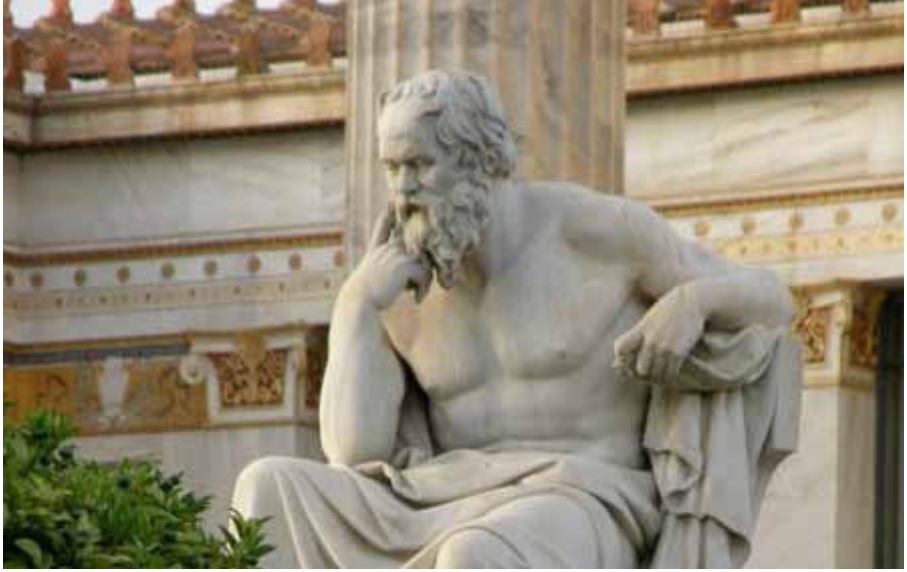

Photo by Inga Leonova.

LIVING STONES

The Boundaries of Our Habitation

Kyle Dugdale

How might we best articulate architecture's legitimate ends? And what are its boundaries?

Is this whole world not, after all, fundamentally a world of our own design? Do we not inhabit environments—built and imagined—that are increasingly shaped and controlled, for better or for worse, by our own actions? Are we not reputed to have entered the Anthropocene, an epoch in which human activity is understood to be exerting a massive impact on the very systems of our earth? Do architects, and designers more generally, not bear a certain responsibility—perhaps even a significant responsibility—for the present and future conditions of this planet?

There is clearly a great deal at stake here for the discipline of architecture. So it is unsurprising that such questions should currently be occupying the attention of those who are most invested in shaping our architectural future. During the fall of last year, the Yale School of Architecture convened a symposium that explored, on a grand scale, the boundaries of architecture's valid domain. Entitled "Constructed World," it drew on the work of leading voices from the disciplines of architecture, planning, geography, economics, anthropology, and philosophy. Its evolving conversations explored architecture as nothing less than a means of comprehending the world, and drew attention to the fact that conceptual and physical constructs are closely intertwined: the way we imagine our world has an impact on the way we build, and vice versa.

The symposium's keynote address was delivered by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. He is a figure whose work has become increasingly familiar to students of architecture, precisely because of his focus on the spatial and

architectonic dimensions of our conceptual spheres of existence, examined on the premise that "humans are themselves an effect of the space they create."[1] Toward the end of his talk, underscoring the constructed nature of this world in which we are immersed, Sloterdijk quoted a passage from Paul Valéry's fictional Socratic dialogue of 1921, *Eupalinos ou l'architecte*, in which Valéry places in the mouth of Socrates the exclamation "Nous sommes, nous nous mouvons, nous vivons alors dans l'œuvre de l'homme!"—"We are, we move, we live in the work of man!"[2] Or better, perhaps: *We have our being, and move, and live in the work of man!*

What, in this context, is "the work of man"? Valéry's Socrates asserts that it is architecture, more than any other art, that shapes the environment in which we find ourselves immersed. It is architecture that defines the boundaries of our earthly existence. It is architecture within which we have our being, and move, and live.

