

The Non-Destination Architect, the Existential Self

“Slowly learning to survive the desire to simplify”

Roger Connah 2023

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I have often been asked about Reima Pietilä's working methods. I could give you endless hints to how he arrived at some part of the project, only for it to be taken on to another place. To some this was infuriating, as if they expected him to come down in favour of one idea, one detail and close it. He never did this. This upset journalists, critics, interviewers, film makers, building leaders and the office. Everything, text, line, project, built work was always on the move. Nothing ever stood still, he would worry all details and ideas into the next detail and idea. The clue to that next step was anything that he encountered in that gap, that intervening space.

I loved that gap. I would feed him a line, a book, an image, a sketch. And he would be off again. It was thrilling. The more anyone knew him the more they would notice Pietilä had ways of both explaining and concealing his ways of thinking, his way of working. Sometimes I felt he did this purposely, other times I think he did it to amuse himself or amuse his respondent. If he even got as half bored as I did of all the questions he had to deal with, I think he must have shared this boredom. He must have sensed the limitations of such questions. But always polite, where could he go but inside his own thoughts?

This was not a dialogue it was a meandering within himself, within his own inner speech. He was always seeking that place where he could take his ideas to emerge into architecture. He never considered himself more subjective than anyone else, nor did he think this was some shamanic alchemy. It might have seemed so, slowly muttering his own soothing memos to himself. But this was a way to rationalize his own inner speech. He would mention that quite often. Even when he was mulling over a question, he turned it. He could do that by an accident, a random analysis of the language used or something happening by chance.

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If I had to offer an interpretation of Pietilä's inner way of working, I would see it as life not architecture. It was to him a way of being. It was existential. Architecture was a way he could be political without being political. This is also the way Philippe Sollers speaks about Roland Barthes. Architecture and thus designing was an ethical act and being ethical he could contest his own reasons for doing something. For me I sensed his method was an anti-method; probably why he was considered a counter-Modernist from those early days in the 1950s.

I slowly began to understand why, in one sense, there was never a resolution for Pietilä. There was in a way no destination to his thinking. If he found someone to agree with this; Nietzsche or the mathematician Kurt Godel, then so be it. It wouldn't last long. He wasn't making a point. He would just spew out options for interpretation, and this was the excitement. Architectural thinking and designing were a sushi restaurant with all the plates going by in front of you. If a journal, magazine or book was lying around, if I handed him a chance book, say Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* or a Max Frisch book, say *Homo Faber*, Pietilä

would engage in the books not as source, but as prompts, as prods to another way of taking his thought and work.

He read briefly, flicked through books for a line or two which fascinated him. It was just like his favourite volume the big red English dictionary. You will find it in the archive. Such a spark, an instant moment, would allow him to go off again, to enter his favourite word 'morphology.' Morphology was always the shape of things, the shape of an architecture to come. He could talk then and expand something he had never read as if was just what he was waiting for. At other times he could ignore it until later you realized he had taken just a fraction of it to become something that was not there before. This way he could collide on the community of ideas all around him in architecture and culture; Finland was not his only source. He had a common intellectual geography with a most diverse set of thinkers. Ideas artists and architecture. He didn't need to know these people or thinkers. he would adapt to any source and connect.

How did Pietilä communicate with the office, with the individual assistants? Doubtless there is a thin line between knowing where a good assistant could take an idea and resolve a detail. is hard to know how the increasing workload emerging at the end of the 1970s for a period of about 4 years affected Pietilä Those who worked with him clearly had to adapt and interpret words and sketches as if they knew what he wanted. His speech though clear of slow was not always concise; they had to insert these into his working. Nothing of this was easy, though I suspect highly rewarding. The dialogue formed in the way the office would transfer his sketches into line and detail. A constant process of dialoguing across the board meant that time had to be allowed for alteration, which would emerge regularly. Doubtless frustrating to many who worked with him, Pietilä might have given off the air that he didn't sense their confusion.

Time and again I would discuss with him not individual assistants. But he knew the work had to proceed to get what he wanted. And considering this was all in flux this was not an easy task for those who worked with him or were used to direct professional routes to a project. In the busy years he could often be found later in the evening in the office circulating and slipping small, altered lines on a piece of sketch paper and taped over the drawing. All these added sketch notes were usually ready for the assistants when they came in the morning. There might ultimately be no compromised ownership to these details or drawings, especially as the projects got larger in the early 1980s. It was clear it was a collaborative task, however much Pietila knew what he wanted. But it was around then, 1984, that I sensed this was all getting out of control; he knew it was impossible to get round and see all details necessary to take the projects forward. Sometimes Raili Pietila would be sitting beside him, taking a more active role, as he sketched a new idea. Or then she sat with assistants and discussed various issues, often interior details, finishes or textures. At one stage along with assistants and students the office grew to between 30 and 40. As I lived either underneath the office for a period, or in the single room next door on *Laivurinne*, I was always conscious of this. I would either join him and sit whilst he sketched and talked, or he would come to my side for a wee dram of whisky and discuss a new text.

