

Δ Architectural Design

Poetics in Architecture



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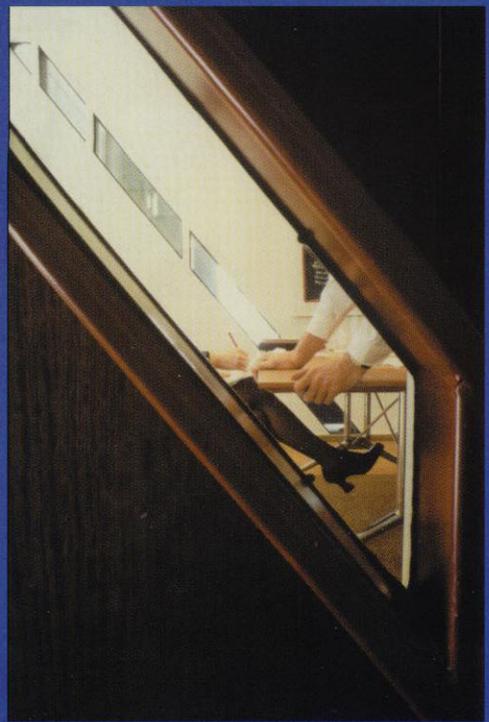
' ... in contrast to the semi-open/semi-closed cellular offices; sight in and out the chief office is blocked off. Only diagonal slits allow a glimpse on some foot- and armwork.'

Back Home: A Personal Note

In her earlier writings (*Reflections on 1' Heure Verte*)² Martine De Maeseneer considered the poetic condition as a possible result of mass intoxication (Absinthe) and as an intoxication with absence (the Internet). Here she explores the psychological impact of her recent work in the context of Bachelard's investigation, and concludes that his chosen images are still the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave.



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This essay is not so much about the *Poetics of Space* (alone). It is also about politics, and primarily about the figure of the house that stands on the crossroads of many world views. A tribute yes, and, if possible, I'd like to attribute an extra house to an extra world view.

Up to several levels Gaston Bachelard's description of the house is an asexual one. It is also well ordered, as shown in the sentence: 'To open a wardrobe is to experience an event of whiteness.'² I may have overlooked it, but I didn't come across the word 'mirror' while reading. This adds to the general assumption that mirrors are ordinary indeed – and yet mirrors reflect things psychological as reflected in the Dutch/Flemish articulation *spiegel/psyche*.

There are reasons enough to admit that a house is a box full of paradoxes. It is haunted by Plato; at the same time it is becoming a myth as much as the figure 'I', in the face of the digital age, is becoming a myth.

I have tried to enter Bachelard's universe with the help of two Dutch/Flemish words: *verdiepingen* alias storeys; and *beeldspraak* alias metaphor. For this purpose, both words are opened up into three lines of thought, three houses: the house of reason; the house of love; the house of simile.

A title that one might expect while going through *The Poetics of Space* is 'storeys' plain and simple, in an analogy with Walter Benjamin's 'passages' that open on to unexpected panoramas in the city. Is it because 'storeys' sounds too obvious – applying one storey to every chapter – in a book that is inspired by the organisation (Bachelard talks about the topoanalysis) of a house, that he doesn't do this? Or does the problem lie with the many-storeyed house bathing in the summer sun as it fills with an air of trance/transcendence?

Or is the 'single' ground floor, an embarrassment because of the image associated with it of the family store, commerce and the banality of street life, the reason? Transcendence or banality? In that case, as another option, the word *verdiepingen*, which literally

Opposite left
Improper functions: Martine
De Maeseneer Architects,
Recto Verso House, Brussels,
1991–95.

Opposite right
Depolarised sites: MDMA,
Piessens Turnover Shoe-
Import Malines, 1992–94.

Above
Man in front of his plate of
spaghetti: MDMA, Erudict
headquarters Groot-
Bijgaarden, 1998–2000.



Logos-Glossy-Glottis: Reconversion of a typewriter factory (Olympia) into an IT plant. We scraped the existing building to the bone, to the white male structure, the modernist logo and filled it in with a glossy interior. We used glass excessively for the partition walls, floor, mirrors, mirror bookcases, liquid crystal glass (from transparent to diffuse with a push on the button).

translates as 'deepenings' does more justice to Bachelard's masterpiece. It expresses more fully that he has created a space where history is overturned.

In the dialectics of 'attic' and 'cellar' a schism is established between, respectively, consciousness or rationality, and sub- or unconsciousness. As a consequence Bachelard's 'house of love' forms a vertical extrapolation of Plato's 'house of reason'. In the latter the dialectic between inside and outside is applied to distinguish between good and evil, order and chaos. It is too easy to say, however, that love is the reincarnation of things good. There are too many obstacles in the way to yield that conclusion. What should be clear nonetheless is that the mutual momentum of both houses, both world views, coincides with the ground floor (where the store is located ...).

