The Wrong Form of Emptiness in Global Design

What does it mean for the world to become global? This phenomenon obviously takes different shapes depending not only on what parts of the planet we are looking at it, but also on what historical backgrounds we are considering. To develop a sense of ‘global being’ is obviously not the same in today’s East Asia, in postcolonial Africa, or in the postmodern West.

However, if the historicity of the sense of global being varies depending on the locality and time, there is no doubt that such a cultural phenomenon is universally characterised by a form of ‘unavailability’ exacerbated by a human invention in the name of technology. As German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) mentioned, technology gives us a false sense of nearness. It enables us to move faster, to access different worlds in no time, to be more productive, or to build more quickly. But this comes at a heavy price. We have less and less time and space to make ourselves available to other people, other worlds, and, as we are discovering with great concerns, to nature. To put it differently, we are less and less well disposed to ‘empty’ ourselves with care and consideration in the light of the place where we live, or the basho (場所) to which we relate, as Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) would have it. In the course of this presentation, I shall keep using the Japanese word basho, because it evokes a whole paradigm of conceptions of place, field, topos, or context, and goes thereby beyond the mere reference to spatial location.

Nishida elaborated a ‘logic of basho’ to explain how entities of all kinds take shape. Entities such as the individual are formed in the light of and within a basho. The relationship between an entity and its basho is also reciprocal and complementary, which means that the nature of such a place is equally determined by this entity. There is always going to be a basho for whatever entity we try to determine – this ‘relational principle’ is what Nishida calls ‘the basho of absolute nothingness’ (絶対無の場所: zettai mu no basho). It is this form of emptiness, of which cultures and societies seem to become less and less aware on a global scale. Indeed, the current ‘global design’ is a world where the wrong forms of ‘emptiness’ have developed, in other words where unethical nihility has spread at the cost of the localities where the human species lives, including the earth. As we shall see, this phenomenon is manifest in significant areas of our contemporary post-industrial built environment, such as the metapolis.

The urban environment is only of course one facet of the ‘global design’. It is however an important one as it has a very significant impact on how we move from one place to another and on how we live somewhere. In other words, the urban environment affects our ethical condition as it influences and even partly shapes our ways of relating to places and people. And what Heidegger described in terms of illusion of nearness, or, to put it differently, illusion of availability created by technology has become one of the characteristic features of our contemporary urban environment.
The urbanisation that developed in par with industrialisation begun in the Western world in the 19th century, but what nowadays emerges on a global scale, that is to say in different parts of the world and different cultures, is a type of urban conglomerates in constant movement, whereby buildings are built, destroyed and rebuilt, or redeveloped into something else. Unlike the traditional conception of the city, they are not divided into quarters, and do not have a historical centre or a clear boundary that separates them from the countryside – in other words, they do not constitute a well-defined basho anymore. This phenomenon is surely more apparent in contemporary megalopolises such as Tōkyō, Los Angeles, São Paulo, or Mumbai, rather than in European ‘classical’ cities, whose heritage still heavily restricts and regulates their development.

This new urban mutation has recently been defined by the sociologist François Asher in terms of metapolisation. All the attributes that make up the postmodern paradigm in whatever field characterise the metropolis: flux, fragmentation, a-centering, a-historicity, discontinuity, permanent transformation, etc. In fact, many terms have been invented to describe urban developments after the industrial and colonial eras, such as megalopolis, heteropolis, urban village, edge city, suburban downtown, me troplex, etc. Asher’s metapolisation, although it refers to a specific aspect of contemporary urban developments, is a concept well suited to designate an environment that corresponds to what I have previously called the wrong form of emptiness in global design. What comes after (the Greek etymology: metá) the city (pólis) is not a basho anymore, but an organic conglomerate in the process of being designed and dismantled according to economic fluxes, with no center of gravity, temporal ground, or sense of unity. Of course, as Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) puts it, in La Production de l’Espace (1974) (The production of space),

There isn’t on the one hand a (conceived) global space and on the other a (lived) fragmented space, anymore than there could be an unbroken glass here and a broken one or a broken mirror there. Space ‘is’ both total and broken, global and fractured. Similarly, it is altogether conceived, perceived, and lived.

(Henri Lefebvre)

But it is precisely when one aspect is privileged more than another, or when there is too much emphasis either on unity, or else on fragmentation, that an imbalance is created, begetting thus the ethical and therefore existential problems that were previously mentioned. An urban environment of the kind designed by the Baron Haussmann (1809-1891) in Paris is beyond doubt like an imperial basho whose timeless pretensions imposes its sense of unity on the individual who lives in it. The metropolis, on the other hand, instead of creating a sense of nearness at all levels, that is to say amongst individuals and between individuals and their places, creates a sense of disunited aloofness that inexorably leads to various forms of existential unavailability.
This latter form of built environment is only one of the victims, if I may say so, of the impact of techno-economics in the contemporary nascent global world. But the damage is significant as the built environment obviously affects our ways of relating to other persons and to our places. There is no possible sense of self-identity and therefore no possible considerate sense of the others’ identity, if we are not given the time and the space to develop such relationships. How can the metapolis foster, or even simply allow such relationships between the ‘self’ and its basho, or ‘I and the thou’ to take place at all? It might be argued that, after all, the metapolis is the reflection or the incarnation of another mode of existence, another way of living that bears the name of the postmodern. But the philosopher will ask, what is fundamentally being lost and what are the existential implications? More precisely, what are the ethico-existential implications of cultural experiences without basho in the nascent global world for which techno-economics is in part responsible?