What makes up the critical documents and the archive of an architect like Pietilä, where built work is set alongside texts, drawings and writing. In the light of today's political and cultural climate, there is once again a need to raise questions about how stories are constructed and what effects they have if we think they can be applied to architecture. What are the risks of using an archive to research and satisfy a need for critical documents and narratives? What are the rights and responsibilities of the storyteller, the researcher, the historian, the critic of the archivist? Participants from various fields such as art, film, media criticism and political theory can be seen today discussing the structure of narratives, and the reconstruction of history. If we ask what stories are not given space in society, how do we know about these stories? Are we trapped in processes that ask us to seek for new alternative strategies for a production of history?

What happens if we are present in the archive's increasingly monopolized and narrowing representation of reality? The situation is neatly told in the dream of one nearly-fifty architect. He is waiting at the traffic lights in Helsinki in his wreck of an Opel. Alongside pulls up the gleaming BMW sports car of the most successful tender-cutting, corporate and corpulent nearly-sixty architect. The sound of laughter echoes throughout the dream as the BMW steams off into the future record books and the younger architect is left at the lights. It is to be sure laughter that he hears but, as the younger architect knows, too often it is a mean laughter. Why should this be the case? Perhaps Finnish Architecture is hardly alone in seeking the clichés it so likes to hear uttered of its work.

What of Reima Pietilä's thinking and his texts. His position as a critic-on-the-outside in Finnish architecture. – for at least 2 decades - was by all accounts much more important than his actual words. The text existed but the reading was thin; Pietilä was polarised just as he himself polarised the other side, the other thoughts on architecture. In fact, so diagrammatic were the times in the 1960s to 1980s, it is difficult to say whether these texts were read at all. Was it enough to indicate protest and dissent from the cultural norm. It is difficult now to say what this represents today beside s a re-writing of history.

But though Pietilä made a conscious effort towards the end of his life to simplify some of the mystery in his words, he never considered it important to abandon the inherent difficulty and creativity he gained from ambiguity. He knew difficulty would remain, and he knew ambiguity would help him draw and create some of his works. Though some might fault Pietilä for a stubbornness, though his critical efforts were seen as monologues, it is very possible he was striking out against the generalisation of argument. He suspected the easy lament and architectural platitudes that could be found in Finnish architectural criticism. Pietilä would, up to his final days, discuss about the once combative architects and architectural thinkers who, like many grounded in the agitprop of the 1960s, believed that militancy had its own unquestionable authority. He would use this to struggle against establishing his own authority.

Pietilä attempted to do more than just keep the conversation going. He imagined how his architecture diverged 'rhetorically' from the ideals some wanted to find more suitable to a Finnish position. Because of this, he felt there was a silence which deepened into an architecture hallucination. There was a time in the radical 1950s that he would have shared the young avant garde assumptions about history and social relations; though he would open them to an entirely different radical critique during the 1960s and 1970s. His texts stand alone, even today. We can see this as a radical, disruptive ambiguity. He would turn to Stockhausen and Beckett quite often; along with other chance thinkers, these became cyphers for the useful difficulty he felt architecture could contain. Deeper meaning may have been found in the social mission for architecture. But to Pietilä this opened the way to a formalism, a neutralisation of excess and difference. The non-destination offered him a clearer link to some of the major movements in modern thought of the 20th Century. If architecture had become life's promise, life needed reasserting. Into the ordinary, the architect as serious player takes the game to gamble with 'life' itself.

The architect responded to building within the climate, the light and the mood of his own environment and country. This rebounded on the architect's life. He became for many – unjustly - the *backwoodsman*. Place was never the real place. For the monk as well as the architect, for the visitor as well as the poet, the Finnish forest can be too deceptive, too labyrinthine. Finding in the forest a geometry of nature could make of architecture a prison-house. Primitive and natural, some identified in the unruliness of Pietilä's architecture a Finnish frame of mind. Opposition often proves a fatigue until overcome. Too much of Pietilä's invention, his language games and cultural schemes, was brushed aside. Opposition grew into a repressive tolerance.

