

*Simona Chiodo\**

## **The meaning of dwelling. Insights from the classical thought**

### **1.**

Among the contemporary architects, it is well-known that philosophy offered an important contribution to the reflection on dwelling through Heidegger's view, according to which "[H]uman being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth" (Heidegger 1993a: 351). Yet, there is a reflection on dwelling that may be even more meaningful than Heidegger's for the contemporary architects: paradoxically enough, the ancient Greek notion of dwelling, and more precisely what may be learnt on the notion of dwelling starting from the ancient Greek notion of architecture, which is developed by both myth and philosophy, and which finally starts a meaningful relationship with the very notion of dwelling, at least in Western culture.

In order to show the reasons why a notion of dwelling inspired by the ancient Greek thought may be particularly promising for the contemporary architects, let us start from the analysis of the ancient Greek etymological meaning of architecture, which may be considered as the condition of possibility of dwelling, as we shall see. Indeed, the word "architecture" has a most interesting philosophical meaning, deriving from the ancient Greek words *arché* and *tektonia*. Whereas the meaning of the latter is simpler, being construction, the meaning of the former is much more complex, since *arché* is one of the words that found the birth of philosophy itself. *Arché* has, at least, two major meanings: the first makes reference to a chronological dimension, by indicating something that comes first and precedes something else, and the second makes reference to a logical dimension, by indicating something that is excellent. Thus, the former has to do with a construction that somehow comes first and precedes something else, whereas the latter has to do with a construction that is somehow excellent.

\* Politecnico di Milano

As for the first major meaning of the word “architecture”, we may argue that it suggests that architecture is nothing less than a condition of possibility: more precisely, by being what comes first and precedes, architecture may be thought of as the condition of possibility of humans’ life itself as it is conceived developing in a human place, i.e., in a place built by the humans for themselves. The ancient Greek myth may help us clarify the meaning of the ancient Greek etymology, since, as it is well-known, there is a major myth that tells us precisely this kind of story, i.e., how the humans could start building by themselves a place for themselves. This myth is, of course, Prometheus’s, as it is told especially by Hesiod, Aeschylus and Plato, and then by Ovid in the Latin tradition. In particular, Aeschylus’s Prometheus, after having given the humans the condition of possibility of the *tektonia*, i.e., the fire, which is the humans’ first technical tool, tells that, before his gift, the humans used to live as ants underneath the surface of the earth, otherwise they were the animals’ easiest preys, as well as incapable of surviving the atmospheric agents. Indeed, the fire totally changed the humans’ life, by making them capable of surviving animals and atmospheric agents, and therefore of living under the sun, and even ruling the earth (see Aeschylus 1983). Thus, there is a perspicuous analogy between the etymological meaning of *arché* together with *tektonia* (as the construction that comes first and precedes) and the mythological meaning of the fire given by Prometheus (which is the humans’ first technical tool, which makes their life possible, in that it makes it possible over, and not underneath, the surface of the earth). In particular, we may argue that this analogy shows that it is possible to identify a technical tool that even starts the humans’ life as we usually conceive it, in that the humans not only survive, but also rule, the earth – and this technical tool at its best may be architecture itself, since it is precisely architecture what literally makes the humans capable of living over, and not underneath, the surface of the earth, by separating a space we may call *kosmos* from a space we may call *chaos*. Indeed, whereas the latter is the ancient Greek word to name the immeasurable space, i.e., the natural space as it is, with all its animals and atmospheric agents dangerous for the humans, the former is the ancient Greek word to name the measurable space, i.e., the artefactual space build by the humans for themselves – the *kosmos* is precisely the result of what both the etymological meaning and the mythological meaning of architecture make reference to, by spreading from the humans’ use of the technical tool that separates a cosmic space (which, by being artefactual, respects the human measure) from a chaotic space (which, by being natural, respects the animals’ and the atmospheric agents’ measures). Thus, this is the sense in which architecture is the technical tool that comes first and precedes – thanks to architecture, the humans can have their very own space, and having their very own space starts their lives in that they can survive, and even rule the earth.

Interestingly enough, the second major meaning of the word “architecture”, i.e., the meaning deriving from the second major meaning of *arché*, which indicates something that is excellent, makes reference to an excellent construction: the excellent construction that can actually succeed not only in separating a space founded on the human measure so that the humans can survive, but also in building this space so well that they can even rule the earth.

