

Resisting.

TENSIONFIELD BETWEEN THE
IDEAL AND THE PHYSICAL.

*A ceramic work by Joachim Provoost
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1.

*“The globe is divided in longitude and latitude degrees. [...] Independent of these geographical points, the human thoughts float like clouds over the surface of the Earth, and architecture is brought to life in the duel between nature and the irrational.”*¹

With this quote, Norwegian architect Sverre Fehn touches upon an universal phenomenon inherent in all creative processes –and the spatial incarnation of architecture in particular– and which forms the basis for the design of the ceramic work discussed here.

It is the confrontation between the spiritual dimension and the physical world, between personal space or *weltinnenraum*², and exterior world, between thought and reality. *Weltinnenraum*, more than solely an immured canvas for abstract content or independent intellectualism, is human inner space in contact with the outside world. Our thinking does not remain merely intellectual and abstract, since even before we ‘take’ the mental image to into reality during the creative process, it is influenced by primal images³, poetic images, pre-verbal and pre-intellectual images that are (based on) lived (experiences).

Understanding and thought are thus not external, but

internal to the interaction between body and world. “*The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness*” postimpressionist painter Paul Cézanne discloses about his creative act. ⁴ Our imagination, the poetic dimension, resonates with our experiences of reality, with memory, and with our experiential ground.

It is from this poetic dimension over to the concrete world, that architecture has to travel ⁵, mediated by our corporeal relationality. Designing happens at the boundary between the interiority of the self and the external world, with the human body as the tangential point between them. ⁶

2.

The design process, from thought to reality, is illustrated through 4 schematic sketches on page 12, which are based on original sketches by Sverre Fehn ⁷, but further elaborated and infused with reflections from the author:

1/ The imaginary scene: “*deep in my mind I see a certain ‘room picture’ (rombilde), that generates an image of what a specific place might be.*” ⁸ Architecture is not a direct knowledge, rather it should be seen as an intuitive understanding of potential. Thought revolves around poetic images, and with each new story or existential experience, one moves closer to the essence. The mental poetic image is analogous to a buried object –under the horizon– in the earth’s mass. It has no shadow, no form, no dimension, and no references. It is unlimited. What is below ground belongs to the sphere of the irrational imagination. ⁹ According to French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the attic and roof of a house immediately tells its *raison d’être*, it is rationally conceived, the slope of the roof being one of the surest indications of climate. ¹⁰ However, its oneiric opposite, the cellar, does not have clear, immediately perceptible

boundaries. Encapsulated in the earth's mass, with dark and vague corners, the imagination extends the room of the cellar infinitely. *"For the cellar, the impassioned inhabitant digs and re-digs, making its very depth active. The fact is not enough, the dream is at work. When it comes to excavated ground, dreams have no limits."*¹¹

2/ One needs to bring the image out into the light, so it acquires a shape and dimensions. Scale is something that comes forth from this confrontation. Thought is extended through the hand, the poetic image becomes tactile.

3/ The architectural room shall give the imaginary room a place. Through our embodied nature we shape things. It acquires scale in relation to our own body. This is termed 'bodycentrism'; one confronts the world with the whole body.¹² Things are measured by the legs when walking along it; the gaze proportions by unconsciously projecting (parts of) the own body onto other things; the gaze implies an unconscious touch; the body weight meets the mass of other objects, e.g. when opening a heavy front door our own weight is used as a counterbalance.¹³ In this incarnate encounter with the world through 'plastic emotions' the body is projected onto the world, and the world is reflected in the body.¹⁴ Our body is the 'tool' with which we value and measure the world. Material affects dimension as well. *"It becomes a character in the story [of the relation between man and world]. It has inherent rules and limits."*¹⁵ In shaping the architectural room Fehn accepts 'resistance forces' that are stronger than the project itself, belonging to the unknown –thought– and forces of nature –reality.

4/ the imaginary as the room: by bringing an ideal from the world of abstract thought to the world of reality, it acquires 'situationality'¹⁶, a condition in which reality and imagination indistinguishably merge into one another. When an object, despite its presence, empties its objecthood

