Why Do Old Places Matter?
It is generally understood that architecture tames natural space for purposes of human dwelling and activities. Buildings, villages and cities give spaces experiential and existential meanings by turning them into specific places of human use that resonate with and choreograph our actions and mental reactions. In fact, architecture is a functional extension of both our physical and mental faculties. Most importantly, it is also an extension and externalization of memory. Mediating between the world and ourselves, architecture provides distinct horizons and frames of experience, cognition and meaning. The prevailing view of architecture as producing structures and objects of merely aesthetic interest is thus crucially misguided.

Architecture is about the world, life and existential meanings rather than just aesthetics. “We come to see not the work of art, but the world according to the work,” French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty remarks. It is a fundamentally different experience to encounter a space or landscape “in the wild” than with the mediation of architectural structures; they frame, scale, relate and tune our physical reality prior to our conscious awareness of it. Altogether, architecture operates fundamentally in the preconscious and embodied realm of consciousness. According to some distinguished philosophers today, such as Alva Noë, human consciousness is not located in the brain at all, but it is out there in our relationships with the world, in “the joint operation of brain, body, and the world.” The logical consequence of this view is that environments and architecture constitute our consciousness.

ARCHITECTURE IN TIME
But, in addition to living in space, we also dwell in time, and architecture mediates equally our relation with the course of time, and it gives endless time its human measure. In the physical reality of time there are dramatically different time scales that exceed our capacities of perception and understanding, from cosmic and
geological time to the time scales of evolutionary, organic and atomic processes—time scales that range from millennia to milliseconds. Architecture helps to scale this terrifyingly vast expanse of time. An essential mental task of human constructions, structures and artifacts is to create a scale of time. “Architecture is not only about domesticating space,” philosopher Karsten Harries argues, “it is also a deep defense against the terror of time. The language of beauty is essentially the language of timeless reality.”3 Space and time are not objective and independent dimensions outside of our consciousness; we are intertwined with the world, in the way of the Moebius strip, which has two sides but only one surface. The world and the self are “chiasmatically” (crosswise) bound together, to use a notion of Merleau-Ponty.4 “The world is wholly inside, and I am wholly outside myself,” the philosopher argues enigmatically.5

Postmodern philosophers, such as David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, have pointed out the dramatic change in our relationship with reality that has taken place in less than two centuries. Notions and experiences of time have become suppressed and replaced by those of space. At the same time, the two physical dimensions have
mingled. Today we can speak of spatialization of time and temporalization of space. Harvey has identified a distinct “space-time compression,” which has fundamentally altered our relationship with these dimensions.⁶

This development, theorized by philosophers, is clearly evident in literature. Nineteenth-century novels are predominantly about time, whereas modern literature revolves around the notion and experience of space. In fact, experiential time has accelerated dramatically from the slow and patient time (“the womb of time,” to use a notion of Shakespeare in *Othello*) in the novels of the great European writers of the 19th century, all the way to Marcel Proust’s great novel about time and memory.⁷ Italo Calvino points out the disappearance of time in modern literature: “Long novels written today are perhaps a contradiction: the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot live or think except in fragments of time, each of which goes off along its own trajectory and immediately disappears. We can rediscover the continuity of time only in the novels of that period, when time no longer seemed stopped and did not yet seem to have exploded, a period that lasted no more than a hundred years.”⁸

The disappearance of experiential time is equally evident in the evolution of architecture. Whereas buildings and settings built before the modern era are documents of benevolently slow time, architecture seems to have become ever faster, hurried and impatient through modernity. Just think of the century-spanning and boundless sense of time experienced in Romanesque monasteries or Gothic cathedrals in comparison with the neurotically rushed time of Deconstructivist buildings, for example. The urbanist philosopher Paul Virilio argues that Western culture began a massive acceleration of speed in the mid-19th century, to the point that the most important product of postindustrial societies today is speed.⁹ Whoever achieves the greatest speed possesses the greatest power in circumstances of both war and peace—besides, these circumstances have lost their differences due to speed, he argues. Speed has also shattered public life and space. “As the consequence of the annihilation of time, the public space is replaced by the public image,” Virilio suggests.¹⁰
ARCHITECTURE AND THE CULTURAL CONTINUUM

In addition to creating the experience of distinct and unique places, the seminal task of architecture is to preserve and concretize, or make real, a sense of cultural continuum and to safeguard our experience of the past, or more precisely, the continuum of culture and life. Yet another crucial task of the art of building is to defend the silence and slowness of our experiential world. Architecture possesses the capacity to restructure and alter our temporal experience; it can slow down, halt, speed up or reverse the flow of experiential time. It is mainly through the temporal layers of our built settings that we grasp the past and the flow of cultural time. The mere image of an Egyptian pyramid in our memory concretizes the temporal distance of nearly 5,000 years.

We are biological and cultural beings. Instead of isolating us in a shallow present and alienating artificiality, architecture needs to mediate our relationship with our biocultural past. Why do we enjoy being in old settings, such as the historic towns of Europe? Isn’t it because these environments, with their rich historical layers, tell us epic narratives of human culture and of the desire for order and beauty? Natural erosion and traces of use by people “humanize” buildings and built landscapes by making their epic story of time palpable. Old buildings embody in material form historical and social institutions and make cultural evolution understandable. We experience a thick and haptic (tactile) time that roots us comfortably in the continuum of culture and time. We experience layered signs and traces of life, and this physical embodiment of time gives us confidence in the future. Architecture issues invitations and promises, and authentic historic buildings and settings offer us reliable

The mere image of an Egyptian pyramid concretizes the temporal distance of nearly 5,000 years.

