

Figure and Ground:

A Parallel Reflection through Architectural History

Henrik Oxvig
Architecture historian

What was it that professor of architecture Steen Eiler Rasmussen drew our attention to in the 1950s, regarding our ability to experience the materiality of architecture and its immaterial voids? Peter Callesen relates to architecture from various epochs and uses the void and the materiality of paper in ways that call back to Rasmussen's understanding of how we experience architecture and space. Rasmussen was inspired by gestalt psychology, which was relatively new at the time. What caught his attention seems relevant to the experience of Callesen's works, even if at the same time there is something present that points beyond gestalt psychology.

It can seem strange to us today that not a single architectural treatise prior to the nineteenth century used the word "space." Can it really be true? Today, we have a tendency to think that architecture *is* space. But architecture hasn't always been experienced that way. The architect doesn't draw space on his or her piece of paper but plots lines that may represent walls, and space is created between the lines. Using gestalt psychology's figure/ground observations, we may call these lines architecture's *figure*, while space arises as the negative of the figure. Space is the *ground* of the figure.

The investigations of gestalt psychology, a little more than a hundred years ago, revealed to us that we *cannot* see the figure and the (back)ground at the same time. We focus either on one or the other, as the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin demonstrated in 1915 with his "vase," a so-called ambiguous or reversible image that allows us to experience how we see *either* two black profiles *or* the white vase which is formed between and by the two profiles. It was with reference to Rubin's vase that Rasmussen drew attention, in *Experiencing Architecture* (1957; English, 1959), to how the complex, advanced masonry work of medieval cathedrals demonstrates the walls were at that time architecture's figure. The space of the cathedral was, so to speak, a by-product, a dark ground one could move around in between the carved, translucent equipoise of the walls of stone and glass, which caught the light and, with their panes of stained glass, coloured it with glowing images.

The situation was reversed in the Renaissance. Rasmussen underlines that it was now the space between orders of columns, reborn in classicism's sense of harmony and calm, that was the figure, and which one was concerned with giving form. In the Renaissance, medieval architecture was in some places rebuilt in order to repress its way of being in the world. In other instances, it was allowed to decay and, as a ruin, function as a memento mori. When Callesen works with the solid fragility of architecture and ruins—the delicate in the massive—it is, in my understanding, with renewed attention to what our visual culture has persistently had difficulty relating to, and which it in fact *cannot* master. Several hundred years passed following the Renaissance, before the word space was used when speaking about architecture. The Renaissance was concerned with the space between the columns but didn't yet have a vocabulary with which to investigate that space. It is simply quite difficult to speak about the spatiality and the void of architecture.

My experience of Callesen's works is that he draws attention to the dynamic between figure and ground. He is attentive to the fact that architecture is more than an image, and that it is the void that both forms a figure and becomes the (back)ground. Callesen doesn't create reversible images. There is something else and more in the relation of the cut to what is cut out. The understanding of figure and ground that was developed by gestalt psychology was conducive to architects who practiced modernism early, and to Rasmussen's understanding of architectural history, which he developed in parallel. But it took time for us to reach that point. To get the sense of

sight to explore space and move around inquisitively required a conscious and observant effort to work with the limitations of sight.

Hans Sedlmayr's description of baroque architecture in "Den gestaltede synsmåde" (*Rumanalyser*, 2000) in the 1920s was not only an inspiration to contemporary architects, but also led Rasmussen to emphasise in writing his history of architecture, how our experience of architecture is many-faceted and dynamic, in the same way that Callesen explores the dynamic between art, architecture, and reality. Callesen plays with illusion, reproduction, two- and three-dimensionality, and makes specific reference to, for example, edifices in Romanticism's paintings of Gothic ruins, and ruins in Dresden, Rome, and Nottingham. He uses the void as void, but also to be the space that indicates the whole, as in the works *Erected Ruin* (2007) and *Little Erected Ruin* (2007).

The eighteenth century archaeologist and architect Giovanni Piranesi, who was from Rome, was interested in challenging the static, objective way of depicting the outside world. Piranesi was critical of drawings that maintain the impression that the world, its life and space, can be held in a closed, three-dimensional box, a fixed figure that we can draw and have command over on a piece of paper. Piranesi's drawings were vertiginous, implicating the viewer in them. They offered insight into a world we can't take in from one point of view. And that's how the world is. The gaze cannot command it in its entirety. Neither can architecture. In other words, it was not Piranesi's ambition to offer us insight into an abstract, nightmarish dream world. Piranesi was interested in challenging the advanced techniques of draughtsmanship developed in the Renaissance. They can capture our gaze and cause us to forget that what we are seeing isn't as complex as either reality or the concrete, built architecture that can only be represented in drawings in a limited way. Piranesi forced his drawings—and thus also the viewer of them—to explore possibilities in the reality outside the frame, of which we only ever have an inkling.

It is, furthermore, interesting to distinguish Piranesi's work from the complex spatial images which the Dutch graphic artist MC Escher created in the mid-twentieth century in woodcuts and drawings, even if Escher utilised the dynamic between figure and ground in our experience of seeing. In his reproductions of space on the two-dimensional surface, Escher makes use of the fact that, as gestalt psychology has established, we cannot see the whole simultaneously, and must take time to experience how ground can become figure and vice versa, if we focus differently. Escher understood that figure and ground in a drawing continually compete for our attention. He allowed this rivalry to articulate itself in a such a way that the whole, which the viewer gradually forms, doesn't hold together. The figure we form between and of the lines doesn't coalesce as a space we would be able to move around in. And this is, if I may say so, Escher's point. Escher plays with our perception and creates paradoxes, and in this way he utilises the dynamic of our senses to show something which we can't synthesise as a coherent spatial representation. Escher remained fascinated by the paradoxes of drawing and didn't lead us beyond the drawing into a world we can't represent, in the way that Piranesi did.

In his works on paper, Callesen also puts our senses to work, and forces us to think about what we are experiencing. It is my experience, however, that Callesen differentiates himself from what gestalt psychology draws our attention to with the figure/ground dichotomy. Or rather, Callesen adds something. It is not only a question of figure and ground, but also of a third term, where figure and ground can change in front of our gaze, and which we are implicated in together with the figure and the

ground. Callesen is in his own way also interested in paradoxes, as when he creates ladders of paper and “raises” ruins, so that the edifice appears in its totality once more, at the same time as it lies in ruins.

Callesen is in conversation with what we in recent times have experienced in the work of Matisse. I am thinking, in this context, not only about the understanding of space we sense through reflecting on what we experience when viewing—sensing—Matisse’s *The Red Studio* (1911), which was met for decades with a lack of interest in reflecting on precisely what Matisse was challenging. For a long time, we ourselves stood in the way of experiencing and discovering what Matisse was showing us, and only later realised that the obstacle was our own lack of reflection on our understanding of space. There is, as indicated, nothing new about this.

The epochal aspect of Matisse’s *The Red Studio* is that it is not simply a question of a number of figures that we can experience one by one along with the ground each of them is locally surrounded by, but also of a unifying but unbounded red space that envelops us, which implicates us completely, even though it is still a question of something that happens on a canvas. It is this *all over* effect that situates us in something more than we can take in. Like Matisse, Callesen challenges how we experience space and asks that we experience it precisely by challenging the singular gaze focused on either the figure or the ground. Callesen does not offer an either/or, but a both/and that we can perhaps have better command over, even though he also plays with illusions, deceptions, and site-specific works on a human scale, in which one begins to doubt what is paper and what is reality.