(it effaces itself) into a phenomenological perception, it can overcome its aesthetical and functional attention. It becomes sedimented in the everyday as ‘structural beings’ to uphold a situational wholeness. Korean minimalist artist Ufan Lee elucidates the notion of ‘situated-ness’ with the following example: *“A piece of lacquer-ware at a dinner table overcomes its scientific and aesthetic objecthood through the accumulation of inter-corporeal contacts wit the hands and eyes of the family members. As its shiny surface fades through repetitive daily acts of the mother’s meals and its washing, its jotai-sei, or ‘situated-ness’, breathes and shines with the history of the family. The gradual waning of the piece’s glossy surface conversely indicates the thickening radiance of its ‘situated-ness’ in the practical horizon of the family’s everyday life. [...] This kind of radiance comes not from polishing the lacquer-ware piece to remove traces of touches, but from the very accumulation of them, something like a dark polish. [...] This sedimentation of ‘inter-corporeal reciprocity’ between the piece and the family members allows the piece to overcome its instrumentality and its self-enclosed objecthood identified with a fixed profile, and to eventually become an ‘irreplaceable part’ of the family.”*¹⁷ This exemplifies the reciprocal relationship: the physical world fuels the imagination, and the imagination infuses reality with value and meaning. An object becomes ‘lived’ through the imagination.

3.

A horizon includes both conflicting qualities, found in the juxtaposition of thought and the physical world. For Fehn, the horizon contains a mystery, something without limits. One can never reach it, as it has the ability to move in relation to one’s own position. It is an image of the immeasurable. So too is thought. Despite we believe to have complete mastery over it in the mind, it is without a fixed form, and always changing, influenced by new experiences and/or the next thought.

On the other hand a horizon can also be seen as a ‘physical preciseness’. “When the earth was perceived as round, the horizon disappeared as a mystery. The earth’s surface was finite, an assessable number.”¹⁸ In architecture, everything we build must be adjusted in relation to the ground, the horizon thus becomes an important aspect of architecture, and the physical contact point or surface between thought and construction.

4.

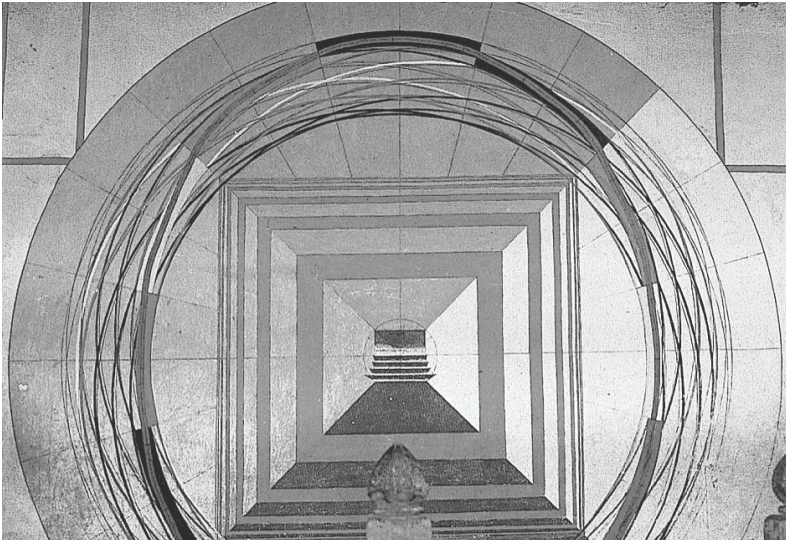
“We do not confront the cosmos unprotected and unmediated, as we apply – consciously and unconsciously – perceived, remembered or imagined architectural images to structure our experiences, thoughts and metaphors.”¹⁹ “The house is an instrument with which to confront the cosmos.”²⁰ Architecture structures ‘the flesh of the world’ through idealised images that articulate and give meaning to our basic human existential situations. Architecture is our primary instrument of physical as well as mental orientation in the world. The architectural image, as an abstraction of the world, is an interpretation of an idealised order.

In order to represent the mental image or human thought in the design of the ceramic work, the concept of the Buddhist mandala has been used. This is an auspicious cosmic diagram consisting of concentric circles, squares and geometrical forms, symbolising the unison of the cosmic and the human, divine and mortal, spiritual and material, with the use of a system of proportions and measures deriving simultaneously from the cosmic order and the human figure; e.g. a stupa, the physical externalisation of a mandala, is a geometrical diagram in plan, while its section outlines an abstraction of the meditating Buddha.²¹ A mandala, however, is –like Rilke’s *weltinnenraum*– more than just a ‘divine’ model of ordered space. It has emotive power as this votive diagram, is imposed into the immediate physical context (of the urban fabric), in the form of a

stupa, which structures daily human life and rites. It grows an existential layer, it becomes embodied and thickened with life-experiences.²²

5.

