

PIETER BRUEGEL THE ELDER'S *THE TOWER OF BABEL* (1563). FROM ART TO ARCHITECTURE

RUTH DOROT

School of Architecture, Ariel University, Israel
65 Ramat Hagolan, Ariel 40700, Israel
E-mail address: ruthd@ariel.ac.il
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1884-1743>

EDNA LANGENTHAL

School of Architecture, Ariel University, Israel
65 Ramat Hagolan, Ariel 40700, Israel
E-mail address: ednala@ariel.ac.il
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7610-1121>

ABSTRACT

Aim. This paper examines the meaning of *The Tower of Babel* (1563), Pieter Bruegel's painting, as a physical, cultural, social, and architectural herald of the modern skyscraper. The interpretation generated will form the background for a contemporary analogy to the modern skyscrapers. These large-scale aesthetic structures, form the sensation of an unnerving lack of space and does not correspond with the existing urban outline. Similar to the tower at the painting, that is a symbol of the lack of connection between nations and peoples, the skyscraper follows in the footsteps of its predecessor that symbolized the confounding of the languages.

Methods. Four theoretical approaches will be utilized: (a) Examining the place of the painting within common approaches to the biblical text, based on familiar examples; (b) Converting the biblical story into a painting; (c) Analyzing and evaluating the painting from an aesthetic perspective; (d) In order to overcome the alienation and lack of community we shall utilize the phenomenological notion of place and space, which opens a path to architectural experiencing that promises to connect the individual to the environment, the world, and the community.

Results. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's approach to the biblical story and its artistic portrayal teaches us that *The Contemporary Torah* (2006, Genesis 11:1-9) is a timeless and universal story that illustrates human pretense, a lack of adequate self-evaluation, arrogance, and stupidity.

Conclusion. The artist understood all this very well and possessed the originality and the daring to represent it even in contradiction of contemporary conventions.

Keywords: Tower of Babel, Pieter Bruegel the elder, the art of time, the art of place, the Bible, northern renaissance, Flanders



INTRODUCTION

The story of the Tower of Babel appears in the book of Genesis at the end of the portion of Noah, indicating that it occurred after the flood. The era is one of human renewal on earth, and it seems only natural that people would seek to build a city, a shared home. The city's tower is another symbol of the safety they seek in an upward-striving structure that grants them a sense of safety from the water. Albeit the builders' pretensions considerably exceeded that necessary to achieve this safety and it seems that they sought to use the tower to reach the very heavens that are God's dwelling:

(1) Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. (2) And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. (3) They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard'. Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar. (4) And they said, 'Come, let us build a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world'. (5) The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that humanity had built, (6) and the Lord said, 'If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. (7) Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech'. (8) Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. (9) That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (*The Contemporary Torah*, 2006, Genesis 11:1-9)

The story of the tower's construction arouses many questions and varied interpretations that indicate a controversy. Theoretically, this is a simple story with no mention of any wrongdoing. All the people wanted was "Come, let us build a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world" (*The Contemporary Torah*, 2006, Genesis 11:4). Hence, we should begin by clarifying the offence committed by the tower's builders. Several points in the biblical story can help illuminate this issue.

"Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words" (*The Contemporary Torah*, 2006, Genesis 11:1). The state of human society after the flood is described as one of unity. The intent of the people who set out to build the city might have been to retain this state of unity by remaining concentrated in a single place, in a closed community where they all speak one language, namely, understand each other. But this violated the Divine injunction: "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth" (*The Contemporary Torah*, 2006, Genesis 1:28). By choosing this course they acted in their own good but against God's injunction.

An even graver offense, however, seems to have been their wish to form

a name and reputation for themselves, to publicise humankind's greatness and abilities as successful and skilled builders. Their sin was that instead of glorifying God's name they chose to glorify their own. This is evident in the fact that instead of using natural stone and mortar to build the tower they used bricks and bitumen, namely manmade materials instead of the natural God-given materials. Moreover, there is also an opinion that the tower looked, ironically, as if it had been carved out of the mountains from which the building blocks were taken, though this act of construction involved the destruction of nature (Vytaš, 2013). It appears that this was what caused God's anger and occasioned their punishment: "Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city" (*The Contemporary Torah*, 2006, Genesis 11:8). The moment God dispersed them and confounded their speech, people stopped speaking one language and could no longer hear each other, namely, they stopped understanding each other.

