

# On Human Centrality

## in the Light of S.E. Rasmussen's and P. Eisenman's Ideas of Architecture

Åsa Dahlin

### THEME: ON THE QUALITY OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Is it relevant to talk about a serious controversy concerning the role of *human centrality* in defining the concept of *architecture*? This was my main question when I started writing this essay, as an experiment inspired by the different ideas of the architects S. E. Rasmussen and P. Eisenman. I saw Rasmussen as representing a humanistic tradition, in the sense of stressing the value of human experience in architecture, especially in *Experiencing Architecture* (Rasmussen 1993 (1957)). Eisenman, on the other hand, early proclaimed himself a "non-humanist", thereby challenging and avoiding the dependence on human centrality in architecture (Eisenman 1998). Despite the opposite perspectives of Rasmussen and Eisenman, I saw them both as concerned with

the same central question: *the question of human centrality in the field of architecture*. Rasmussen stresses the presence of *human centrality* while Eisenman seems to stress the absence of it, but are their perspectives really as different as I first thought?

Rasmussen claims that architecture has to serve the need of the experiencing human being, while Eisenman challenges the idea that architecture is mainly concerned with serving human needs. The value of architecture is, according to Rasmussen in *Experiencing Architecture*, dependent on the interaction between the experiencing person and the experienced architectural object. Architectural value is seen as an ongoing making, dependent both on the capacity of human experience and the quality of architectural objects. (However, I must add that Rasmussen does not develop his philosophical discussion on human centrality particularly well.) Eisenman, on the other hand, especially in his early texts, talks about architectural value as something that can and should exist, separated from, or beyond, human experience. Eisenman wants to "displace the subject (as both designer and client) since the remaining architectural index is no longer dependent on the iconography or functions of man" (Somol

1999, p 17). It is important to note that discussing the theories of Eisenman is complicated, because of their incessantly changing character.

The philosopher A. Janik, among others, points out that the most serious questions are about disunity of the content of the essential questions. It is necessary to be prepared to follow a discussion within a conflict, even if it leads us to unfamiliar fields. We need to stress what we think is substantial in the actual questions, but we also need to be ready to revise our idea of what the substantial aspect of the question is (Janik 1991, p 98–99). I think it is useful to use opposite perspectives, such as Rasmussen's and Eisenman's, to deepen the architectural debate. *Human centrality* is an essential question in the context of architectural aesthetics. It is, therefore, extremely interesting to compare the ideas of these two famous architects. Another important aspect of this comparison is that Rasmussen's and Eisenman's ideas also represent a shift in architects' professional attitudes, depending on various new possibilities and demands during the late twentieth-century. Although I will concentrate on the philosophical aspect of human centrality in this text, this change in the architects' professional attitudes will also be part of my discussion. First, however, I will give a brief and subjective presentation of Rasmussen and Eisenman.

### Rasmussen & Eisenman

Steen Eiler Rasmussen (1898–1990) and Peter Eisenman (born 1932) have both been among the most influential architectural theoreticians in the Western World during the twentieth century. There are also some important similarities in their professional attitudes. They both combine the traditional role of the architect with writing articles and books, which have been widely read. They have both taught students of architecture, and have had the opportunity to produce building proposals, resulting in some built projects.

Among others, the architects K. Klint, C. Petersen, E. Lundberg, and G. Asplund have influenced Rasmussen in his work. He also mentions the aesthetics of H. Wölfflin, V. Wanscher, and R. Wittkower (Rasmussen 1957, p 247–250).

*Ordering, wholeness, stability, harmony, sense-experience, identification, utility, and easily understandable* are some keywords to describe the work of Rasmussen. Eisenman was among M. Graves, C. Gwathmey, J. Hejduk, and R. Meier one of the "New York Five", a group of avant-garde architects

during the 1960s. Since then, Eisenman has had a strong voice in the theoretical discussion of architecture. The philosophers Nietzsche, Foucault, Chomsky, Derrida, and Deleuze have inspired him. Some key words to describe the work of Eisenman are *nihilism, deconstruction, fragmentation, anti-classicism, displacement, universality, uncertainty, diagrammatic, and textual*.