It became too easy for a generation to dismiss the architect for an incorrect approach to culture. Nature to many Finnish architects in the mid 20th century could never be an appropriate starting point. Landscape was only ever a myth and regionalism was always too regional, however much Pietilä spoke of a kind of critical regionalism before it became a common language used to revise a more rational Modernism. If we try and make case for Pietilä's architecture as a dialogue with the space of the forest, and - in more general terms - a life-space, this was ignored for many years. Painfully symbolic, subtlety was transferred into the narrative of the space. His attackers and critics would always be pained if he slightly demoted the tectonic to mimic nature's morphology.

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There would always be a moment when he uttered one of his dialogue-stopping lines. His attempt to keep the conversation going suddenly stopped. His Surrealism would mix with a Sufism without him knowing. "I have no problem with this. You know why?" he would say. "Because elks do not have any transcendental ideas..." Did Pietilä pay a price for what was often considered a serious frivolity? As the 1980s would pass over to the 1990s it was found difficult to imagine what it might mean to speak of a *Finnish frame of mind*. Finnish architecture began to become repetitive coding; parametric gymnastics confused the recognisable semiotics as more diversity and tolerance did seem to creep in. In the 1980s the Museum of Finnish Architecture decided to do an exhibition on the architect's work. This began in Helsinki in 1984 and for the next few years travelled the world. Life was always elsewhere in this country.

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Around 1986, Pietilä became ill. I'd had enough, I wanted a change and was living in Nizamuddin in Delhi. Slowly life had been squeezed out of architecture as far as I was concerned, and it was necessary to reverse this process. I began to consider

what it means to talk of *Architecture or Life* and to have worked and created a friendship with Pietila with whom I spent off and on nearly 20 years.

How do you ever know about an architect's mind: the meanderings, the routes he took to convince people of his work, or the stories he told, the inventions, the chaotic musings.

Any amount of extracts, demonstrate the way he thought. In the crucial year 1989 he would repeat his interest in guidelines not credos. His was never the Marxist way, though that had become flattened in Finland by the 1970s. He rarely knew what rules were good, what rules were bad. He would go on sating this in his disruptive ambiguity. He might have thought a return to history could save him, but it wouldn't. Animalistic, he sniffed things out, often admitting to being unable to understand in any proper way. Which always begged the question: what for Pietilä became the proper way?

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Have I played a trick on myself? Did Pietilä become a grand cognitive illusion in a country impossible to understand from the outside? What is this alibi for my own life, and what if it really had nothing to do with architecture at all? There was often a long pause between sentences and the statements he made. Breathing pauses, I think. Or re-thinking pauses? Were they a chance to deflect or alter the thought as it emerges from the mind and makes its way out into the public. Was this the non-destination strategy? He would often say to me using the third person: "Pietilä changes opinion about matters so fast that some of the recent 'letters' are now out of date." Was Kyosti Ålander right back in the early years of the Museum of Finnish Architecture. He identified a Pietilä with no permanent principles. Yet he made such an architecture out of this flux. Does this sum him up? A no-destination architect with many destinations? To be serious about how the mind changes, how one changes one's mind - to know at least this. I think of this as Pietilä's *anti-method*.

Literal metaphors, mixing images chaotically, global regionalism, nothing in the ordinary sense. A bear's sleep and an elk's logic.

I think back to the Dipoli manifesto from 1966 and how he described it as a challenge on good taste. Dipoli and his text *Literal Morphology* is the summa of all his thinking; it anticipated most of the phenomenology that was to come in Finland, in built or written form. This was why I came to this country; it is what I have ended up with, and it is what I will take away. "I must rely on the non-verbal, things I cannot see or touch," he says, "but I am convinced they are there somehow....like a hunter always in the present and aware of the present before it becomes visible, that zone between the future and the past which we no longer call the present. This is Pietilä's thinking machine, a strange idea in grammar...the 'sana-maa'." He was always undressing his own words, undressing his own text, and undoing his own thinking. The Pietilä machine is unstoppable. Painful realities and wild laughter; this is the unique existence of someone who would never claim to be a master, a guru or an Ustad. The Bear sleeps, the Bear's work is done! After this, nothing stops; Pietilä the non-destination architect, continues disrobing.

I remember Anselm Hollo's translated lines of a poem from Paavo Haavikko:

We fly
Against the door jamb
Of the air
The air Weeps for us
We were the King's bowmen
We are leaves on the trees
The leaves
Touch air
Not heavy
Like the king's treasure
We go
Tree Into the reddening glow.

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