This interpretation of the biblical story contends that God's anger, occasioned by his annoyance at the "ladder" leading to the sky, resulted in a negative outcome that was the opposite of the builders' original intention to remain united; hence, the story of the Tower of Babel is one of pessimism, loss, and human failure. Due to the story's picturesqueness and its significant results, it was portrayed by many artists over the generations. Well known, for instance, are Gustave Doré's series of engravings, as well as the paintings of Salvador Dalí, Hendrick van Cleve, Maurits Cornelis Escher, and others. Also included in this group is Flemish Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel de Oude (1525-1569), the first of the Bruegel artists (Pieter and Jan Bruegel), who chose this biblical story as the topic of his painting.

This paper seeks to examine the depths and meaning of *The Tower of Babel* (1563), Pieter Bruegel the Elder's "encyclopedic" painting, as a physical, cultural, social, and architectural herald of the modern skyscraper. The lofty architectural structure at the centre of the biblical story and of the painting has become a symbol of the confounding of languages and of the deficient interpersonal verbal communication that expanded into deficient connections between nations and peoples. Interpreting the painting will provide a context for understanding our perception of architecture; does an architectural work constitute a mere functional structure or is it also a work of art, as in Nikolaus Pevsner's (1958) definition, whereby architecture is perceived in the bible as a cooperative act of intensification. The tower's builders sought "to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world". In these circumstances, the political and ethical functions are more significant than the aesthetic. Building the tower, however, does not result in the desired preservation of the community, rather to its destruction: "Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city" (*The Contemporary Torah*, 2006, Genesis 11:9). The hubris of the tower's builders deprived them of their home. This indicates that establishing such a monument is not a suita-

ble way of shaping society as a community. We would like to show that this has direct implications for the image of modern and post-modern cities. Similar to towers built in the current era, the building of the biblical Tower of Babel signifies an era characterised by alienation between humankind and the world. In this way, man exists “outside” the world. The question to be asked is: How can we overcome this phenomenon and what means are necessary?

In order to interpret the painting, four theoretical approaches from the disciplines of art history and philosophy will be utilised: (a) Examining the place of the painting within common approaches to the biblical text, based on familiar examples; (b) Converting the biblical *story* (the art of time) into a *painting* (the art of space), inspired by the theory of German playwright and intellectual Ephraim Lessing Gotthold (1781-1729) in his book *Laocoon*; (c) Analysing and evaluating the painting *The Tower of Babel* (1563) from an aesthetic perspective, following the *formalist* approach of Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), as presented in his book *Principles of Art History*; (d) In order to overcome the alienation and lack of community we shall utilise the phenomenological notion of place and space proposed by philosopher Martin Heidegger, as presented in his book *Being and Time*, which opens a path to architectural experiencing that promises to connect the individual to the environment, the world, and the community. We shall also utilise the philosophical approach of Emanuel Levinas (1979), for whom urban existence is predicated on “Otherness”, thus maintaining ethical relations within this expanse.

Common Approaches to Painting Biblical Themes

When endeavouring to paint a biblical theme, attention should also be focused on the different artistic approaches commonly utilised by artists in the different periods.

Illustrating the story: An illustration embodies a certain message or idea *visually*, without developing a deep personal or general interpretation. It serves as a visual illustration of the text, as exemplified by Gustave Doré (1832-1883).

Adapting the story: Most artists who painted biblical stories were Christian. For them, and particularly for Catholic artists, the Old Testament is a pre-figurative reflection of the New Testament. This means that they portray the story as an introduction to or herald of the New Testament and are hence under no obligation to accurately reflect the origin – the Old Testament.