*Experiencing Architecture* by Rasmussen was first published in 1959 (1957, in Danish). Rasmussen explains his purpose in his foreword:

My object is in all modesty to endeavour to explain the instrument the architect plays on, to show what a great range it has and thereby awaken the senses to its music

(Rasmussen 1993 (1959), p 6)

Rasmussen also says that architecture is a "functional art" and that it "solves practical problems" (Ibid, p 9). *Experiencing Architecture* has been reprinted many times and is widely read and used for teaching purposes. It is important to note that Rasmussen and Eisenman are not of the same generation. Eisenman has, in fact, been a student of teachers from Rasmussen's generation. Eisenman wrote his (unpublished) Ph.D. thesis, *The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture* (1963), partly as a critical response to C. Alexander's *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*. He wanted to shift from an essential formalism to a kind of more open textuality, an interpretative field outside function and meaning as a deep structure. "I moved from Chomsky to Foucault to Derrida, trying to find a way of forming in architecture." (Eisenman 1999, p 7; Eisenman 1993, p 133).

Eisenman strongly reacted against the architectural formalism maintained by the older generation's R. Wittkower and others (Eisenman 1994, p 133). Eisenman says in an earlier text "Functionalism is really no more than a late phase of humanism, rather than an alternative to it" (Eisenman 1998 (1976)). Eisenman advocates "a real modernist spirit", a "displacement of man away from the center of his world" where "he is no longer viewed as an *originating agent*" and objects are seen as ideas independent of man" (Eisenman 1998 (1976), p 11).

It is not obvious what Eisenman means with *humanism*; a problem that can be partly explained by a confused mixture between the concepts of *humanism* and *classicism* in the field of architecture, dating back to the renaissance. Classicism



and humanism, says O. Svedberg, remained almost synonymous in the field of architecture until, at least, the 1930s (Svedberg 1992). A famous example is R. Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (1949), concerned with architecture from the Italian renaissance. Wittkower's interpretation was very influential. It gave, says Lefaivre, a conservative "historical view of neoplatonism" and a concentration on "harmonic proportional systems" (Lefaivre 1994). Thus Lefaivre instead treats "Italian Renaissance Humanism" as an opening in architecture to a "long relativity theory ever since". "Humanist architecture is a fantastically creative dream-machine, and a nightmare, *in potentia*" (Ibid).

Humanism has no end. It was invented by freethinkers and is by definition a paradigm in the making, open-ended, risk-taking, and forward-looking in its attempt to formulate a better future without losing sight of those parts of the past that are worth preserving. Humanism cannot be kept still.

(Lefaivre 1994, p 3)

It is important to understand this conceptual confusion to understand why Eisenman talks about "an attitude towards architecture that differs in no significant way from the 500-year tradition of humanism" (Eisenman 1998 (1976), p 9). In a general way *humanism* is mostly used ethically, to stress the equal value of all human beings. The fundamental issue for this definition is the assumed fact that we, as human beings are at the same time very much alike, and consequently, we have the same human values, independently of age, gender, social status or cultural background. Von Wright talks about humanism as an attitude that concerns questions of life. A humanistic standpoint is intellectual; it is based, he claims, on a critical and sensible relation to reality. The humanistic attitude has no constancy, von Wright continues, the question "what is humanism?" is always open. Every generation must try to answer the question from its own premises. A task that is especially important during times of great change (von Wright 1996, p 160). The question "what is a humanist architecture?" is, of course, also an open question, important to raise for all generations of architects. The inevitable question is then "do we wish a humanist architecture?"

## Human Centrality

Rasmussen and Eisenman look differently at the architect's profession. When Rasmussen talks about the architect as a theatrical producer who plans the settings for our lives, Eisenman, by contrast, describes the architect as an organiser of information within an electronic paradigm. Eisenman argues that there was a shift around 1960, when the role of the architect changed. At this point, there was a shift in methods practised by architects: from the use of drawing to the use of diagrams, and to what he calls the "information-architects" (Eisenman 1999, p 8). The differences between Rasmussen and Eisenman concerning the architect's profession are thus to do with the central question: "what is architectural value?"

