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INTRODUCTION

Patricia M. Locke

No longer is it a matter of speaking about space and light, but of making space and light, which are there, speak to us. There is no end to this questioning, since the vision to which it is addressed is itself a question. All the inquiries we believed closed have been reopened. What is depth, what is light, tí to óv [what is being]?

—Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”

Architecture is a place to question and, through questioning our very sense experiences, to draw back from the forgetfulness that makes us take being alive for granted. Architecture can, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s words, make “space and light, which are there, speak to us.”\(^1\) By articulating light and space, among other factors, architecture reopens thought about human perception of and relation to how we remake and occupy the world around us.

Perception undergirds our cognitive and affective schemata, our experiences of simultaneity and disjunctive multiplicity, and our social institutions. The general theme of Merleau-Ponty: Space, Place, Architecture is the experience and expression of space on multiple levels, addressing questions central to the work of philosophers, architectural theorists, and readers in a range of creative fields. This introduction situates Merleau-Ponty’s thought within an understanding of lived space and shows how the three sections of the book contribute to an integrated understanding of spatiality. They transgress habitual spatial categories to explore darkness, psychological depths, imagined
landscapes, art’s pliable spatiality, and space’s intertwining with time and memory or mangled conditions in torture chambers and in prison.

Architecture is a privileged mode of experiencing space, and it acts as a nonverbal way of knowing. Through the agency of architecture, places (and human beings) are shaped, confirmed, and questioned. Places ask questions of Merleau-Ponty: Why does the world appear to us as it does? How do places show and modify us? If space and light really do “speak” to us through architecture, how do we enter into the conversation? The authors of *Merleau-Ponty: Space, Place, Architecture* respond in a variety of ways, thinking with Merleau-Ponty as well as with some of his interlocutors.

Architecture, like painting, can serve to show us what it means to be human. The representation of our experience in painting is akin to place-making architectural expression. Architecture can support human flourishing by providing the arena in which we act, while at the same time having a figural prominence of its own. Distinct from the unframed natural environment around us, the built world at several scales (home, neighborhood, city, etc.) offers anchorage for the specifically human activities of the upright animal. We both sense and come to know ourselves as embodied subjects, yet intertwined irrevocably with others. Distance highlights the spatial self-awareness revealed by architecture more than the other arts. Merleau-Ponty’s late work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, emphasizes our intimate connections with the overlapping natural and cultural milieu. Yet we know ourselves also to be spatially integral wholes (albeit with porous boundaries) analogous to architectural wholes.

Phenomenology values experience and respects the world’s self-presentation in the here and now. We don’t need to belabor the point that Merleau-Ponty and Edmund Husserl made in the 1940s: the world is in a crisis, its flash points made all the more volatile with the postmodern turn. Climate change, chronic war, violence in political and social life, and the widening gap between rich and poor are companion to a felt sense of estrangement from one another and the natural world. More recently, critics such as Paul Virilio would add globalization and virtuality to these all too familiar problems.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty diagnoses our difficulties as rooted in part in misperceptions of the world of space and time that we inhabit. He values prereflective experience over the sedimented “knowledge” we’ve been taught about the way things are, and he agrees with Edmund
Husserl’s critique of contemporary high altitude thinking. “High altitude” thinking about the world as a map, regularized and spread out below us, offers the illusion of comprehensive sight. We imagine that we simultaneously can see all spaces, without folds or hidden corners, and can account for them in a quantifiable manner.

The book of nature, according to Galileo, is written in mathematical language. Without this language, one “wanders in vain through a dark labyrinth.” A mathematizing approach leaves out qualitative experience of world and expressive responses in art and architecture, ethics, and other value-laden domains. What we gain in physical predictive power, we lose on the level of lived experience. Merleau-Ponty might agree that the world presents itself as a labyrinth, but would claim that our access to it is to follow its twists and turns as moving, perceptually sensitive beings. The boundaries are felt as directing or motivating our intentional acts toward goals, in deeply etched but ineffable patterns, rather than as geometric lines specifying distinct but homogeneous areas. Likewise, successful architecture supports human intentions, which are many and varied. Building that comes from preconceived assumptions about function and form will not attain the resonating characteristics of light, built place, and original “speaking” through silent means that I attribute to the word architecture.