Interpreting the story: This approach is the deepest and it attempts to decipher the inner depths of the story and the Jewish spirit of the Bible. At times this interpretation utilises biblical and extra-biblical sources, while sometimes it is a personal interpretation. The most conspicuous and clear example of this approach is that of Dutch Baroque artist Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn.

Utilising the story as an *analogy*: Sometimes the biblical story is utilised for the purpose of teaching a moral lesson, forming an analogy, or making a political statement. Pieter Bruegel de Oude's painting *The Tower of Babel* (1563) is a good example.

Converting the art of time into the art of place One major issue confronting the visual artist when dealing with literary sources (biblical stories, mythological stories, religious texts, and others) is the need to convert the art of *time*: literature, music, dance, cinema, to the art of *place*: painting, sculpture, and architecture. One of the first to address these distinctions was German playwright and intellectual Lessing Gotthold (1781-1729) in his book *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Lessing, 1983).

The art of *time* is related to events on the time sequence, while the art of *place* or space is related to simultaneous occurrences in space. Arts of time involve actions that follow each other in sequential time span. In contrast, arts of space describe objects that our senses grasp at independent points in time that are not necessarily sequential. (Dorot, 2013, p. 14)

Figure 1



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Tower of Babel

Note. Oil on wood, 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Source. Wikimedia, Creative Commons licence. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kunsthistorisches_Museum_Wien,_Pieter_Bruegel_d.%C3%84.,_der_Turmbau_zu_Babel.JPG

A story that evolves over several pages, chapters, or even only verses, as in the current story, cannot be unified and translated into a single painting. The artist has the option of forming a diptych, triptych, or even a series of paintings or sculptures, however for various reasons this is not always possible. Therefore, each artist usually chooses to focus on a different part of the textual story, according to his or her perception regarding the main point, highlight, moral, and so on. Hence, each of the above artists appears to give the story of the tower a different expression. One describes the flaunting of the building achievements, the other engages in perspective exercises through the tower's portrayal, and yet another outlines a type of illustration of the story. Transferring an event, story, or incident from one medium to another expands the aesthetic pleasure and adds a new dimension to human understanding that would not have been possible otherwise: "...Buber taught us that a flourishing culture unites the arts, while a withering culture divides them" (Ofrat, 1986, p. 9).

PIETER BRUEGEL DE OUDE – *THE TOWER OF BABEL* (1563)

Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel de Oude (1525-1569) chose this biblical story of all others. From a superficial perspective, the painting *The Tower of Babel* (1563) meets the Renaissance conventions according to the classification principles determined by Wölfflin (1864-1945). The painting contains a balance between line and colour, the light is divided fairly evenly, with no strong light and shadow contrasts, the uniformity within the multiple details is typical of the artist. The entire scene is set in a pretty landscape, as customary in 16th century paintings, and the composition too is based on the principle of balance: on one side of the tower King Nimrod and his entourage, balanced on the other by the vibrant port of Antwerp, with its merchandise waiting to be unloaded (Wölfflin, 1962).

Bruegel the Elder did not devote himself to bible art and bible paintings were not particularly popular in his era. This raises the question of why he chose to focus on a biblical story as the theme of his painting and why this story specifically. The question regarding the choice of story is particularly potent due to its pessimistic message, in contrast with the optimistic worldview and idealisation of reality that were at the centre of the customary Renaissance worldview.

Notably, the artist's milieu was the 16th century Northern Renaissance style. Koenraad Jonckheere (2014) claims that in the latter half of the century paintings of the Tower of Babel flourished in the low countries and constituted a subcategory of landscape paintings. These canvasses and panels were interpreted as paintings with a moral-allegorical message or as comments on the faulty hubris (Koenraad, 2014). The Northern Renaissance is an artistic style that evolved north of the Italian Alps; according to art historian Horst Woldemar Janson only in the 16th century was

it affected by the Italian style. Even then the Northern style remained under the influence of the medieval and late gothic styles (Janson, 1970). The humanism that underlies the Renaissance is common to the Italian and Northern styles but there are also quite a few differences, for various reasons. The Northern style is more realistic and figurative, without the idealisation typical of Italy. There were improved painting techniques and multiple prints, while the perspective making was empirical and not linear-mathematical.

