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## Architecture: Human Intervention of the Earth

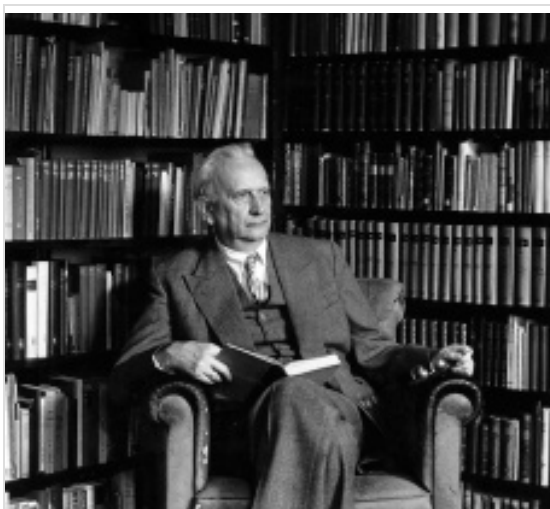


By Hans Teerds

“Jaspers’ thought is spatial because it forever remains in reference to the world and the people in it, not because it is bound to any existing space.”

-- Hannah Arendt, ‘Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio’

It is in the midst of her description of the German philosopher and her tutor Karl Jaspers’ ‘faculty for dialogue [and] the splendid precision of his way of listening’ that Arendt identifies his spatial approach. Jaspers, she argues, through his thinking created a space wherein ‘the *humanitas* of man could appear pure and luminous.’ In speaking and listening, Jaspers was able to change and widen, sharpening and therewith ‘illuminating’ the subject. This approach of course depends upon the ability to take other perspectives into account, i.e. Kant’s ‘enlarged mentality,’ of which Arendt was the ‘political mentality *par excellence*.’



The little addition to the quote above, the description of Jaspers’ approach as not being bound to any existing space, is very important. As I would argue, it distinguishes Jaspers from her other tutor, Martin Heidegger, whose philosophy might have been too much ‘grounded’ in the soil of the black woods, where he had his hut in which he could withdraw from the world and hustle and bustle about on his own. Jaspers, in comparison, never withdrew from the world, even when he and his wife had no place to participate in this world during the Second World War. His thinking remained spatial (and political), Arendt argues, because his approach was

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Karl Jaspers (Source: Wikipedia)

argues, because his approach was intrinsically bound to the world and the people in it.

The quote reminds me how spatial the world is. It offers room for people to live in, but politically understood, spatiality is also a fundamental aspect of the public realm. As Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*:

The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground for all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position.

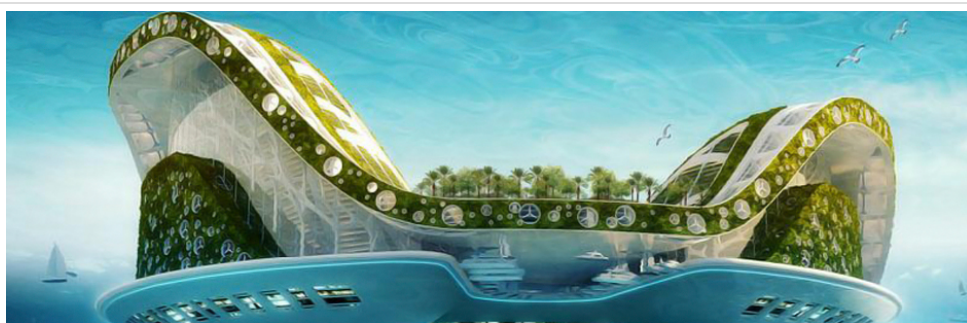
Where people are involved in the world, space (and time, of course) is a fundamental category. A public space is required.

As an architect, a profession often understood as just a designer of buildings, I think the above quotation offers a useful perspective in which architecture is embedded in the political realm. This is not so because architecture is concerned by a specific site or space (which is a main figure underneath all architectural projects, of course) or by a political program but certainly because it always is bound to the *world and the people* in it.

The quote and Arendt's description of Jaspers' faculty for dialogue challenges the architect in two directions. First, the term "architecture" should be taken here broadly to refer to 'spatial interventions in the world that create space for the human habitat.' One might argue that this is yet another reference to Jaspers' philosophical approach: to create a space where 'the *humanitas* of man can appear.' This challenges the outcome of the project: space for *humanitas* as it's goal.

The other direction by which architects are challenged is their task of integrating Jaspers' approach into their designs. After all, architectural design in this perspective relies as much on the capacity of the architect to think from other perspectives as he does on his own appetite for beauty. It is not only his personal approach to design and the wishes and needs of his client that matter but also his relationship with his neighbors, the settlement as a whole, and the public. Together, these influences affect the outcome of his project and demand that the architect should be able to think and proceed from a public perspective in order to change, widen, and sharpen the scope of his projects. This perspective challenges the designer, in other words, to participate in the world. He must not withdraw to his office or atelier; he needs to go out in the streets and squares, malls and parks, in order to understand the world and the people. In so doing, he should train his capacity to design as being a form of 'enlarged mentality.'

To my understanding, however, the political aspect is fundamental to the architectural profession even beyond this regard. It is by definition spatial and thus bound to the world and people in it. Architecture is closely related to Arendt's understanding of the notion of the world itself, which I read as all the human interventions that transform the earth--that is, the globe, our biological sphere, nature--into a habitual environment for the human being. Without such interventions, life on earth would not be possible.





Source: Down to Earth

The interventions I reference above mainly consist of *things*: houses, cities, infrastructures, tables, spoons, and artworks, but also institutions that regulate the human community, all of which build upon the world's foundational ground for human life and society. According to Arendt, the world is therefore always a *common* world that human beings must share with one another and with our predecessors and offspring. The treatment of this world, as we might imagine, affects all human beings, which reveals it to be of public interest, or the object of political life. This precisely is the political aspect of architecture: as one of the main instruments of the human being to intervene in the world, it is by definition a public issue.

To be sure, realizing the political aspects of architecture can be a challenge. At the heart of the discipline of design, there is an understanding of a shared responsibility towards how we are to treat very tangible and physical aspects of the world in the future. Design therefore deals with the grand design of our species, past, present, and future. As experts of design, architects are challenged to interpret life in its formal and spatial manifestation, which requires that they conceptualize alternative possibilities, imagine future situations not yet described, and bring those often un-thought aspects together into tangible proposals that are subject to human agency. This is the main political challenge of the profession: to make architectural projects accessible for discussion by a larger public. One might state that this challenge includes the *responsibility* of spatial designers to offer 'speech and articulation' to spatial issues—most spatial issues also are political issues, and vice versa—and bring their investigations, their imagined future possibilities and impossibilities, into the realm of the human affairs. Seen in this light, architecture is a spatial profession: bound to the world and the people in it.



### Hans Teerds

Hans Teerds is an architect based in Amsterdam. He currently is writing a Ph.D thesis on the public aspects of architecture as understood through the writings of Hannah Arendt at the Delft University of Technology.





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