**“Building Dwelling Thinking” by Martin Heidegger**

“Building Dwelling Thinking” is a lecture Heidegger gave to the Darmstadt Symposium on *Man and Space* in 1951. It is one of three lectures prepared by Heidegger in that decade which revolve more around myth and poetry than the rigorous, technical works he was known for. The other two being “The Thing”, and Poetically Man Dwells”.

In this lecture, Heidegger reframes *dwelling* as the way human beings *are* on earth as a sparing that safeguards *the fourfold* (earth and sky, mortals and divinities). *Building* is a way of gathering together the fourfold and *buildings* are those things which allow a space in which dwelling can occur. The essence of space is derived from *locales* but locales are not particular places. Rather, they inhere in the thing, the thing that *is* a locale and that can therefore *make* space. *Thinking* about our *homelessness* and how we must “learn to dwell” combined with building as dwelling is what brings “dwelling to the fullness of its essence”.

Dwelling

In order to uncover the essence of a thing, Heidegger, as always, turns to *language*, which he maintains is actually the “master of man.” Starting with the word, *bauen* [build], he notes that this comes from the Old High German word, *buan*, which means to dwell; i.e. “to remain, to stay in a place.” Heidegger then claims that this word is actually the root of the word, *bin*, the verb ‘to be’, thus, ‘I am’ actually means, ‘I dwell’, i.e. “The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth… To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.”

Of course, the word *buan* also means to raise up edifices but in addition to this, Heidegger says it also means to “cherish and protect, to preserve and care for” or to cultivate. So building is dwelling, dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on earth, and building as dwelling means cultivating growing things and erecting edifices.

We don’t dwell because we have built, rather, we have built because we dwell, that is, because we are *dwellers*. So what exactly does it mean to dwell? Tracing ‘dwell’ back to the Gothic word *wunian*, Heidegger notes that this word means “to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace.” And the “word for peace, *Friede*, means the free, das *Frye*; and *fry* means preserved from harm and danger… safeguarded. To free actually means to spare.” Sparing, in turn, doesn’t just mean not harming; rather, it is something positive and “takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own essence, when we return it specifically to its essential being, when we “free” it in the proper sense of the word into a preserve of peace.” Sparing is the safeguarding of each thing in its essence and the “*fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing*.”

So, dwelling encapsulates living *on the earth*, but it also includes *under the sky*, *remaining before the divinities*, and *belonging to one another*. These four elements Heidegger calls *the fourfold*. Mortals *are* in the fourfold by dwelling. Since we have seen that the basic character of dwelling is safeguarding (or sparing) this means that “Mortals dwell in the way they safeguard the fourfold in its essential unfolding.”

This safeguarding takes the form of letting each of these things be in their essence, which ultimately means:

* Saving the earth. Not exploiting it or wearing it out.
* Receiving the sky as sky. Respecting the sun and moon, allowing the seasons to move through their cycles, and not turning night into day.
* Awaiting the divinities as divinities.
* Mortals initiating their own essential being. This means being capable of death and ensuring a “good death.”

How does dwelling preserve the fourfold? It does so by “bringing the essence of the fourfold into things.” In order for this to happen, things must be let be in their essence, and this only happens when “mortals nurse and nurture the things that grow, and specially construct things that do not grow.” Cultivating and constructing; that is, *building*.

Building

So, how does building relate to dwelling? Through the way it *gathers* to itself earth and sky, divinities and mortals. The example Heidegger gives is a bridge which “*gathers* the earth as landscape around [it]” and “is ready for the sky’s weather and its fickle nature.” It also “grants mortals their way, so that they may come and go from shore to shore” and “*gathers*, as a passage that crosses, before the divinities”, whether we acknowledge this by giving thanks to them or ignoring their presence.

Now, of course the bridge is a “mere bridge”, a thing; but this *gathering* is precisely what makes the bridge a thing and it is only on this basis that the bridge can then be a “mere bridge”. It also has a *site* but, “only something *that is itself a locale* can make space for a site.” There are many spots where the bridge can be built but only one of them proves to be the locale, and the “locale comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge”, not the other way around.

Further, a space is “something that has been freed… within a boundary” and a boundary is not where something *stops* but where it *begins its unfolding*. Space is therefore that which has been “let into its bounds” or “for which room is made”. Since we just saw that room is always made by virtue of a locale, “*spaces receive their essential being from locales and not from* “*space.*”” (By this last “space”, Heidegger means space considered as a mathematical/scientific notion, which as an abstract, empty concept actually “contains no spaces and no places.”) Things which, as locales, allow a site (or space), Heidegger calls *buildings*. The essence of building then, is “letting dwell.”

How does space relate to humans? In talking of “human beings” we are already discussing those beings who “stay within the fourfold among things” and even when we “relate ourselves to those things that are not in our immediate reach, we are staying with the things themselves.” This means that if we think of the old bridge in Heidelberg (Heidegger’s example), wherever we are bodily, “we are there at the bridge” and we may even be closer to it than “someone who uses it daily as an indifferent river crossing.”

Spaces (and space itself) open up only because they are let into the dwelling of human beings and to say that humans “*are* is to say that in *dwelling* they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locales.” It is only because of this that we are able to go *through* space at all. To make this clear, Heidegger talks about going toward the door of the lecture hall. In going there, he is already there “and I could not go to it at all if I were not such that I am there, that is, I already pervade the space of the room, and only thus can I go through it.” Our relation to locales and through them to space, inheres in dwelling.

Thinking

Heidegger says the plight of dwelling is that we “*must ever learn to dwell*.” Our *homelessness*, he suggests, is the result of us failing to realise (think) that the plight of dwelling *is* a plight and is, in fact, *the* plight. Realising this and giving thought to our homelessness is the “sole summons that *calls* mortals into their dwelling” and brings “dwelling to the fullness of its essence”. We accomplish this when we “build out of dwelling, and think for the sake of dwelling.”