According to art researcher Moshe Barasch, local or regional traditions led to the entrance of local elements. Namely, the different cultural background of each area affected the varying meaning (Barasch, 1986). In addition to the stylistic differences between the Italian and the Northern Renaissance, Bruegel the Elder himself was characterised by a unique style that differed even from his contemporaries. This contrast was described by researcher Keith Roberts:

...The archaic colouring of many of his images and his refusal to adopt the idealised style of the figures as developed by the Italian Renaissance artists... His works were not compatible with the aesthetic disciplines common in his time (Roberts, 1976, p. 5).

Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted *The Tower of Babel* three times. A first version that was subsequently lost was a miniature on ivory created during his stay in Rome, the second is *The "Little" Tower of Babel*, located in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, and the third (1563), the topic of this paper, is the largest and best known, located in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which has some 15 of his works. In the Northern Renaissance tradition of precise details and descriptions, the painting has myriad technical, mechanical details and descriptions of types of work, builders, stonemasons, work tools, cranes, houses, land and sea landscapes, boats, and even women hanging laundry. This level of detail is specifically associated with Bruegel's unique style as an "encyclopedic" artist. In most of his paintings he describes a wealth of sights and depicts the painting's topic in minute detail. It is fascinating to inspect the details of this painting, which are surprising at times. The tiny city, for instance, which is spread out beside the tower and thus emphasises its size, is surrounded by a wall and contains residential buildings, shacks, a bridge, a river, a church, a cart, and so on. The manner in which the artist shaped the inner space of the building, coloured in cream or beige, in contrast to the external part coloured in red terracotta, is detailed and tempts the observer to peek into the inner space, even arousing curiosity and a desire to enter.

Figure 2

*Pieter Bruegel the Elder, detail
from The Tower of Babel*

Note. Oil on wood, 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

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The details are so minute that parts of the painting could have been portrayed as a separate work. The painted details illustrate and animate the biblical story, although they are taken from the artist's time and place rather than from the land of Shinar or the time of the story. The tower's design, with its many arches, was probably inspired by the Roman Colosseum, which the artist had visited previously, in 1552-1553. The artist was impressed by the building, which symbolises the hubris of the pagan empire and the engagement in nonsensical and vacuous matters, which led to the fall of the Roman Empire. In this context, it is notable that during the Middle Ages scholars compared Rome to the city of Babylon, two cities that were alienated from God.

The basic structure of the tower is formed by spiral ramps. The circle was the geometric shape favoured by Renaissance artists, as it is a symbol of perfection. Aside from the circular shape, all other elements point to imperfection, dissolution, destruction, and disharmony. The painting depicts a state of construction beside deconstruction, where the ultimate outcome is failure and falling. The heavy impressive structure leans sideways, namely, the failure stems from the faulty design, a consequence of human weakness, rather than from Divine intervention. Moreover, none of the levels are complete or wholly built; the lower levels are in a state of collapse while others have already been built on top of them. The pretence of ascending high into the sky is manifested in the height of the tower that reaches to the top of the painting. The clouds conceal the unfinished edge and seem to cut

off the top of the structure, intensifying the sense of collapse, destruction, and lack of purposefulness resulting from human pretensions.

Humankind is indeed at the centre of the painting, as evident in the presence and manifest actions of the individuals portrayed, in the spirit of the Renaissance, however the dimensions of the human figures are tiny and they seem to resemble worker ants, their image lost among the sea of details. Even King Nimrod, who Josephus Flavius attests was the initiator of the Tower of Babel, as the first king of the Babylonians (Caroll, 2008), and who is depicted visiting the work in process, accompanied by his councillors and entourage, is relatively small. This despite the artist's special focus on him, manifested in his somewhat exaggerated elevation. This approach stresses man's weakness versus the enormous pretensions. The many labourers, builders, and planners energetically busy at work demonstrate the extent of their pretence versus their failure. The frenzied work is seen everywhere: everyone is busy with some activity, wares are arriving from overseas, many impressive devices and work tools are spread about. These images are the outcome of contemporary discoveries and the scientific and technological developments of the Renaissance. But all this is futile, downfall awaits them all.