In line with the physical layout of a Buddhist stupa, the architectural reproduction of an idealised world view, the design of the ceramic work features the pure rotational symmetric –albeit negative– shape of a cone to represent the mental level. A perfect geometrical form operates as an iconographical representation of a higher order and idealised space. Just like the externalisation of poetic images from the mind into reality,



Buddhist mandala, Simtokha dzong, Bhutan, 19

Photograph by Guy Van Strydomck.

the cone is superimposed –a mould is literally pressed– onto the base of the bowl, representing the physical world. The imagined is embedded in the physical. The crudeness of the base implies a sense of strong and solid materiality, a mimesis of the uncontrollable chaos in natural forces. Yet, parallel cuts run straight from one side to the other, the rigidity of which displays a vague sense of preciseness and rationality. They are like latitude degrees that make our physical world exactly measurable. While in the imagination, the cone expands infinitely across the edges of the bowl.

The cracks and deformations of the ceramic bowl are witnesses of the



The physical externalisation of a Buddhist mandala;
Boudhanath stupa, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2018

Photograph by the author.

tensionfield between thought and reality, between idea and clay. A mental image cannot touch upon reality unharmed, it is tested, bend, and moulded to finds its physical externalisation. In shaping thought, reality offers resistance, through which a design acquires depth in the physical world. In the creation of the bowl, the high viscosity and mass of the unfired clay offers a counter force to the moulding. It has a language of itself that resists the intentional movements acted upon it, thus revealing its true ground: a substance, not a willingly material. Imposing preconceived ideas onto it, does not occurs without ‘violence’. It is a reciprocal struggle, during the moulding, as well as in the oven, when the built up tension of the juxtaposition of thought (immaterial) and reality (matter) continues the deformation and the forming of cracks.

The thin line between the glazing, which is draped like a fragile skin over the harsh cumbersome physicality of the calcined clay, is like the horizon. Its surface is the tangential point between thought and the earth, between the safe haven of the imagination, and the violent exterior reality. The glaze has minuscule indentations, reminiscent of a soft, pliable skin, which contrasts the dark black clay that recalls earthly mass.

The eventual aesthetic and atmosphere of the bowl subtly convey the dynamic of the Buddhist stupa; pinning down onto a specific spot of the physical world an element of an idealised order.

NOTES

1 Sverre Fehn, excerpt from his acceptance speech at the Pritzker Prize ceremony 1997, as reproduced in ‘Arkitektur N’ no. 7-2009, p. 56 / **2**

'*Weltinnenraum*' is a notion from poet Rainer Maria Rilke in: ENWALD, Liisa 1997. 'Lukijalle' (To the Reader), Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Hiljainen taiteen sisin: kirjeitä vuosilta 1900-1926' (The Silent innermost Core of Art: letters 1900-1926). Helsinki: TAI-teos, p. 8 / **3** 'Primal image' is a term borrowed from Gaston Bachelard in 'The Poetics of Space', p. 33. / **4** As quoted in MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice 1991. 'Sense and Non-Sense.' Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press (sixth paperback edition), p. 17/ **5** Sverre Fehn in: Per Olaf Fjeld, 'Sverre Fehn: The Pattern of Thoughts', p. 68 / **6** For an account on corporeal engagement, see the notion of *shintai* in: Jin Baek, 'Nothingness: Tadao Ando's Christian Sacred Space', p. 35-52 / **7** Fjeld, op. cit., p. 109 and 177 / **8** Ibid., p. 176 / **9** Bachelard distinguishes between rational and irrational imagination, spatio-phenomenologically explicated by means of the oneiric polarisation of the house into the attic or roof on one hand, and the cellar on the other. Bachelard, op. cit., p. 17-29 / **10** Ibid., p. 18 / **11** Loc. cit. / **12** See Juhani Pallasmaa, 'The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the senses', p. 43-77. Bodycentrism is opposed to ocularcentrism, in which vision exclusively becomes the dominant sense for experiencing the world, see ibid, p. 21-41 / **13** Ibid., p. 43 / **14** 'Plastic emotions' is a term used in: LE CORBUSIER 1959. 'Towards a New Architecture.' London: Architectural press, and New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger, p. 7 / **15** Loc. cit. / **16** For an in depth account on 'situatedness' see: Baek, op. cit., p. 47-49 / **17** Ibid., p. 48 / **18** Fjeld, op. cit., p. 108 / **19** Juhani Pallasmaa, 'The Embodied Image', p. 120 / **20** Bachelard, op. cit., p. 46 / **21** Pallasmaa 2011, op. cit., p. 61-62, and Marc Dujardin, 'Bhutanese Architecture and the Dynamics of Tradition: an Architectural Study of Identity and Change in Traditional Dwelling Culture and Built Environment', p. 75-158 and figures 3.14, 3.15 and 3.24 / **22** For an in-depth account on how an idealised world view is physically implemented in an existing context, see Niels Gutschow & Bernhard Kölver, 'Bhaktapur: Ordered Space Concepts and Functions in a Town of Nepal.'