High altitude thinkers impose worldviews, whether historically sedimented or based on a priori conditions, which obscure our immediate experience. Yet there are other anthropocentric/patriarchal/Enlightenment attitudes toward nature, the city, and the wider world that might be invoked as similarly blocking our contact with things. Postmodern positions that overemphasize shock, novelty, or the reduction of material bodies to language also may be too abstract to account for the ways particular human beings, especially those who suffer, experience life in the world. Merleau-Ponty turns to artists and poets as well as to philosophers, putting them into dialogue with one another. We need to return “to the things themselves,” to make the familiar strange again, in order to overcome our disengagement from the overly determined places (or the virtual placelessness) around us. Given that Merleau-Ponty draws often upon scientific studies, especially of the human body and sensory or cognitive capacities, he is not opposed to science or technological advances per se. Rather, he brings into question the fantasy of comprehensive knowledge and the presupposition of a world that is more “real” in scientific or hyperlinguistic, rather than phenomenological, description.
Merleau-Ponty suspends what we think we know about quantifiable space and the contents therein to notice what shows up when we attend to partial perspectival perception. Without constructing a theatrical space based on a priori conditions for sensing figures against a neutral backdrop, we wake up already in the world. Merleau-Ponty argues that our perception is inextricably bound to movement, and we become aware that the horizon moves with us. This moving horizon displays and occludes various aspects of things, relating them to our own bodies’ intentions in space. Spatial contours can be described by this prepersonal, lived point of view. Spatial perception is “a structural phenomenon and is only understood from within a perceptual field that, as a whole, contributes to motivating it by proposing to the concrete subject a possible anchorage” (PhP, 293). Contra Newtonian space, which is infinite in extent and neutral in orientation, the lifeworld offers us finite reasons to move, or places to stay put, directed by our bodily experience. We are motivated initially by interconnected aspects of natural topography and social features such as class, race, gender, and language. Our homes, cities, and wider terrain are organized in particular ways, and we live in a specific situation, even as it overlaps others.

Merleau-Ponty is critical of derivative Cartesian or Kantian views that conceive of space as logically and physically neutral and consistent, viewed by an observer outside the system. He would appreciate certain features of a classical perspective such as Aristotle’s account, with its emphasis on the qualitative differences in spatial regions and directed motion toward or away from them. Yet, neither an absolute outsider’s viewpoint nor an individual human’s limited perception are important to an Aristotelian who views the cosmos organized from an earthly center to a celestial periphery. Merleau-Ponty’s critique of prior understandings of space and place yields positive strategies to overcome the dualistic split without a return to a classical position.

In Phenomenology of Perception, he argues that “I” am an embodied center of both perception and movement, the moving origin point of space, and where I stand distinguishes all things as partially hidden and revealed, oriented to the left or right, front or back of my own place. I realize that it is through my body that I have relations to other bodies, other persons. Space is experienced as having differentiated regions, particular places endowed with triggers for memory and imagination. I do not sort places according to the heavy and the light, as an Aristotelian would, but by those that draw me toward them, or seem threatening, or are barred from my investigation.
This primary spatiality offers the most significant orienting marker for the embodied being: depth. Depth registers my relations in terms of distance and proximity to others, and incorporates qualitative, affective responses to them. Merleau-Ponty rejects the common height, width, depth parameters of geometrical space as descriptive of location, and brings forward depth as the first dimension. He does not mean this metaphorically. When we assume that height and breadth are primary, and depth is a kind of breadth seen from the side, we imaginatively shift our perspective in space. We no longer feel the contours of the presented world. We have abstracted from any particular viewpoint to claim a constructed array of ideal sights, objects we might see if we could be in several places at once. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty argues, “Depth is born before my gaze because my gaze attempts to see something” (PhP, 274). This gaze is solicited or motivated by the world, and offers a horizon to the lifeworld in return. Within a field of presence that is both spatial and temporal, things and the gaze envelop or embrace one another. He highlights the reciprocity between the spontaneously organized world, which provides possible anchorage for the moving perceiver, and the intentions of the embodied being responding to that milieu. We are firmly embedded in a world, even before we represent it to ourselves through geometrical or symbolic means. The givenness of the anonymous human being, like the field itself, provides a thick atmosphere within which perception takes place.