Sloterdijk went on to suggest (not for the first time) that Valéry's phrase is in effect a re-appropriation of a familiar assertion from the seventeenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, where what is at stake is precisely that within which "we live and move and have our being."[3] The suggestion is doubtless accurate; certainly the biblical text was familiar to Valéry.[4] But at the Yale School of Architecture, Sloterdijk quoted Valéry, because the twentieth-century poet's response to that question appears, in effect, to be *architecture*. This remains, no doubt, the typical contemporary response, and also the premise of the "Constructed World" symposium. But within the context of the Apostle Paul's address in Socrates's Athens, as narrated by the author of the Book of Acts, the response is different. That within which *we live and move and have our being* is there declared to be not the constructed world created by the architect, but rather the creator God himself, who "made the world and everything in it" (Acts 17:24).

When approaching this text *as text*, it is perhaps easy to overlook the architectural *con*text. But if we are to be attentive to environment, that context is surely significant. Paul speaks while "standing in the middle of the Areopagus" (Acts 17:22). Standing below the temple of Athena Parthenos—today perhaps architecture's most canonical monument—the apostle Paul delivers a powerful assertion of Christian doctrine, rendering explicit the premises that underlie this constructed world, and drawing attention to architecture's incommensurability with the divine, its inability to contain the creator God:

> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for. … (Acts 17:24–28)

Paul declares that "the God who made the world and everything in it" cannot be contained within the boundaries of men's architectures; on the contrary, it is he who has created men and "the boundaries of their habitation." This is God the architect, *deus architectus mundi*, an architect with clear design intent, who created men *that they should*

[1] Peter Sloterdijk, "Spheres Theory: Talking to Myself about the Poetics of Space," *Harvard Design Magazine* 30 (Spring/Summer 2009): 127.

[2] Paul Valéry, "Eupalinos ou l'architecte," in *Architectures*, ed. Louis Süe and André Mare (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française, 1921), 28; my translation. See also Valéry, "Eupalinos ou l'architecte: Dialogue des morts," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (March 1, 1921): 257–85.

[3] See Peter Sloterdijk, "Architecture as an Art of Immersion," trans. Anna-Christina Engels-Schwarzpaul, *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts* 12 (2011): 106–7; Sloterdijk, "Paul Valéry," in *Mein Frankreich* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013), 87. Valéry's text is closest, perhaps, to the trajectory launched by Jacques Lefèvre's 16th century translation, which reads: "En luy nous vivons et mouvons et sommes."

[4] This is clear from the paraphrase of the Latin Vulgate in a passage from Paul Valéry, "Mauvaises pensées et autres," in *Œuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier, vol. 2 (Gallimard, 1960), 809: "Dieu (in quo sumus, vivimus et movemur)."

seek God. And this excerpt ends, in the English, with that single word *for*—which in turn introduces the quotation to which Valéry's text alludes.

The curious thing, for readers familiar with Valéry's text, is that the poet there goes on to place in Socrates's mouth speculations that are not so distant from Paul's own assertions. We are told by Valéry that architecture, like music, is indeed an art devoted to constructing an immersive environment: it "fills our knowledge and our space with artificial truths, and with objects essentially human."[5] Yet its methods seem to point toward things that extend beyond the boundaries of this constructed world; as a tectonic art, it seems "dedicated to reminding us directly" of a more fundamental conceptual order and stability.[6] Valéry's Socrates goes on, in fact, to speak of the search for God the creator, "the great Shaper," "the Constructor."[7] He ties a dialogue about architecture to the search for the divine architect—a shift not dissimilar to that accomplished by Paul in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. The relationship between Valéry's text and its presumed biblical source is perhaps more extensive than Sloterdijk's attribution might at first suggest.