On these common grounds – possibly – a certain critique could nestle. Critique from a post-structuralist and a post-feminist corner that rejects *The Poetics of Space* as too nostalgic and too historically dated. The advice to us is that we should direct our attention away from Bachelard's topoanalysis of intimate space towards spaces of crises, deviance, exclusion and illusion: to heterotopoanalysis.³ Who cannot agree with them?

Within *The Poetics of Space* Plato is hiding behind every corner, even though his name is rarely spoken. What to say, for instance, about the roundness of the house, which sounds undeniably Platonic. The cleverness, and also the

mental 'eclipse' in Bachelard's work follow from reverberation/reverie/becoming, which is so intertwined in the Dutch/Flemish *verwoording/verwondering/wording*. Only a poet is able to imagine a round house ... add to it a number of corners.⁴ And, indeed, wasn't it Plato in the first place who uttered his disdain for poetry, art and music alike as being mere illusions of reality. In fact, for him they weren't worth more than the Palace, the tongue of fish women in the Rue Bouterie.⁵

It is, then, Bachelard, in turn, who tackles the men of reason by 'hiding' them in the attic of the house of love, where they can enjoy the view of the adjacent pitched roofs. In the presence of these clear triangular forms and strong frameworks, these men can muse about the geometrisation of the world. Dreaming, Bachelard argues, is however the privilege of the fearless, and one does so preferably in the cellar and in the dark. *Verdiepingen*: it is only the poet who can run swiftly up and down the stairs.

A thought on the side: as we continue our explication in terms of houses instead of levels, of course the house of reason finds itself outside the house of love.

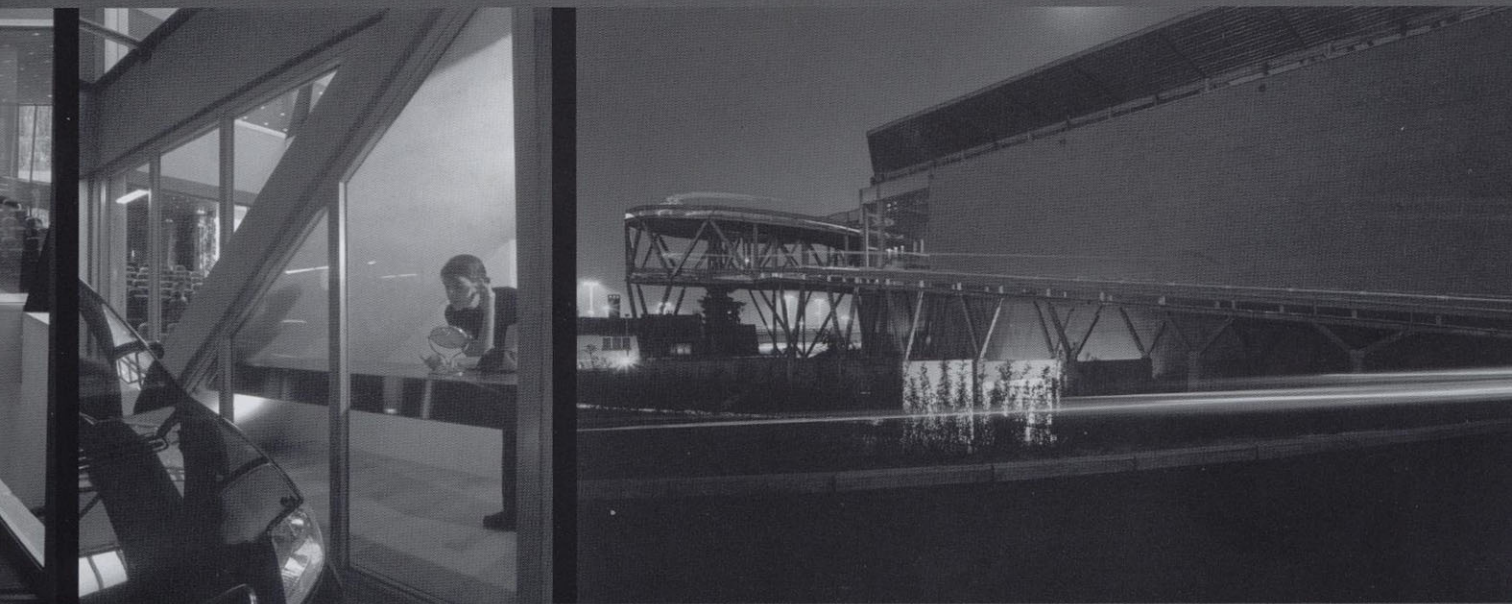
I'm attracted to *beeldspraak*, Dutch for 'metaphor', because it confuses two words: 'image' and speech – *beeld* which translates as 'image' and *spraak* which translates as 'speech'.