Understanding architecture... is not the same as being able to determine the style of a building by certain external features. It is not enough to see architecture; you must experience it. You must observe how it was designed for a special purpose and how it was attuned to the entire concept and rhythm of a specific era. You must dwell in the rooms, feel how they close about you, observe how you are naturally led from one to the other. (Rasmussen 1993, p 33)

A new reading... would do violence to the former categories of architecture as an object of desire (of an aesthetic pleasure), as a reification of man (anthropomorphism and human scale), and as an object of value (truth, origin and metaphoric meaning). Such a dislocation is not necessarily place-specific, time-specific or scale-specific. It does not symbolise use, shelter or structure. The dislocation takes place, then, between the conventional and the natural. (Eisenman 1993, p 38–39)

A pedagogical idea is the basis for Rasmussen's thesis: to teach people to become aware of architectural experience. Eisenman is not interested in pedagogics in this sense. Instead, as we have seen, he speaks of a new form of reading: a dislocation from the traditional architectonic values, away from the perspective where a human being is the center of his or her world. I want to suggest that Rasmussen in *Experiencing Architecture* and Eisenman in his early texts seem to advocate two distinct models of the concept of architecture. Here presented in a very simplified way as A and B:

A: *Architecture* = the aesthetic value of architecture is determined by the interaction between an experiencing human being and architectural objects (presence of *human centrality*)



B: *Architecture* = architectural objects have an aesthetic value of their own, independent of an experiencing human being (absence of *human centrality*)

Eisenman chooses in his early texts to look at architecture as separated from the experiencing human being (model B). This does not mean that he denies that there is something that can be called architectural experience. He rather tries to separate the values of architectural objects and experience. He talks about "internal" formal conditions and "external" construction of subjectivity (Somol 1999, p 16). In Eisenman's perspective, there is no need, and no opportunity, for identification in architecture. Architecture must be autonomous. Eisenman wants a pure architectural object, as free as possible from external circumstances (Ståhl 1996, p 6). Eisenman does not search for truth in architecture in its history, its social role, or in archetypes, Ståhl remarks. *Architecture*, in Eisenman's perspective, means displacement of an ongoing architectural metaphysics (Ibid). This displacement, I think, leads him, as time goes, closer to Rasmussen's view on experience as important to *architecture*.

Rasmussen argues that the experiencing human being always identifies his or her body, feelings and thoughts by means of his or her environment. This is to do with surviving. Architects have to account for that human beings are naturally part of their environment, and never excluded from interaction with their context (model A). Rasmussen chooses to compare the work of the architect with the work of a gardener. The gardener must take care of his or her plants, and the architect must take care of the people who are going to use his or her buildings (Rasmussen, p 12).

If they cannot thrive in his house its apparent beauty will be of no avail – without life it becomes a monstrosity. It will be neglected, fall into disrepair and change into something quite different from what he intended. Indeed, one of the proofs of good architecture is that it is being utilized as the architect has planned. (Rasmussen 1993, p 12)

Rasmussen wrote this in the 1950s. Today, in a rapidly changing society, as we all know, many buildings are not used as they were originally meant to. Many big industrial buildings now serve other needs, such as, for instance, cultural activities. Rapid shifts have undermined the "truth" of function for architects to hold on to. The demand for flexibility in our

buildings, for them to serve more than one purpose, has increasingly taken over. However, the intention Rasmussen expressed, that the architect must try to make people thrive in their houses, can still be regarded as important, despite the change of attitudes concerning function.

### Unpleasantness

Eisenman has spoken about the need for architects to make people feel uncomfortable. He once wanted to express the current disorder and chaos of society in the built environment, while he thought it is not possible to lock out anxiety with secure and stable architecture. An architecture that expresses and permits disorder and anxiety, Eisenman says, deals with the problems and doesn't pretend that the world is safer than it is (Nygaard 1995, p 161).

The German Holocaust Memorial in Berlin has served as an opportunity for Eisenman in cooperation with the American sculptor R. Serra, to remind people of the presence of the anxiety and horror of the nazi-period in a proposed monument. 4000 concrete columns with varying heights, up to 7.5 metres, were supposed to be spaced exactly 92 centimetres apart from one another. Placed within the group was planned a single, white column, intended as both a symbol of collective remembrance of the millions of victims of the holocaust and, simultaneously, of the individual victims (Schubert 1997). The labyrinth was without fixed entry, exit, or center, and set out to allow room for the passage of only one person at a time. The space was meant, according to Eisenman, to induce feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and disorientation. Serra abruptly withdrew from the project in 1998, but Eisenman proceeded alone, agreeing on a reduction to 2700 columns (Philips 1999). Last summer, after more than 10 years of debate, the construction of the monument has finally begun, scheduled to be complete in 2004 (History Today Ltd.).

