

The dream-life of tactility

*Listen to the eyes of the skin, whispered Juhani Pallasmaa, in his short but seminal 1996 text. Listen, touch, smell, taste, and feel but don't be taken in by the visual, and our culture of surfaces. Here Pallasmaa, Finland's leading architectural theorist, talks about how he arrived at this sensual world, as his new book, **The Thinking Hand** is published.*

Juhani Pallasmaa greets me at the entrance of his office, a converted second floor apartment in the south of Helsinki. He is a tall man, dressed in regulation architecture black, though immediately warm and with a friendly manner. Bespectacled and bald, with a Finnish glint to his eyes, he ushers me into a book-lined meeting room, where we sit down each side of a long, central table. He says, once initial pleasantries have been dispensed with, that he is writing an article once every two weeks. My knowledge of his work is limited to his polemical essay *The Eyes of the Skin* and an earlier book, *The Language of Wood*, which accompanied an exhibition of the same name, and various of his essays, articles and talks. *The Eyes of the Skin* is a small book, less than sixty pages long, and was published over ten years ago. Yet at the time I read it, and in the years since the book has exerted a fascination and hold on my thinking which I return to for reminders of its essential message.

I am not alone in being swayed by the book's message. This is that architecture, as well as much else in modern culture, has become increasingly experienced through one dominant sense, that of the eye, with the other classical senses, hearing, smell, taste and touch so marginalised as to be irrelevant. Through the sixty pages *The Eyes of the Skin* Pallasmaa made a pliant and persuasive case for just how deeply 'out of touch' modern cultures have become, overwhelmed by the visual and the image, that many no longer even notice. First published in 1994, the book's impact at that time, was such that it became part of standard reading material on many, if certain types, of architectural courses in different countries. That it was steeped in Nordic modernism in theoretical clothing may have limited its reach. In the mid-nineties with much of the architectural community still in theoretical thrall to post-modernism and its texts, Pallasmaa was several removes from the mainstream orthodoxy was never going to be anything like universal. *The Eyes of the Skin* also appeared at just the moment when computer aided architectural design was sweeping through so much of the profession, multiplying the very visual dependency, which the Finnish writer was highlighting as both one-dimensional and destructive. Pallasmaa's argument of deeper architectural purpose, that of strengthening our sense of real experience through the built environment, may also have been too hard, too 'real' even, for a

profession which was in turn engaged with practical commercial needs on the one hand, and a tendency towards theoretical abstraction, on the other. To immerse oneself in Pallasmaa's diagnosis, which required the participation of all our senses, rather than the increasingly 'retinal' or 'ocular' architecture of image and spectacle, was not the direction the vast majority of architects with any profile or influence seemed interested in. Even so whilst Pallasmaa's architecture of the senses did not change the architectural map, its influence has made its way, less loudly, through the undercurrents of the architectural world.

Born in 1936, Pallasmaa is these days occasionally spoken of in the same breath as his Finnish architectural peers Alvar Aalto and Reima Pietila. Those who do so, quickly caveat, that this is not to make architectural comparisons, rather to draw attention to similar consistencies of approach and outlook that come from what, arguably, is an earlier and more distinguished era in Finland, when the influence and respect of Nordic modernism was at its height. Pallasmaa is one of the very few contemporary figures who bridges that past with today's very different cultural context, these days being the most influential elder of the Finnish architectural community. As an architect, with a long line of buildings to his practices name, he continues to work energetically on building projects. In 2006 he completed the large Kamppi multiuse development, a mix of shopping centre, bus station and residential right in the heart of the capital. One current project is a museum and concert hall in the northern Finnish part of Lapland. He is well known in his home country, but it is his writings, and in particular his manifesto for an architecture integrating all the senses which has spread his name internationally.

This writing, mostly in the constant flow of essays and lectures, is hardly limited to architecture. The title of one of his most recent books, *The Architecture of Images; Existential Space in Cinema*, reflects the fact that his critique isn't really architectural; he is addressing much broader crucial issues, even if architecture is the primary field for their exploration. 'The hegemony of the eye', is but one of his descriptions for the over-dominance of this sense, expressed in the omnidominance of the image in modern industrialised societies. The rise of the retinal is as much a cultural and specifically, technological phenomena, increasing decade-on-decade compared to the place and influence of the other marginalised senses. Our senses are still there, as are our bodies, but we have lost an awareness of this relation, Pallasmaa reminds us through art and other culturally derived examples. In place the full body of the senses has been, and continues to be diminished, chipped away at over the decades by each wave of technological change that adds to the weight of images constantly raining in on us, demanding our attention. One



Alvar Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium and the Villa Mairea

consequence is a loss of some anchorage to the real amidst a mushrooming of the image-world of fantasy. It is not a case of a world without images, Pallasmaa distinguishes between the manipulative and poetic use of the image, the one found in advertising and propaganda, the other with its open, liberating effect. But, with the Internet, with 24/7 global TV, with the power of its reach, the former increasingly drowns out the latter.

Pallasmaa explores these issues through art as much as architecture. The contrast he makes between an architecture of image and an architecture of essence, is as applicable to art or to a certain extent, other mediums of creativity. The book on film's title, *The Architecture of Images* is confirmation of this. But he also makes use and draws in psychology and the cognitive studies of both the mind and the body. Beginning with a discussion of the mind's relation to the body he will move to introducing its relevance to architecture. For instance, a current interest is the distinction