Bachelard devotes a whole chapter to metaphor. But why, may I ask, lock it up in drawers and wardrobes if it deserves a whole storey indeed? Metaphor should occupy the ground floor, open and well. Why not give a whole house over to it?

The most obvious explanation is once again Plato's phantom. For isn't it Plato's aversion for poetry that comes through in Bachelard's reserve about metaphor,

Notes

1. Martine De Maeseneer, 'ABISINTHE/ABSENT Reflections on l'Heure Verte,' Participation in www.virtualmanifesta.com, curated by Ole Bouman (Ljubljana), June 2000.
2. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, English translation, Beacon Press (London), 1964, p. 81.
3. Joan Ockman, review of *The Poetics of Space*, *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 6 (fall 1998).
4. After Bachelard, *op cit*, p. 148.
5. I paraphrase here Walter Benjamin, 'Marseilles' in *Reflections*, Schocken Books (New York), 1986, p. 130.
6. Fredric Jameson on Jacques Lacan in 'Demographies of the Anonymous', *Anyone*, Rizzoli (New York), p. 48.
7. Jacques Derrida and the deconstruction of metaphysics, *Dissemination*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago), 1981, p. 182.
8. Fredric Jameson, *op cit*, p. 52.
9. Bachelard on Jean-Paul Sartre, on Baudelaire, on Richard Hughes; *op cit*, p. 138.



which is projected on a lower level? Or does the truth about Bachelard's attitude lie closer in time, to be found in a 19th-century romantic reflex that distinguishes between imagination and fantasies (tales)? On a closer look, it is 'image' and 'speech' that lead a life apart in *The Poetics of Space*.

Lastly, is Bachelard's reserve to be searched for within Bergson's metaphysics? **What is certain is that the attention shifts to the lower regions of the house.**

For Jacques Lacan, one of the 'less radical' philosophers of reason, the 'warm subjective body of the I', that which can be easily identified with the house of love or the house of intimacy, is exactly the spot one needs to leave in order to be able to be creative. In other words, the 'I shell is the price you pay to be able to know'. In the explanation that follows Lacan links the subjective 'I' with the neurosis known as repetition compulsion. It addresses a mental state that mediates between fear and anxiety, where the same conduct, the same reactions, the same thoughts are tiresomely rehearsed over and over again in the most varying situations.⁶ A bit later, Lacan goes on about mirrors ...

Following another lead, repetition compulsion is soon connected to the hysterical scream 'I, I, I!!!' which folklore has defined as a typical female state of mind. Repetition compulsion' is then seen against the background of marriage, and what marriage can do to oneself or the other. Jacques Derrida puts it as: 'Hysteria is to be found behind/beneath marriage and exposes

itself only by mimicry.' In the same context he goes on about hymen – why Latin? Because it translates both as membrane and marriage ...⁷

With the 'rhetoric of mime' metaphor, we are only steps away from the Frankfurter Schüle. Around the corners lurks Gombrowicz's satire *Ferdydurke*, a kind of existential *Alice in Wonderland*, published in 1937 a year ahead of Sartre's *Nausea*, whereby the search for auditory traces in the dark bursts out in a giant laugh.⁸

It's in this universe, theatre, house that, being inspired by Michel Foucault, the play 'I becoming myth' could be performed and, honestly indeed, what else sounds through in semantics and semiotics than sameness ... How can this sameness (I, type, figure, narrative), being doomed to fold back on itself (negatively), offer any perspective on 'higher' levels of thought? I guess it's here that Plato and the philosophers of reason, and Bachelard and the phenomenologists, have drawn their own conclusions.

This universum is not the house of reason, nor the house of love, but the house of smile (simile) – the primary house.

Membrane: Only once does the story of the house of love or the house of intimacy take a different turn, in the sense that the vertical dialectics of attic and cellar is extended to the outside. This happens in the figure of the little girl Emily⁹ who, in the act of leaving, suddenly becomes aware of the fact that 'she' is 'she' (I = I). But soon after this the question is raised: when will she come back home again, to her own self?

The creative thought behind this anecdote that Bachelard offers us is that in the end everyone is searching for more objectivity, but the question remains: how is it done? Δ

Above left to right
'The phallic illusion in the feather', Cone/Derrida: MDMA, Erudict headquarters Groot-Bijgaarden.

'Feathers with some grotto effects, Cone/Derrida: MDMA, Erudict headquarters Groot-Bijgaarden.

Drive-in auditorium. 'Will you stand in for me, Misscha? I had asked and looked away in my driving mirror: MDMA, Erudict headquarters Groot-Bijgaarden.

Corner/coin – a metal, a money thing, an open recess: MDMA, Erudict headquarters Groot-Bijgaarden.