More precisely, we may add what the ancient philosophers argue about the meaning of architecture starting from its classical (both etymological and mythological) foundation. According to Plato, Aristotle and, later, Augustine (see in particular Plato 2008, 2013 and 2016 and Aristotle 2009), and starting from the Pythagorean tradition, the very beauty of architecture is based on the respect of the human measure, which is literally measured by numbers, i.e., by numerical proportions. Indeed, architecture is a matter of rationality, as Aristotle argues by defining it as a productive disposition with a true *logos* (see Aristotle 2009: 1140a). And its rationality is founded, again, on the *kosmos*, since it is precisely the *kosmos* what gives the humans their measure, and in particular their spatiotemporal measure. Indeed, the *kosmos* literally indicates the sky, which gives the humans both their spatial measure (by setting the distinction of the cardinal points) and their temporal measure (by setting the distinction of the days and the nights, the months, the seasons and the years, as well as of their rhythms). Moreover, the *kosmos* figuratively indicates the order, which, starting from what is set by the sky, becomes the very order of the humans’ life as it is measured in spatiotemporal terms – and, among the technical activities, architecture is precisely what gives the humans a space that is measured in terms of their spatiotemporal order.

Thus, in order to briefly identify the cornerstones of the ancient notion of architecture, we may argue that it is thought of as:

1. first, our first technical tool to separate a cosmic space (which is safe for us) from a chaotic space (which is unsafe for us);
2. second, our first technical tool to build a cosmic space measured on our own spatiotemporal measure, i.e., a space that represents our own spatiotemporal identity as humans.

Now, the question is the following: how the ancient notion of architecture may promisingly influence the way we think of dwelling?

## 2.

Thinking of architecture by starting from the meaning of *arché* implies an idea of precedence that seems alternative to Heidegger’s notion of dwelling as the cause, and not the effect, of building. In the latter case,

the idea is that the humans are essentially dwellers, as “[H]uman being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth”: first, we are dwellers and, second, and consequently, we are builders. On the contrary, in the former case, i.e., in the case we start our reasoning from the meaning of *arché*, building itself, and in particular architecture itself, seems to come first and precede – architecture seems a *condicio sine qua non*, and therefore dwelling seems to follow. More precisely, let us reason on what may be the theoretical meaning of this possible inversion.

We may argue that an interesting theoretical meaning of this possible inversion may be the following: thinking of architecture as a *condicio sine qua non* means giving the humans a technical and technological<sup>2</sup> ontological essence that is even stronger. Indeed, if we go back to Prometheus’s myth, then we may think of his gift of the fire not as an inessential addition, but as an essential, i.e., ontological, completion of the humans’ very identity, as we shall see. Of course, as it is well-known, also Heidegger’s notion of technology is strictly related to what the humans are (see Heidegger 1993b). Yet, thinking of the humans as essentially dwellers, as Heidegger does, seems to deprive that special kind of technology coinciding with architecture of a stronger founding role. On the contrary, in Promethean terms, architecture seems to even complete the very creation of the humans as they are. Not by chance, in several versions of Prometheus’s myth, including Plato’s and Ovid’s, Prometheus is even the humans’ creator: the former attributes to him the role of giving the humans not only the fire, but also an essential quality, i.e., the wisdom of practicing the arts *lato sensu*, as they are conceived in the classical thought (see Plato 1956: 321 c-d), and the latter even attributes to him the role of creating the humans by modelling them (“Still missing was a creature finer than these, with a great mind, one who could rule the rest: man was born, whether fashioned from immortal seed by the Master Artisan who made this better world, or whether Earth, newly parted from Aether above, and still bearing some seeds of her cousin Sky, was mixed with rainwater by Titan Prometheus and moulded into the image of the omnipotent gods. And while other animals look on all fours at the ground he gave to humans an upturned face, and told them to lift their eyes to the stars”. See Ovid 2010: I 77-87). Thus, there are at least two possible ways of thinking of the relationship between the humans and that special kind of technology coinciding with architecture:

<sup>2</sup> Starting from now, I shall use the word “technology”, since it is more precise in order to indicate the complex architectural practice (and which is used in the English translation of Heidegger’s works).

1. in the first case, and according to Heidegger, the humans are essentially dwellers, and this is what determines their being builders in general and architects in particular;

2. in the second case, and according to the classical foundation of the notion of architecture, we may argue that the humans are essentially architects, in that their first gesture is the technical (and then technological) separation of a cosmic space from a chaotic space, and this is what determines their being dwellers.