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messages of continuity. We are mentally incapable of living in chaos, or in a condition devoid of time. According to geographer Edward Relph, alienation from place results in “existential outsideness” (“existential outsideness involves a self-conscious and reflective uninvolvment, an alienation from people and places, a homelessness, a sense of the unreality of the world, and of not belonging”), and it is evident that alienation from the experience of time results in an equally severe mental condition. Yet today’s experientially one-dimensional cityscapes and buildings convey a flattened present tense that weakens our sense of time and impoverishes our sensory participation and imagination. The task of architecture is not only to provide physical shelter or to house our fragile bodies; our buildings also need to house our memories, fantasies, dreams and desires. Buildings and structures from different eras enrich our experiences of places, but they also strengthen our sense of rootedness, belonging and citizenship.

Cultural identity—a sense of rootedness and belonging—is an irreplaceable foundation of our very humanity. Identities are not only in dialogue with physical and architectural settings. In fact, we grow to be members of countless contexts and cultural, social, linguistic as well as architectural and aesthetic identities. Identities are not attached to isolated things but to the continuum of culture and life. True identities are not mere momentary attachments, but rather they have their historicities and continuities. Instead of being just occasional background aspects, all these experiences, and surely dozens of other features, are constituents of our very personality. Identity is not a given fact or closed entity. It is an exchange. As I settle in a place, the place settles in me.

**CARRYING ON TRADITION THROUGH REINVENTION**

It is evident that artistic meanings cannot be invented as they are fundamentally unconscious and prereflective existential re-encounters with primal human experiences, emotions and myths. As architect Alvaro Siza argues, “Architects don’t invent anything, they transform reality.” Architectural meaning is always contextual, relational and time-bound. Great works achieve their density and depth from an echo of the past, whereas the voice of the products of superficial
novelty remain feeble, incomprehensible and meaningless. Great works possess a timeless freshness and they present their embodied enigma always anew, as if we were encountering the work for the first time. The greater a work is, the stronger is its resistance to time. “An artist is worth a thousand centuries,” French poet and essayist Paul Valéry suggests.13

An interest in the significance of tradition is today usually seen as nostalgia and conservatism; in our age, obsessed with uncritical views of progress, our eyes are fixated on the present and the future. During the past few decades, uniqueness and newness have become the prevailing criteria for quality in architecture, design and art. The coherence and harmony of landscapes and cityscapes, and their rich historical layering, are not any more seen as essential objectives of architecture. Artistic uniqueness and formal invention have replaced the quest for existential meaning and emotive impact, not to speak of the desire for a spiritual dimension or beauty.

The most eloquent and convincing defense of tradition is surely T.S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1929),14 but its wisdom has been sadly forgotten today. The poet states that tradition is not a static “thing” to be inherited, preserved or possessed, as true tradition has to...
be reinvented and re-created by each new generation. Instead of valuing mere factual history, the poet argues for the significance of “a historical sense,” an internalized mental dimension. It is this historical sense that ties the artist and the architect to the continuum of culture and provides the backbone of his or her language and its comprehensibility. Exploring fundamental issues of identity—asking the questions “Who are we?” and “What is our relationship with the world?”—is an innately human quest. This historical sense also brings about collective cultural meanings as well as societal purposefulness. It is this historical sense that gives profound works their combined humility, patience and calm authority, whereas works that desperately aspire for novelty and uniqueness always appear arrogant, strained and impatient.

Artists and architects have always understood the benevolent power of beauty in the settings of our lives. Today neuroscience offers empirical evidence that the character and quality of the environment have a measurable and dramatic impact on our lives. It has been shown that environments not only change behavior but also change the brain, which thus leads to behavioral changes. Fred Gage, professor of genetics, explains: “While the brain controls our behaviour and genes control the blueprint for the design and structure of the brain, the environment can modulate the function of genes and, ultimately, the structure of our brain. In planning the environment in which we live, architectural design changes our brain and our behaviour.” It has also been convincingly established that sensorially impoverished or one-dimensional environments lead to equivalent negative developments in the mind.

Why do old places matter? They matter crucially because they structure and modify our experiences of the world, and eventually of ourselves. In addition to enriching our sensory and experiential world, they root us in the course of time and give us a sense of security and safety. “Be like me” is the implicit command of every poem, according to poet Joseph Brodsky. No doubt, every great piece of architecture possesses the same authority. A cultured setting with its historical authority and depth conditions us to
sense and understand qualities in both culture and human character. Significant architecture makes us experience ourselves as complete embodied and spiritual beings. FJ

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6 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 240.
8 Italo Calvino, *If on a winter’s night a traveller* (Orlando: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1979), 8.
10 Paul Virilio, as quoted by Mika Vääättänen in *Katoamisen estetiikka*, 127.
13 Paul Valéry, *Dialogues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), XIII.

VIDEO
Click here to hear Juhani Pallasmaa talk about the essence of architecture.