Figure 3
Pieter Bruegel the Elder,
detail from *The Tower of Babel*

Note. Oil on wood, 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Source. Wikimedia, Creative Commons licence. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kunsthistorisches_Museum_Wien,_Pieter_Bruegel_d._%C3%84.,_der_Turmbau_zu_Babel.JPG

THE MESSAGE

The message is one of profound criticism regarding the human condition. This critique is linked to the artist's general worldview as manifested in many of his other paintings. To judge a literary or physical artwork and

reach an interpretation, it is necessary to focus on the individual work, but it should also be viewed in the context of the artist's body of works. "The interpretation can be based on other texts written by the author or in his era or that he utilised, finding the overall context within them" (Barzel, 1990, p. 16).

Hence, attention must be directed at the unique worldview of Bruegel the Elder, in the context of his era and in contrast to it, as evident from his artistic world. In the painting *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1568), for instance, he depicts blindness accompanied by maliciousness, stupidity, and vengefulness.

Figure 4
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Blind Leading the Blind

Note. Oil on wood, 1568, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples

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In his painting *Children's Games* (1560), the artist provides a portrayal and a critical treatment of children who resemble old people or small adults. These represent humankind, who behave as young and mostly cruel children.

Figure 5
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Children's Games

Note. Oil on wood, 1560, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

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The artist reaches the height of his criticism of humankind and its nature in his well-known painting *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1599). By illustrating popular proverbs in their verbal form, the artist demonstrates that human beings are evil at base, as well as envious, narrow minded, lacking wisdom and proportion, inconsiderate of others, and exploiters.



Figure 6
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Netherlandish Proverbs

Note. Oil on wood, 1599, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

Source. Wikimedia, Creative Commons licence. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder,_Netherlandish_Proverbs,_1599,_Gemäldegalerie,_Berlin_%282%29_%2840204298851%29.jpg

The artist's choice of the Tower of Babel is consistent with his overall worldview. The story engages in the same type of criticism, proving that man is pre-inclined to evil. Bruegel the Elder demonstrates in his painting that man's folly and evil exist irrespective of time, culture, or place; that is how things have been from the beginning of time. This explains why the people in *The Tower of Babel* are portrayed as weightless or meaningless, small, nearly indistinguishable within the sea or land scenes. The painting serves as a mirror reflecting the face of humanity. The artist uses the story as a pessimistic allegory for human nature.

Another possible explanation is that the artist utilised the painting to arouse among his contemporaries in Antwerp a discussion on the conflict underlying the story. In her paper, art historian Barbara Kaminska describes

Antwerp's unprecedented processes of demographic and economic growth in the 16th century, processes that intensified during Bruegel the Elder's years of activity. Antwerp became a publishing centre and a flourishing city of commerce. Consequently, new neighbourhoods were developed in the city and its suburbs and significant architectural changes were implemented. These changes had a deep effect on the character of the community, which comprised groups who spoke different languages, from different nations and trades, with a non-homogeneous socio-economic status.

Bruegel must have felt that in order to preserve these significant achievements the biblical story merits debate. The artist may have intended to warn his compatriots of the pending dangers. The painting was a type of parable aimed at arousing the townspeople, who could possibly encounter the same fate as that of the people in the story.

As in the case of literary works, there is an affiliation between the painting and the artist's inner and experiential world, as well as his era. Hence, the artwork should be understood in this wide context (Barzel, 1990). This approach makes it possible to link the painting to political criticism of the future and state of the Spanish Habsburg dynasty and to contemporary protests against their rule of Flanders. This link leads to the conclusion that the biblical story was used by the artist as an allegory and a subtle way of conveying a political message.