This possible shift is very interesting from a theoretical point of view. It is not necessarily an argument against Heidegger's view, but simply a possibility of starting our reasoning on architecture and dwelling from another perspective, which may make us understand other theoretical potentialities. In particular, we may argue that thinking of the architectural gesture as a *condicio sine qua non* seems to imply an interesting shift of what we think the human identity is essentially: if the architectural gesture has a founding role, then the human identity seems more active, and in particular more challenging nature itself. The etymological, the mythological and the philosophical classical traditions seem to converge by defining the humans as special creatures who can master an analogously special technology, through which they can separate themselves from the rest of nature by building a space measured on themselves, and therefore they can start their history of ambitious evolution as special creatures who are "finer than these [other creatures], with a great mind, one who could rule the rest: [...] moulded into the image of the omnipotent gods. And while other animals look on all fours at the ground [...] [the] humans [have] an upturned face, and [...] lift their eyes to the stars". Indeed, and paradoxically enough, this theoretical shift seems to help us explain even better the present of these special creatures: whereas conceiving them as essentially dwellers leads to think of them especially as those who can (hopefully) take care of nature (as, indeed, Heidegger suggests through his well-known image of the fourfold<sup>3</sup>), conceiving them as essentially architects in the above-mentioned sense leads to think of them especially as those who can challenge nature – and challenges may be both promising and risky. On the one hand, the founding gesture of the architect who separates the humans from nature may be promis-

<sup>3</sup> For the positive balance between the humans and nature implied by the image of the fourfold see Heidegger 1993a (351): "Earth is the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal. [...] The sky is the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year's seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night, the clemency and inclemency of the weather, the drifting clouds and blue depth of the ether".

ingly ambitious, in that it is the first step towards the humans' evolution ("to lift their eyes to the stars" is a meaningful metaphor: the human evolution is so sophisticated that the humans are closer to the gods, who inhabit the sky, than to the animals, who inhabit the earth, since the humans, precisely thanks to the *arché* together with the *tektonia*, can create, as the former can and the latter cannot). On the other hand, the founding gesture of the architect who separates the humans from nature may be riskily ambitious, in that it is the first step towards something that may result in a catastrophe both for the humans and for nature (in particular, taking to the extreme the idea according to which the humans are the nature's counterpart, i.e., those who challenge nature by being both literally and figuratively separated from it, may mean severely violating it, and therefore causing a catastrophe both for the humans and for nature, which is precisely what we are risking to cause now). Thus, thinking of architecture as a *condicio sine qua non* means giving the humans a greater ethical responsibility: whereas the humans of Heidegger's fourfold have the responsibility of taking care of an earth they harmonically inhabit, the humans of the classical thought have the responsibility of taking care of the most challenging balance between their being the ambitious and technologically advanced counterpart of nature and nature itself – which is precisely our present ethical challenge.

### 3.

Now, let us focus on the possible consequences of the above-mentioned theoretical inversion on the very notion of dwelling. If architecture comes first, then what is the meaning of dwelling, at least from a philosophical point of view?

Again, let us start from Prometheus's myth, and in particular from Aeschylus's version of it in his *Prometheus bound*. Prometheus, who, after having deceived Zeus by helping the humans, is tortured by an eagle eating his liver, explains the reasons why his gift of the fire has been exceedingly essential for the humans (see Aeschylus 1983: 556-557): as we have already mentioned, the humans, before having received the gift of the fire, were doomed to live as ants underneath the earth, in order to survive both the animals, being their easiest preys, and the atmospheric agents. On the contrary, after having received the gift of the fire, together with the capacity of mastering it, they totally changed their way of living, by moving, literally, from underneath the earth to over the earth and, figuratively, from being the passive preys of animals and atmospheric agents to being even their active rulers – thanks to the gift of the fire, i.e., thanks to the capacity of mastering the *arché* together with the *tektonia*, the hu-

mans started being actually dwellers of the earth (by building by themselves a place for themselves, and consequently by being over the earth).