I am geared into this fundamentally intercorporeal world shared with others who have their own viewpoints and agency. This insight is a motive for renewed wonder, and brings the authors of Merleau-Ponty: Space, Place, Architecture to work out the critical and productive implications of his thought. Phenomenologically based architects, too, explore the consequences of the thinking body by designing on a human scale, highlighting texture, touch, and other sensorial elements, and by emphasizing the qualitative dimension of experience in their expressions of space. Contemporary architects whose built work shows kinship with Merleau-Ponty include Steven Holl, Maya Lin, Peter Zumthor, Glenn Murcutt, Will Bruder, Antoine Predock, and Lisa Iwamoto / Craig Scott, among others. We can see in their work attentiveness to site, depth, materials (including light and volume), and the human experience of inhabiting a particular place over time. Their projects invite us to a corporeal companionship with Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology. Our authors draw out features of his thought that could support meaningful design practices, while a sensitive
dwelling with these architects’ projects could make our essays’ implications more concrete.

Our book spans from Merleau-Ponty’s major work *Phenomenology of Perception* to the shift in ontological focus in his uncompleted manuscript, *The Visible and the Invisible*. I contend that there are three strands of philosophical thought about place and space in response to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy that can draw continued intellectual support from it: feminist philosophy (and other cultural critiques), deep ecology or ecophenomenology, and philosophies of material objects in the wake of Deleuze.

Space is a major theme of *Phenomenology of Perception*, both in the chapters on the body and motricity and in the main chapter on space. The embodied being who experiences himself or herself both as subject and as an object for others displays this self-understanding in intentions toward movement and perception. Responsive to others and the general milieu in the moment of action, the agent’s motives are grounded in and are most immediately noticeable in body habits and the inhabitation of place. It is here that feminist criticism finds a foothold, both exploring the possibilities Merleau-Ponty’s view offers and pointing out his culturally bound limitations.

Deep ecology, represented in its Merleau-Pontian strand by David Abram’s writing, thinks about the natural world and humans’ not entirely benign residence within it. Parallel arguments to those of ecophenomenology can and have been constructed to inform our thinking about architecture. Here, too, ethical concerns can become more prominent than the questions of spatial knowing and being that underlie them.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty observes that we understand “why we see the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than their being-perceived—and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body” (135). The distance necessary for sight and the proximity of touch are our means of communication with things. At the same time, things in their places continue to interact with one another, to cohere or to dissolve over time. We can think about things among themselves when we aren’t subjects attending to them and accounting for their histories in purely physical or chemical terms. Or we can emphasize difference and multiplicity over the preservation of identities, along Deleuzean lines. Among material philosophers, Jane Bennett thinks with both
Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, challenging views of physical matter as inert stuff for human shaping. Rather, she and others claim that “vibrant matter” has its own effectiveness and agency, qua matter. She cites Merleau-Ponty as noticing that “objects” are already expressive, and that we know this when we know our own being as physical, alive, and present. This seems a promising direction for architecture and landscape architecture to investigate. Our authors comment on the premises of all three of these fields, especially when they focus on Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy of the flesh.

Flesh is an element as fundamental as the ancient Greeks’ earth, air, fire, and water are in their varied conceptions of matter in time and space. Each traditional element has two primary meanings: a physical fire burns the cedar in my fireplace, and, at the same time, fire can be considered as “the dry and the hot” component of composite beings. For Merleau-Ponty, flesh can likewise refer to the thickness of what lies beneath my skin, being of the same nature as the bodily flesh of others. It can also refer to the zone or straits that acts as a medium of communication, revealing relations between the human being and the world that includes latent or “invisible” aspects not fully disclosed or even able to be so. He specifies that flesh is an “incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an ‘element’ of Being” (VI, 139).

The latent features contribute to depth felt as thickness in time and space. Our own bodies share the world, are objects for others, and change over time along with them. We bring the past with us, much as a cape streams out behind in the wind that is the future blowing our way. Thus we are in touch with the others who inhabit our milieu. Change can be measured only against a steady ground, but the notion of flesh reimagines what counts as ground. Taken as the in-between, it allows for us to change direction together, possibly with the recognition of what will support human flourishing rather than destruction. Merleau-Ponty’s introduction of flesh as an incarnate principle, visibly allowing the latent to be felt in our experience of space and time, provides a new conceptual support for acknowledging our intimate weave into the world that gives itself to us.5

Merleau-Ponty: Space, Place, Architecture is divided into three sections, grouping essays with similar or complementary foci. Let’s turn to liminal space, temporal space, and shared space to draw out the implications of spatiality as outlined above.