We have little information about Bruegel the Elder and his life. Steven A. Mansbach (1950) describes the scholarly interest around Bruegel the Elder and says that it is hard to understand why this painting attracted such little attention though it was so important to him. Moreover, it is also puzzling because the painting could provide modern historians with significant hints about the artist's connections to contemporary political and cultural events under the Spanish Habsburg rule, when there were aspirations for a liberal community (Mansbach, 1982). The interest increases particularly in light of Janson's claim that Bruegel was very learned, a friend of humanists, and the Habsburg court were his patrons (Janson, 1970).

THE TOWER OF BABEL – A BUILDING OR AN ARCHITECTURAL WORK

Pevsner opens his book *An Outline of European Architecture* with the statement that "A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture" (Pevsner, 1958, p. 23). This distinction, with its lengthy presence in the history of construction and architecture, emphasises two extremities. One is the house and residence and the other is the church and holy temple, where one is relatively private and the other relatively public, one secular and the other sacred. Obviously, both the shed and the cathedral are buildings. However, there is a strong sense that the cathedral contains something beyond a mere structure. What is this sense of "beyond"? Pevsner's answer

is that architectural works are distinguished from buildings by their design with attention to an aesthetic dimension. In other words, an architectural work is a functional structure that is also a work of art. Does the approach whereby the architectural work is a building intended to succeed as an aesthetic object indeed reflect the essence of architecture?

We shall try to examine this statement in view of Bruegel's painting *The Tower of Babel* from 1563. It was undoubtedly not a concern for the aesthetic dimension that led to construction of the tower. When observing the painting, we are struck by the contrast between the incomplete tower that pokes up through the clouds, a true skyscraper, and the many other modest structures in the painting. The houses in the nearby town, the agricultural farms, the city walls, the bridges and shelters, are fragile and upheld by the tower itself. The former were probably built by the workers to provide shelter while working on the tower.

The contrast between the tower's monumental architecture and the modest structures was probably familiar to the artist's contemporaries. In medieval towns the residents were those who built the cathedrals that were the centre of the town. Hence, the painting invites a distinction between the two types of construction, the residential and the holy, the mundane and the architectural.

In the biblical description, the architectural work is depicted as the product of a collaborative act of intensification. The tower's builders wish, as stated, "to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world". This conception of the architectural work stresses the political and ethical functions over the aesthetic. In this case, it seems that building the tower does not lead to preservation of the community but rather to its destruction: "Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city". The hubris of the tower's builders deprived them of their home. This indicates that establishing such a monument is not a suitable way of shaping society as a community.

This description of the story raises the question of a current analogy for the Tower of Babel. A quick glance at our cities, which are gradually growing upwards, positions the skyscraper as a potential candidate. The magnificent skyscrapers, large-scale aesthetic objects usually designed by talented architects, sparkle in the sun they reflect during the day and in the interior lighting at night. Nevertheless, they also create a discomfiting sense of lack of space. Building a tower seems to disconnect the structure from the changing fabric of the landscape or city. This type of architecture does not manage to relate to the pre-existing textures and structures or to the features of the existing context and expanse.

The resulting contention can be demonstrated by endless examples from the modernist period and from the current period as well. If architects see their mission as building independent disconnected aesthetic objects, then architecture should aim to create works that turn a cold shoulder not only to the neighbouring structures but also to the world

and its constraints. The aesthetic work is an ideal per se and it cannot be accountable to context.

An example of architecture that maintains a connection to its location is evident in another story in the book of Genesis – that of Jacob’s dream (*The Contemporary Torah*, 2006, *Genesis 28:11-17*). This story too describes a situation that centres on the link between heaven and earth. There the link is formed not by disregarding the place, the context, but on the contrary, by experiencing the general landscape as a place. Where the builders of the tower seek to exclude God by empowering the human, in the story of the dream the place is established as the location of the Divine residence. But it is not only God’s place of residence, rather also a place that is open to connecting with a more supreme reality; it is the gate to Heaven, where the ladder symbolises the connection. The world is experienced as a place that exists in a state of correspondence, not only with Jacob but with the future generations as well. Jacob reacts to this experience by marking the place; he takes the stone he slept on and transforms it into a monument. The horizontal rock becomes a monument – a vertical pillar.