If this argument is reasonable, then we may add that this meaning of dwelling implies a series of specific consequences:

1. first, dwelling seems to suggest the idea of being safe: the first thing the humans look for is a place where to be safe. Indeed, being safe is so essential that, if it is possible to be safe only underneath the earth, then the humans force themselves to become something else, i.e., a kind of ants. Thus, being safe seems essential for the notion of dwelling;

2. second, dwelling seems to suggest the idea of separating: again, the condition for the humans to move from underneath the earth to over the earth is the separation, through the fire, i.e., through technical (and then technological) tools, of a place for themselves from other places. In particular, they separate their own (cosmic) space from the (chaotic) spaces of both the animals and the atmospheric agents: they do not do without animals and atmospheric agents, which keep existing, and are an essential source of life for the humans, but, interestingly enough, what the humans need is only a separation from them, not an extinction of them. This is the reason why architecture is founding: an extinction requires another kind of activity (in particular, destruction), whereas a separation requires the architect's gesture of tracing and building a place meant to be the humans' place;

3. thus, and third, dwelling seems to suggest the idea of living in a place measured on oneself: again, a cosmic place means a place that is founded on, and therefore represent, the humans' identity starting from their spatiotemporality;

4. fourth, dwelling seems to suggest the idea of ruling: even if, at least outwardly, dwelling seems to make reference to something somehow passive, it seems to actually make reference to a particularly active role, which is ruling both the animals and the atmospheric agents by technically (and then technologically) avoiding their negative effects and, moreover, by technically (and then technologically) exploiting their positive effects. Thus, ruling somehow means ruling nature itself as the humans' most challenging counterpart.

If we choose to follow these insights from the classical thought, then we get to the following result, which is quite interesting: we may think of dwelling as something that spreads from technically (and then technologically) separating a safe place measured on the humans' spatiotemporality from nature, not only in order to avoid its negative effects, but also in order to exploit its positive effects – dwelling seems to imply, and therefore to mean, that the humans are essentially so ambitious that nature is especially something to challenge: dwelling seems to start as the humans build a place for themselves that makes them capable of ruling nature.

Of course, the kind of suggestion the classical thought seems to give us is quite interesting also because it seems to imply a *caveat* that is most urgent now: if the humans are essentially challenging nature, then the most dangerous thing is not what the latter may do against the former, but what the former may do against the latter (which is precisely what is going on now more than ever in human history).

Not by chance, Prometheus is severely punished by Zeus for having provided the humans with the fire. But what is even more interesting is that also the humans, who are not directly guilty, are punished by Zeus, who, after Prometheus's first deceit to help the humans against Zeus<sup>4</sup>, deprives them of the fire, which is given back by Prometheus before being bound to a rock and continuously injured by an eagle eating his liver. Zeus's punishment against the humans is most interesting because it means that Zeus is worried about the potential challenge between the gods (together with nature as it is ruled by them, and in particular by Zeus himself as the gods' king) and the humans, who, from the very beginning, are thought of as the most ambitious, and therefore the most challenging, creatures. Thus, and not by chance, Zeus's punishment against the humans is depriving them of the fire, i.e., precisely of what can make them challenge both the gods and nature as it is ruled by them. Moreover, Aeschylus adds a most meaningful detail, according to which Prometheus knows a secret unknown to Zeus about what will cause Zeus's own defeat: his own offspring will become more powerful than him, and will finally defeat him by substituting him (see Aeschylus 1983: 216). The myth is unclear about the identity of Zeus's offspring who will defeat him (in some cases, it is identified with Heracles). But, if it may make sense to think about the humans themselves, as they are very feared by Zeus,

<sup>4</sup> See Hesiod's *Theogony* (560): "from that time forward, ever mindful of the fraud, he did not give the strength of untiring fire to wretched mortal men, who dwell upon the earth". The first Prometheus's "fraud" to help the humans against Zeus is told by Hesiod in his *Theogony* as well (535-555): "When the gods and mortal men were contending at Mekone, then did he [Prometheus] set before him [Zeus] a huge ox, having divided it with ready mind, studying to deceive the wisdom of Zeus. For here, on the one hand, he deposited the flesh and entrails with rich fat on the hide, having covered it with the belly of the ox; and there, on the other hand, he laid down, having well-disposed them with subtle craft, the white bones of the ox, covering them with white fat. Then it was that the father of gods and men addressed him, 'Son of Iapetus, far-famed among all kings, how unfairly, good friend, you have divided the portions'. Thus spoke rebukingly Zeus, skilled in imperishable counsels. And him in his turn wily Prometheus addressed, laughing low, but he was not forgetful of subtle craft: 'Most glorious Zeus, greatest of ever-living gods, choose which of these your inclination within your breast bids you'. He spoke subtlety: but Zeus knowing imperishable counsels was aware, in fact, and not ignorant of his guile; and was boding in his heart evils to mortal men, which also were about to find accomplishment. Then with both hands he lifted up the white fat. But he was incensed in mind, and wrath came around him in spirit, when he saw the white bones of the ox arranged with guileful art".



then, and once again, we get to the same result: the humans are essentially challenging creatures – and dwelling may be thought of as something essentially founded on this challenging human identity, i.e., as something that has to do not only with passively staying in a place, but with actively ruling a place.

