a sensory and experiential richness that itself plays a role in the spatial and topographic functioning of a built form. This is especially evident in a building such as the house

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<sup>51</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry Language Thought*, loc. cit., pp. 163-186.

Aalto built for his friends Harry and Maire Gullichsen, the Villa Mairea (see fig. 2) – a building that exhibits a complex interplay of elements both within the formal and material elements of its construction and in its sensory, experiential, and affective character.<sup>52</sup>

The focus on the thing, on spatialized form in its concrete complexity, is also evident in the character of Aalto's architectural practice. Schildt comments that when Aalto began a new building, 'he would not start by drawing the floor plan or elevation, but by looking at it as an object in space and depicting it as a reality'.<sup>53</sup> Of course, the 'looking at' that is at issue here is inseparable from the *sketch* and *the act of sketching* – from that form of drawing that explores the reality of the thing through the vitality of the drawn line. Here a sense of the spatiality that is at work in such a superlative way in Cézanne can also be discerned in the sketches by which Aalto's own practice was advanced and that also demonstrate something of the essentially spatial character of the engagement with things that is itself integral to design practice as such. The spatialized character of Aalto's practice in architecture and design also seems to be reflected in Heidegger's philosophical practice – certainly as exemplified in essays such as 'Bauen Wohnen Denken'. What appears there is a thinking that, no matter its density, nevertheless operates, not only through an attempt to stay close to things, and so to respond to the circumstances of thought, but also by means of an active visualisation that engages, not merely with concepts in their abstraction, but rather with a conceptual field articulated in terms of concrete figures and experienced forms – the Fourfold itself, and its gathering of earth, sky, gods and mortals (especially understood in relation to the sorts of the 'active principles' of which Hölderlin speaks),<sup>54</sup> being a particularly clear example.

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<sup>52</sup> See Aalto's own account of the Villa Mairea as set out in his plan description for the building in 'The Villa Mairea', in: *Alvar Aalto in his Own Words*, ed. by Goran Schildt, transl. by Timothy Binham, New York 1998, pp. 225-230. Aalto emphasises that although built as a unique dwelling for a wealthy client, the building is nevertheless an opportunity 'to tackle some of the central problems in architecture today' (Aalto, 'The Villa Mairea', loc. cit., p. 226).

<sup>53</sup> See Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Early Years*, loc. cit., p. 155

<sup>54</sup> 'The more I study nature around home, the more I am moved by it. The thunderstorm, perceived not only in its more extreme manifestations, but precisely as a power and feature among the various

In Heidegger and in Aalto, the understanding of things in their located and spatialized concreteness, in their indeterminacy and complexity, can be seen to connect directly with the two thinkers' common concern with the human, and with that human mode of living in the world to which the idea of 'home' also refers us. That concern does not depend on a prior and substantive definition of the human, nor does it imply some notion of human superiority or excellence. It is much simpler and more fundamental: that it is out of human being in the world, and only thus, that the need for building comes, that building, both in its generality and in its specific architectural form, arises as an issue; it is only thus that there is even a question about what it is to live, about what it is to find a sense of home. Moreover, the way the human appears here is inextricably bound to place and therefore to bound or limit, *and it is here that the proper limit of design itself appears*. The limit of design is given in and through its human, which is to say, its *placed* character, and in design as a responsiveness and attentiveness to that placedness.

Neither for Heidegger nor for Aalto can the question of what it is to live in the world, the question or 'plight' of home, be resolved by reference to any single overarching 'frame'. That question can only take its bearings, can only appear as a question, from within the place and space in which it is opened up. The question of home, of living, and so of building is thus always and only a question that arises within a singular horizon, with respect to a concrete situatedness, in and through the unitary multiplicity of what is given *here*, within these *bounds*, in this *place*. In this way too, the question of the possibility of the human, of a human mode of living, is indeed seen to be a question inseparable from the question concerning the reality of things – a reality that is no less material than it is 'ideal' (indeed, one might say that

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other forms of the sky, the light, active as a principle and resembling fate, working to impart national shape so that we might possess something sacred, the urgency of its comings and goings, the particular character of its forests, and the way in which the diversities of nature all converge in one area, so that all the holy places of the earth come together in a single place, and the philosophical light around my window – all this is now my joy. Let me not forget that I have come this far'. Friedrich Hölderlin, Letter (1802), in: *Hymns and Fragments*, transl. by Richard Sieburth, Princeton 1985, p.39.

its ideality is given in its materiality)<sup>55</sup> – for it is only in and through the engagement with the concrete and the material that human living is shaped in its own reality. The question of the human, of living and of home, and the question of things, of building, and so too of architecture *and design*, thus arise together, within the same, though complex and expansive, place.