The project is "hotly controversial" (the magazine *Architecture*, November 1998). It has been criticised by M. Lind in the magazine *New Leader*. Lind says:

It is chilling that the German government should contemplate selecting, as designers of a Holocaust memorial, two men whose shared aesthetic unites technocracy with torture. (Lind 1998)

Lind continues by saying that there are real dangers associated with attempts to use horrifying monuments to evoke



the Holocaust. The chief danger, Lind says, is that people will subconsciously begin to associate, not the Nazis, but the millions they put to death with dreadful and oppressive imagery (Lind, 1998).

Eisenman and Serra themselves have described the project as "a field of memory". Their hope is that the visitors will "become lost in space and time" (Sacirbey 1998).

We wanted a surface like a field of wheat or corn that rolled and twisted with the wind. There are moments when you walk into a field of wheat and you're fine at the edge, but once you really get in, you become completely disoriented spatially. What we wanted was something that seemed very quiet from the outside. On the street, you can see urban context, but you don't realize that the ground dips. Suddenly you find yourself no longer able to see the street: The interior pillars are 12 feet high and 2 feet wide. The ground would be of granite chips. You would have a sound – the echo of feet crunching around you like jackboots. The sound and tactility of the whole experience would be strange for a Japanese person who didn't know anything about the Holocaust or for a child 50 years from now.

(Eisenman in an interview in *Architecture* Nov, 1998)

We don't want to tell people how to feel, but to ask what's your meaning in this place? (Serra, quoted in Sacirbey 1998)

Almost 70 years old, Eisenman now admits that he no longer needs to pursue his extreme agenda of making people feel uncomfortable in his buildings.

Some projects, like the Holocaust memorial, are going to make people feel uncomfortable. But I don't personally feel the need to make anybody uncomfortable anymore

(Eisenman in an interview in *Architecture*, November 1998)

Eisenman describes the way his attitude has changed:

...when I walk into a room now, I don't need to dominate the conversation. I can sit on a jury for two hours and not say a word, just let them all talk. I find it hard to believe that I used to think that I needed to make people feel uncomfortable, I used to think I had to control everything that went on, who was doing what, etc. I have no feeling about that anymore. (Ibid)

I think that there has been a kind of displacement in Eisenman's "humanistic" attitude as time has passed: experiential values have become more central. The difficulties with "the

universal object attitude" and a "displacement of man away from the centre of his world" are obvious in Eisenman's own description of the Holocaust Memorial project. He describes an experiencing human being, uncertain and lost in the built object, but, nevertheless, the meaning of the project is settled by the centrality of the experiencing human being and his or her emotional, intellectual and bodily based identification with the architectural object.

### Identification and Universality

In his article "Post-Functionalism", in *Opposition* (1998 (1976)), Eisenman, claims, as said earlier, that, modern architecture was never sufficiently modernist, and that it amounted to nothing more than a late phase of humanism.

Shifting architecture from a formal to a structuralistic base, would enable architecture to finally register the insights of the modernist avant-garde, an account which suspends classical-humanism's centrality of the subject

(Somol 1999, p 17)

In displacing the author subject (and, ultimately the static object), Somol says, Eisenman meant "to shift the primary focus from the sensual aspects of objects" to the "universal aspects of objects" (Ibid). To catch universality of object, Eisenman has used different methods. He explains the possibility of using diagrams, to catch an inner code or structure of "the interiority" of architecture that can make the architect stand more free.

My use of the diagram proposed a different rationale, one that could be both more logical and more involved with a process of architecture somewhat distant from the design process of the traditional author-architect. Such a logic could not be found in form itself, but rather in a diagrammatic process that had the potential to open up the difference between the form/content relationship in architecture and other disciplines, particularly the other plastic disciplines of painting and sculpture. (Eisenman 1999, p 49)

There is, as I have pointed out, a rich variety in Eisenman's reasoning. Ståhl may be right when he interprets one of Eisenman's main intentions as viewing *architecture* as something that can never be accomplished, but rather as part of a delayed process (Ståhl 1996, p 120). However, through all of



his spectacular buildings and texts, Eisenman has, I think, raised important questions such as: Is it possible to reach “a universal aspect of the object” in architecture? Can *architecture* exist autonomously from the dependence of the reality established by human experience, activity and identification? Will architecture continue to be legalised by presence? Is there a difference between architectural ideology and theory?