#### 4.

Is there anything we can we learn from the classical thought in order to face our present? We may argue that the answer is affirmative, and complex at the same time, as we may at least very briefly suggest, in the short space of an article, as a possible issue on which philosophers and architects may work together.

On the one hand, we should consider the explicitly positive meaning of dwelling, which may be thought of as one of the most essential fulfillments of the human identity. Indeed, dwelling coincides with the full start of the human evolution, as the humans can not only hardly survive, but also fully live (and even rule). Yet, being capable of building the *condicio sine qua non* of dwelling, i.e., the cosmic place, is not trivial at all, as some of the most important Italian architects of the last century, for instance, used to warn. According to Rogers, there is still “the painful problem of the human’s house. Years, centuries, millennia go by, gods rise and die, their pompous abodes, the powerful humans’ manors, fountains, theatres and markets set themselves up, but the human still has not learnt to build an abode for herself/himself: a house for everyone, for you, for me, for the Anonymous. [...] Go away from the rubble, and build your house, it is time: you have fiddled with the pyramids, the Coliseums and the big domes enough, show who you are and how much you are worth. I want to be true, to live: I want houses where this is possible” (Rogers 1943: 333, my translation). And, according to Cattaneo, “Among the many architectural topics, that of the house, despite being the richest as far as the examples are concerned, is the most roughly defined. The house is studied in its smallest particulars of practical operation, but it is not asked what it really is or should be, considering the human’s life” (Cattaneo 1942: 500, my translation). These warnings mean that the *condicio sine qua non* of dwelling is hard to be fully satisfied, and requires that the humans act at their best by carefully using all their architectural capacities, which are both practical and intellectual, since, in order to be capable of building “the human’s house”, the architect should be capable of answering the philosophical question implied by the very etymology of architecture: if the architect builds the *condicio sine qua non* of the human’s evolution by building the cosmic place that represent her/his

identity, then who is the human, i.e., what is her/his identity (who is “everyone”, according to Rogers)? Answering this question requires a complex intellectual exercise of abstraction: what can be unifying for anyone (“for you, for me, for the Anonymous”, according to Rogers)? What can essentially define the human identity in terms of spatiotemporality, and therefore in terms of needs and aspirations, for anyone? The answer is complex, but the architect should be capable of answering through her/his building, which can consequently start our being actually dwellers, who live in a safe place measured on our identity, which makes us capable of ruling nature. (Yet, the above-mentioned architects’ warnings seem to be still unsolved: still too often, houses happen to seem built in order to be economic speculations, and not at all in order to be “the human’s house”, the “abode for herself/himself: a house for everyone, for you, for me, for the Anonymous”).

On the other hand, we should consider the explicitly negative meaning of dwelling, which may be thought of as the most challenging balance the humans should master, i.e., the balance between their being the ambitious and technologically advanced counterpart of nature and nature itself. Yet, if it is true that this challenge is even founding, at least in Western culture, by being implied by the classical thought, then it is also true that reasoning on its possible meanings and consequences may be a precious warning itself, and therefore a precious step towards possible solutions, which philosophers, together with architects, may start working on in the light of the present phenomena. (For instance, a first complex, as well as provocative, question to answer may be the following: if it is true that we are essentially challenging nature, then what possible meaning, and what possible limit, may have our present effort to bring nature in our cities by trying to progressively subordinate its rules to ours? Is this phenomenon safe, or may it imply a possible hidden danger?).

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## The meaning of dwelling. Insights from the classical thought

The classical thought (making reference to etymology, myth and philosophy) may promisingly help us reason on the meaning of dwelling. In particular, if we try to consider the notion of dwelling together with the notion of architecture, then we get to the following result, which seems quite interesting also in order to reason on the present: starting from the notion of architecture, and in particular from the meaning of *arché*, which is the remarkably philosophical word that founds it (together with *tektonia*), implies an idea of precedence that seems alternative to Heidegger's notion of dwelling as the cause, and not the effect, of building. This possible shift, which enriches the ways in which we may reason on both architecture and dwelling, may give us possible suggestions that are still meaningful.

KEYWORDS: Philosophy of architecture, Dwelling, Human measure