It may be that in living and building we do indeed aim, as Aalto says of architecture, at the creation of a certain paradise, but any such paradise remains always an aim and never an achievement – as Aalto himself recognises, it is a 'very *limited* happiness' that architecture, and so also building, offers. It is thus that in Aalto's work, and increasingly so towards the end of his career, a key task of architectural practice is to strive against what Aalto saw as the 'dehumanizing' effects of technology and 'rationalization' – an idea often expressed in terms of his injunction to 'protect the little man'<sup>56</sup> as well as in his ever-present concern to maintain a role for art in architecture and design, where art goes beyond any merely aesthetic concern, but itself moves us into the wider sphere of the interconnectedness of things, of nature, of the human, and of the world. The young Aalto expressed something of what is at issue here in a comment on the character of the built form of the home: 'If you want my blessing on your home', he writes, 'it must have one further characteristic: you must give yourself away in some little detail. Your home should purposefully show up some weakness of yours', and he adds, 'no architectural creation is complete without some such trait... no architectural creation is complete without some such trait; it will not be alive.'<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See Jeff Malpas 'Building Memory', in: *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts* 13 (2012), pp. 11-21.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, Aalto, 'Art and Technology', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 128. Here Aalto argues that technology itself 'even the more vulgar ... must in each detail practice the same synthesis: think of man above all'. His comments on planning, referred to below, footnote 59, are also of relevance here.

<sup>57</sup> Alvar Aalto, 'From Doorstep to Living Room', in *Alvar Aalto in his Own Words*, loc. cit., p. 55. I am grateful to Esa Laaksonen for bringing this passage to my attention.

#### 4.

It would be a mistake to suppose that an essay like 'Bauen Wohnen Denken' could provide us with a detailed account of the nature of design, even of architectural design. Yet equally, Heidegger's essay is not without implications for design as well as architecture, and indeed, it seems to move us towards elements that contribute to a broad conception of design that is not far removed from that of such a key practitioner as Aalto. According to Heidegger, design operates within a domain opened up for it out of the active engagement in the world that is 'building', and that itself stands in a close relation to our mode of living in the world ('All planning remains grounded on the response of building to the Fourfold, on building as a letting-dwell, and planning in turn opens up to the designer the precincts suitable for his designs'). Design is predicated, and indeed arises out of, that more fundamental mode of orientation. The question is whether this is something to which we attend – either in terms of attending to the larger context in which a particular design task is situated or to the broader dependence of design that is also at issue here. Attending to that dependence means adopting a different attitude to design – one that does indeed see design as responding to the task of building and of living as that takes on a singular and concrete form.

The measure of design cannot be simply an aesthetic or technical one. It cannot, as Aalto so often emphasised, be one of mere economy. The only real measure does indeed come, in the terms Aalto uses, from 'the general attitude towards life',<sup>58</sup> from the mode of living within which any particular design is embedded. In this respect, design in general must be understood as Karsten Harries has argued we must understand architecture,<sup>59</sup> as having a fundamentally 'ethical' function. All the more

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<sup>58</sup> The quotation comes from Aalto, 'Culture and Technology', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p.95. How the sense of measure that appears here relates to the sense of measure at work in Heidegger's 'Poetically Man Dwells' (*Poetry, Language, Thought*, loc. cit., pp. 213-229) is an important question, but there is not the space to pursue it here.