Architecture, the philosopher J. Dewey says in *Art as Experience* (1934), is a notable instance of the reciprocity of the interaction between human beings and their environment. Materials are transformed so as to become media for the purposes of human defence, habitation, and worship. But human life itself has also changed, according to Dewey, in ways far beyond the intent of those who constructed the buildings. The reshaping of subsequent experience by architectural works is more direct and more extensive than in the case of any other art, save perhaps literature, Dewey continues. They not only influence the future, but they record and convey the past. (Dewey 1980, p 231). Consequently, in Dewey’s perspective, there cannot be one “correct” way of experiencing and understanding architecture, because life itself is dynamic and pluralistic. Both Rasmussen and Eisenman would probably agree with this statement. It is, I think, important to realise this similarity, despite the many differences in their perspectives. Concerning the question of *universality* and *identification*, there is, however, a wide gap between Rasmussen and Eisenman. Rasmussen would, probably, immediately agree with Dewey, that “buildings, among all art objects, come the nearest to expressing the stability and endurance of existence” (Ibid, p 230), whereas Eisenman would not.

Rasmussen seems to have had, contrary to Eisenman, a fairly uncomplicated picture of architecture as a natural part of our everyday life, our surrounding world, our history, and our culture. The interplay with the outside world is ongoing for the experiencing and reacting self, but there are important basic similarities in the ways human beings experience the outer world, which determines the deeper value of architecture in Rasmussen’s perspective. Rasmussen uses the experiencing human being, with body, senses, emotions, and intellect, as a natural and unquestionable starting point when discussing architecture; however, his discussion sometimes lacks substance. He says that architecture is intimately connected with man’s daily life from cradle to the grave.

Ordinary people produce it for ordinary people, and therefore he wants architecture to be easily comprehensible to everybody. Architecture is based on a number of human instincts: on discoveries and experiences common to all of us at a very early stage in our lives: above all, our relations to inanimate things (Rasmussen 1993, p 14). Statements like this one, concerning identification and universality, Rasmussen leaves without discussion or references.

### **Becoming Aware of Fundamental Experiential Values**

Eisenman has certainly inspired many architects, and helped to intellectualise and broaden architectural theory by questioning deeply the architect’s traditional demands of harmony, utility, and beauty. Eisenman’s perspective has created a necessary debate. It has forced a consideration of what *human centrality* can mean today for the concept of *architecture*. Eisenman has, while trying (at least in his early texts) to deny human centrality, actually demonstrated the opposite: the importance of an awareness of fundamental experiential values for the concept of *architecture*. Eisenman, and others in his generation, have thus forced us to question the ideals of the older generation in a refreshing way. The normative spirit that sometimes can be traced in both Rasmussen’s and Eisenman’s ideas (in more or less pleasant ways) has, as far I can see, now receded, and it is time to reformulate an aesthetic platform, less ideological and more theoretical. Eisenman, himself says: “I no longer believe that knowing is more important than experiencing” (Zaera-Polo 1997, p 20). Eisenman has also stressed, that the theory of architecture has been very pragmatic, only treating issues as how to build buildings, how to site buildings, and how buildings look. Few pay attention to such things as the object, the subject, and relationship between them (Eisenman 1993, p 133). Rasmussen and Eisenman are among the architects that have tried to develop a certain kind of fundamental theoretical attitude.

Architectural experience with its rich pluralism, is a ground for continuously judging architecture in many different ways dependent on the variety of situations and events. There is a fascinating dynamism and plasticity in architectural experience to investigate, but first we need more knowledge about the capacity of human *experience* and *consciousness*. The field of human consciousness is one of the most interesting interdisciplinary research areas today. The aesthetics

of architecture, I think, can be enriched by taking part of current debate concerning human consciousness. It is, for instance, interesting to discuss the concept "embodied mind" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999) in relation to experiential architectural values.

Human beings create architecture for human beings. This is the simple fact why architecture *is* a question about the presence of human centrality, and not the absence of it. It is conditioned and vitalised by human life, and it is part of ongoing human experience, for as long as experiencing persons exist and thus react to architecture. I have argued in this text, in the light of Rasmussen's and Eisenman's ideas, that we can never exclude *human centrality* from the architectural debate. It is, on the contrary, an enormously interesting and important field, necessary to develop much further within the aesthetics of architecture.



Åsa Dahlin, PhD.stud.KTH  
KTH, School of Architecture  
asadal@arch.kth.se

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