But the web of appropriations is more intricate still. What remained unsaid, in Sloterdijk's keynote address as in his previous discussions, is that Paul's words, according to the account in Acts, were addressed specifically to the philosophers of Athens—to the heirs to Valéry's main protagonist. And it has been suggested in the last century that Paul's statement to those philosophers was in turn appropriating a line attributed to a poet presumed familiar both to first-century Athenians and hypothetically, before that, to Socrates himself: a line credited to the semi-mythical seventh- or sixth-century BC Epimenides of Knossos—poet, prophet, and by some accounts philosopher—whose words, known only via a twelfth-century Syriac compilation that incorporates passages from a lost fifth-century commentary on Acts 17 by Theodore, bishop of Mopsuestia, are uttered in the context of a hymn to Zeus ostensibly composed by the god's son, Minos of Knossos. Epimenides's authorship was reconstructed in the early twentieth century by the English scholar James Rendel Harris, and published in a series of texts that assessed the impact of the Cretans' claim as to the death of the great god Zeus, whose tomb, according to the Cretans, could be found on their island.[8] The attribution to Epimenides is sometimes mentioned in footnotes to more recent translations of the book of Acts; yet the apparent witness of the biblical text itself—"as certain also of your own poets have said" (ὡς καί τινες τῶν καθ' ὑμᾶς ποιητῶν εἰρήκασιν)—is typically separated from Epimenides's preceding line by a semicolon, which fixes the force of Paul's own (plural) attribution on the (singular) quotation from Aratus's *Phainomena*, long recognized, that immediately follows it. The Revised Standard Version, for instance, renders the verse as follows: "For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.'" If punctuation is typically among the more arbitrary elements of textual transmission, this semicolon is perhaps due for reappraisal.

It should be noted that the debt to Epimenides is not universally recognized. Recent scholarship has often preferred to relate Acts 17:28a to Platonic ideas—a relationship that would impute a different but equally rich resonance to Valéry's appropriation.[9] But the attribution to Epimenides, if accepted, is architecturally significant. For one, Paul is found to be appropriat-

[5] Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos, or The Architect*, trans. William McCausland Stewart (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 37–38.

[6] Ibid., 40.

[7] Ibid., 90–95.

[8] James Rendel Harris, "The Cretans Always Liars," *The Expositor* 7, no. 2 (1906): 305–17.

[9] For an exceptionally careful treatment of this text, reviving the interest in Epimenides, see Clare K. Rothschild, *Paul in Athens* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

ing a statement that is tied to the story told by the Cretans—always liars—about the death of the great god. The quotation is therefore already to be understood within the context of an apologia—specifically, within the context of a longer debate over the mortality, and thus the boundedness, of the divine. Furthermore, according to tradition, Epimenides had once prescribed the building on the Areopagus of altars to gods unknown, edifices that have in turn been compared with that altar to which Paul here refers. If, as a type, the altar is to be understood as a proto-architectural construction, then this text should also be interpreted in the context of an architecture that is tied to the search for an unknown divinity, an architecture with a capacity to point toward things that extend beyond the boundaries of this constructed world.

Paul's sermon is evidently a text of extraordinary allusive richness. And its insinuation into contemporary discourse is no less complex. At the Yale School of Architecture, extending a staggering trajectory of oral and textual references, Sloterdijk the German essayist cites the presumed appropriation by Valéry the French poet in the name of Socrates the Athenian philosopher of the Apostle Paul's quotation in Athens, narrated by the author of the book of Acts, of a line ostensibly spoken by Minos son of Zeus but attributed to the poet Epimenides of Crete by the work of an English scholar studying a commentary by a fifth-century bishop fragmentarily preserved in an anonymous twelfth-century Syriac compilation. This alone is an astonishing construction, or reconstruction.

But Paul's assertions are challenging to contemporary architectural discourse in ways that as yet remain unexamined. Ours is, after all, a society increasingly skeptical about the Christian claim to have identified the unknown God. It is instead a pluralist culture, inclined to understand Christianity and even religion *tout court* as a human construction, replacing the figure of God the architect, *deus architectus mundi*, with the figure of a God who is a product, like architecture itself, of "the art and imagination of man" (Acts 17:29). It is a culture that is committed as never before to pouring its energies into the construction of environments of its own design; and if those environments are no longer always built, they are no less immersive for being immaterial. Here, too, we hear the word *architecture* invoked: in the architecture of those virtual worlds in which, increasingly, we are expected to live and move and have our being. Indeed, if the way we imagine our world has an impact on the way we build and vice versa, then the trajectory of Valéry's text suggests that the relationship between architecture and theology deserves further attention. To assert that this relationship is not currently being thoroughly examined by the discipline's leading voices would be an understatement. Yet it has a direct bearing on the articulation of architecture's legitimate boundaries and ends. ✠

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