<sup>59</sup> See Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, Cambridge Massachusetts 1998.

so if we attend to the idea of the ethical as concerned with the realm of human action as it shapes human living, with human action as always standing within a certain *ethos* (and so also a certain bounded *topos*). Such an ethical emphasis is evident in Heidegger, even if it is not named as such, and explicit in Aalto – 'the architect's task', he writes, 'is to restore a correct order of values'.<sup>60</sup>

Too much of contemporary architecture and especially design practice operates in a way that seems divorced from such ethical concerns – divorced from the concern with human living that preoccupied Heidegger and Aalto. This is evident, although it may sometimes seem otherwise, even in the recent fashion for so-called 'design thinking'. On the face of it such thinking may seem to exhibit many of the features that are suggested by Aalto and Heidegger's accounts of building and design practice (the emphasis, for instance, on what are often referred to as 'non-linear' forms of thinking, and on the need to address multiple considerations at one and the same time).<sup>61</sup> Given the contemporary rhetoric around the notion, perhaps one could even be lead to suppose that 'design thinking' itself moves in the direction of the 'thinking' (*Denken*) that figures as the third element in Heidegger's 'Bauen Wohnen Denken'.

Yet it is worth taking a closer look here. While 'design thinking' undoubtedly encompasses many different things (and there are forms that undoubtedly are closer to the broad view of design found in Aalto and Heidegger), there is also a sense in which what it refers to is a mode of practice that is itself firmly embedded within contemporary forms of economic and political organisation (in this sense, the idea has almost taken on the status of a design 'product' in its own right), and thereby often serves exactly the forms of technological and rationalistic ordering that

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<sup>60</sup> Aalto, 'Between Humanism and Materialism', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 131. Elsewhere he talks of planning 'regarded as an ethical means of development that puts a stop to centralization, leading where blind development cannot, and functioning as a guardian of ethics and human freedom'. Aalto, 'National Planning and Cultural Goals', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., p. 101.

<sup>61</sup> See, for instance, Aalto's discussion in 'Art and Technology', in: *Sketches*, loc. cit., esp. pp. 127-128.



Heidegger and Aalto find so threatening.<sup>62</sup> It is a form of thinking that typically understands itself as a means for the more effective solution of already given 'problems' (even if complex and even 'wicked' in character), rather than of attending to the larger place, its openness and its bounds, in which such thinking arises. In this respect, one might ask to what extent some of the celebrated exemplars of current design and 'design thinking' actually match up to the conception of design found in Heidegger and Aalto. Moreover, whereas the phrase 'design thinking' may well lead us to suppose that it is *design* that leads thinking, in fact, as Heidegger would urge, it can only be *thinking* that leads design – that grounds design, that opens up the proper domain of its activity (which is to say that design, properly understood, is itself embedded in thinking, may even be understood as itself the expression of a fundamental mode of thinking). The thinking at issue here, however, is a thinking that itself stands in direct relation to human living, and so also to the placed mode of being in the world to which Heidegger's thinking can be seen to direct us. Only on that basis can we think design, and only on that basis can design, though its role in relation to human building, contribute to thinking. On this basis, one can well imagine, as Petzet seems to suggest, that Heidegger and Aalto might have come together in a fruitful meeting – if only such a possibility had not itself been cut off by the limit to which their own lives were brought in such coincidental fashion.

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<sup>62</sup> In Heidegger's case, it is crucial to realise (although, again, this is all too often overlooked) that his own critique of technology is not a critique of technology as usually understood, but is indeed directed at a particular mode of ordering of the world – one as much evident in contemporary economic and organisational systems as in particular instances of contemporary technology (see Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology*, loc. cit., pp. 281 ff.) – and perhaps Aalto should be read in similar fashion. Certainly, one finds an equally trenchant critique of technology, developed over several decades, in the work of Aalto's close friend, the philosopher G. H. von Wright. Von Wright attacks what he refers to as 'the managerial type of rationality of which modern natural science is in origin the outflow' as well as the refusal of limit that appears as a characteristic element in modern technology – see 'Dante Between Ulysses and Faust', in: *Knowledge and the Sciences in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. by Monika Asztalos, John E. Murdoch and Ilkka Niiniluoto (*Acta Philosophica Fennica* 48, Helsinki 1990, pp. 1-9).