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PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

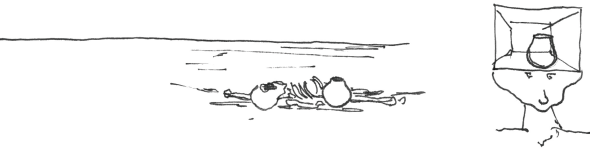
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PHOTOGRAPHIC SOURCES

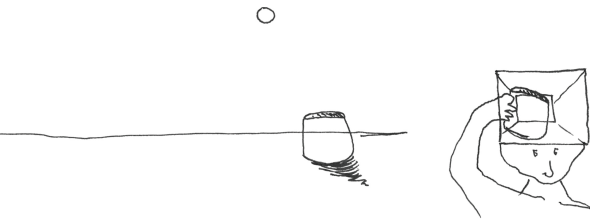
p. 6 / VAN STRYDONCK, Guy & POMMARET, Françoise & IMAEDA, Yoshiro 1984. 'A Kingdom of the Eastern Himalayas: Bhutan.' Geneva: O. Lombard

DESIGN PROCESS

From the ideal to the physical.



1 / The imaginary scene: a buried object, in the earth's dark mass as metaphor for the mental image. Without shadow it has no form, no dimension, and no references. It is unlimited. We cannot truly get a firm grip upon it, as it exists only in the mind.



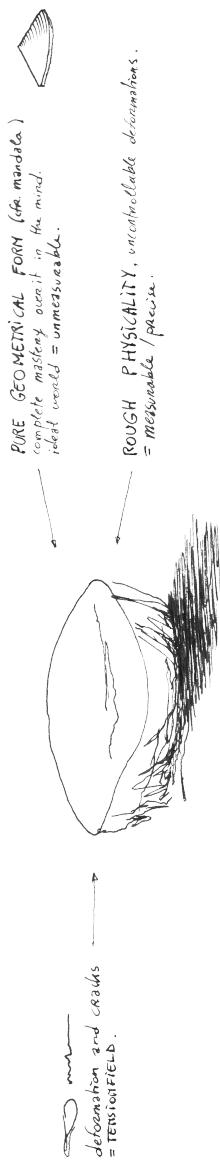
2 / Taking the intellectual image out of the mind, into the physical world is like bringing a buried object up to the light. The moment it is again offered its horizon, it also finds its shadow, and its precise measurements (Fjeld, op. cit., p. 110). It becomes tactile.



3 / The physical takes shape through superimposition of the mental image and reality—a reciprocal process in which the dimensions of the human body mediate. For ceramics, in particular, this often only involves the hands.



4 / When imagination and reality merge, the physical representation of the poetic image transcends its functional and aesthetic considerations and acquires 'situationality'. An object becomes 'lived' through imagination.



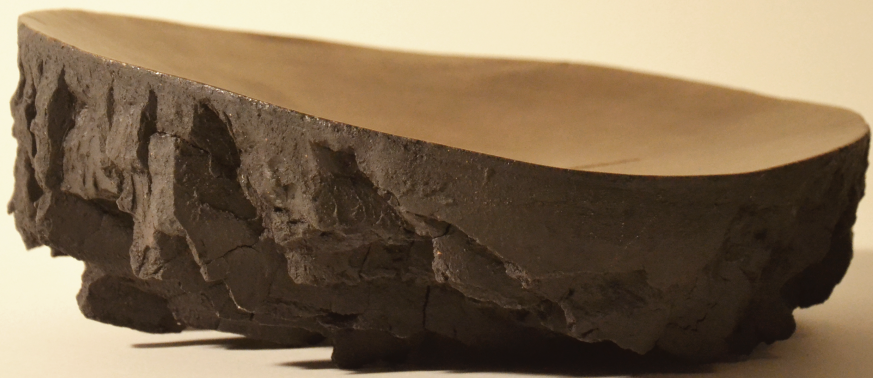
(Architektur Nr. 7-2009, p. 50) SVERRE FEHN: the world is divided into Longitude and Latitude degrees = PHYSICAL WORLD, which is precise; it is round, so its surface can be perfectly measured.

↔ above it floats a horizon of HUMAN THOUGHTS, which are endless, unlimited. = unmeasurable. through the human body the two meet. the abstract ideal world of the human thought is posed onto the concrete physical context, and adjusted as such through interpretation and perspective the two are melted into each other; the ideal resulting cracks and deformations due to the physical processes exerted onto it.



This page: top texture
Opposite: bottom texture





This page and opposite:
overall views





This page and opposite:
detailed views