Heidegger’s view on the impact of technology on human beings are well known. In The Thing, (Das Ding), he argues that ‘all distances in time and space’ shrink and warns us that that ‘short distance is not in itself nearness. Nor is great distance remoteness’. Even more, ‘in the default of nearness the thing remains annihilated as a thing in our sense’. In other words, and as is developed further in The Question Concerning Technology, (Die Frage nach der Technik), technology makes us increasingly overlook ‘the thingness of things’. As a result we cannot “think” being and we become worryingly more and more incapable ‘to respond to the appeal of its presencing’. We are loosing our ability to trace a path - in Heidegger’s words, ‘the path of a responding that examines as it listens’. This is also echoed in Building Dwelling Thinking (Bauen Wohnen Denken), in which he argues that if we want to have an ‘authentic existence’ (eigentlich Existenz) or meaningful way of ‘being’ (sein) we should relate to the world and to other selves with ‘care’ or ‘concern’ (Sorge). He called this particular relationship ‘dwell’ (wohnen). We should not forget how to dwell in the world and in the light of the other, and in his eyes, there is no doubt that our (post)modern way of living with all its information technologies, efficient means of transportation, of building, destructing, and redeveloping, does not allow us to dwell properly. Speed prevents us from taking the time to dwell, and as such affects the authenticity of our mode of being. In other words, technology affects the relationship between being and time (Sein und Zeit).

The metapolisation of global design increasingly prevents us from learning how to respond to the appeal of the basho where we live, for the simple reason that the a-historical, fragmenting, and a-centering nature of its urban spaces does not allow it. It seems that a certain balance, or harmony, between the right spatial and temporal elements in urban design is necessary for individuals and communities to relate to their basho in a mutually considerate manner. In the previously mentioned case of the Paris of the Baron Haussmann, the spatiality of this imposing urban design at the service of the institution is what prevents the individual to dwell properly in the sense that one never has the feeling of belonging.
to such a space. Beside its aesthetic, or rather sublime character, we can indeed talk about a de-humanization that begets unavailability on both sides – the side of the inhabitants and that of their basho.

In the case of the metapolis, the imbalance also originates from temporal elements. The a-historicality, the permanent processes of redevelopment, speed and the techniques of time-saving, are all factors that equally contribute to the wrong forms of emptiness in global design and therefore to unavailability.

I believe that Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960) was trying to highlight the need to re-establish this balance when he was redeeming the role played by spatiality in human relationships. He is of course most well-known for his study on climate and human ontology, 眼土人間学の考察 (Fūdo ningengaguteki kōsatsu; Milieu: a study in human ontology,1935). His ethics (倫理学: rinrigaku) is however of particular relevance when it comes to understanding the relationships there ought to be between, in our case, inhabitants and their built environment. Indeed, he emphasises reciprocity, complementary dimension, self-negation, and equilateral relationship, between the self and the other, or the individual and society. In order to show the importance of ‘togetherness’ for any conception of ‘being human’ to be possible at all, Watsuji proceeds along four axes: ethics (倫理: rinri); human being (人間:ningen); existence (存在: sonzai); and society (社会: shakai). Human being is basically at the crossroad of its past and future horizons, as well as its relationships with other people and a particular ‘milieu’, or ‘climate’. The ‘self’, as a result, cannot be thought in isolation from all these temporal, spatial, and inter-personal factors.

Watsuji did indeed attempt to re-establish the balance between temporality and spatiality when it comes to understanding the formation of individuals, selves, and identities. He argued that Western ethics mainly focused on ‘temporality’ and had as a result constructed a conception of the individual abstracted from the ‘spatial world’ or society. For him spatiality enables inter-connectedness, and is indeed fundamental if we are to understand human being at the crossroad of an infinitely complex set of relationships of all kinds. To support his argument, he referred in his Ethics (倫理学: rinrigaku) to the Japanese etymology of the word 人間 (ningen), pointing that it is made of two signs – the first character meaning ‘person’ (人: nin) and the second ‘between’ (間: gen/aidagara) and therefore ‘space’. Watsuji therefore sees the very notion of ‘human being’ in terms of complementary differential relationship between the individual and society. This ‘space’ or ‘between-ness’ within which the self relates to others can only be possible by means of mutual self-negation, or rather reciprocal emptying. In other words, the self 即 (soku: is/is not) the self, as it needs to ‘negate’ society as much as to be ‘negated’ by society. Between-ness constitutes therefore a space of emptying that is necessary for the self-determination of individuals and society – something very similar to what Nishida, as previously mentioned, called the ‘basho of absolute nothingness’ (絶対無の場所).
The need to remain aware of the complementary balance there ought to be between the right forms of temporality and spatiality is a philosophical matter of fact that is hardly questionable. When it comes to the relationships between individuals and their built environment, the question is of course about the possibility to conceive an urban design that overcomes the spatial and temporal deficiencies that can be traced in the modernity of the Baron Haussmann’s redevelopment of Paris, or in the postmodernity of the metapolis.

To argue that economic forces together with abuses and misuses of technology are in part at the origin of what has been called the wrong form of emptiness in an increasingly globalising culture, implies that we are brought into a crisis of an ethical dimension. It is precisely because our ways of relating to each other, to our built environment, to the earth, the sky, our world, or, to put it differently, to our basho, have been drastically transformed in the past decades, that our mode of being has equally undergone a significant mutation. This ethical crisis is not a moral one – worse, it is existential, and could be named the metapolisation of the global world.

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6 Heidegger (1975), op. cit. p. 170.
7 Ibid. p. 183.
Ibid. p. 186.


The 1988 English translation of 風土人間学の考察 (Fūdo ningengaguteki kōsatsu; Milieu: a study in human ontology, 1935) by G. Bownas appears as Climate and culture: A philosophical study, Westport: Greenwood Press.