The Tower of Babel and Jacob’s pillar represent conflicting approaches in architecture, one of intensification despite the sacred, or sanctification of the human, and the other of reacting to that which is experienced as holy. What can be the meaning of this paradigm for us today? Have we not transcended it, so much so that any attempt to look back will seem like an anachronism? Is there anything that can replace it? Is it possible that architecture, by its very nature, demands such a retrospective view?

A QUESTION OF PLACE – HEIDEGGER AND THE GREEK TEMPLE

A positive answer to these questions emerges from an oft-cited description, where German philosopher Heidegger describes the Greek temple in his text *The Origin of the Work of Art*:

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the rock-cleft valley. The building encloses the figure of the god and lets it stand out in the holy precinct through the open portico. By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple. This presence of the god is itself an extension and delimitation of the precinct as a holy precinct. The temple and its precinct, however, do not fade into the indefinite. It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance, and decline, acquire the shape of destiny for the human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people. Only from and in this expanse does the nation first return to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation. (Heidegger, 1971, p. 41).

It is hard to propose a verbal reading of this section. How can we understand the sentence: "A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing"? How can we understand the undefined thing that Heidegger is describing?

Many have deliberated regarding the essence of the temple Heidegger described. Does it matter? Is he relating to a specific temple? It seems that this temple cannot be found on any map. Like the Tower of Babel, its place is in the domain of the ideal.

Heidegger (1971) claims that the temple transforms a certain area into a holy precinct, where God's presence is evident. But when entering the precinct, and in this respect leaving the everyday world, the dimension of God's presence does not remain outside, behind us. The temple illuminates the mundane. This is what allows Heidegger to say that the temple reveals the world to the community. The word "world" here does not denote the total facts but rather a significant order that allocates a proper place to things and people. In other words, the world is not a collection of objects with predetermined meaning, but rather the very location of the things and the set of relationships they form among themselves and with us generate a global tapestry. Therefore, the architectural work is inseparable from the tapestry in which it is set, it is integrated with its place.

The discussion regarding the Greek temple does not stem from a traditional architectural point of view, rather it wishes to see the temple as a place that unites around it a network of paths that give voice to the space it opens and grant meaning to the concept of residence. Heidegger's philosophy initiates a perspective that is beyond the traditional aesthetic objectivisation and that seeks to relate to the Greek temple as an action, a creation. Through the Greek temple Heidegger reveals the nature of the architectural work, which is more than a decorative object placed in space. Buildings are supposed to be meaningful rather than only to be. The architectural work as a work of art does not represent reality, rather it facilitates a different view of the world. In this respect, the architectural work refuses to fit a predetermined relationship; it brings a "statement" of its own and thus initiates a different perspective.

We understand the temple as an architectural work with a vital public function. This understanding leads to the comprehension that the role of architecture is to help gather individuals into a community by giving presence to the forces that manage its life. Describing a temple not as a specific temple but rather in general sheds light on something that involves the Greek world in general without relating to a specific god, rather the presence of the Divine as a concept. The structure of the temple, or in Heidegger's words the templework, exposes the world of the Greek, of the individual and of the entire community. The architectural structure is in this respect a public structure strongly associated with holiness and not only a cultural means of expression. The sacred is the communal and architecture allows the establishment of cultural values. Through the relationship between the temple and the people they experience the sense of a place in history and

in the community. This allows them to experience the present as a common present, designed by virtue of a known past; it allows them to experience the future they anticipate.

Unlike Bruegel's tower, Heidegger's temple is apparently more than the product of a proud might-enhancing process. Heidegger indicates how this "more" should be understood – the temple frames its context and thus allows us to see ourselves once again – not only as a manifestation of form and matter but as the site of an occurrence. Standing there, the temple "forms a place", constitutes a boundary line, has limits and a territory. The temple makes it possible to see the landscape as it illuminates the historical world to which it belongs and gives it a unique focus.

The construction of the Tower of Babel, similar to that of the towers built in our era, encourages the conception of an era characterised by alienation between the individual and the world. The individual seems to exist "outside" the world. Heidegger's proposal opens a path to experiencing architecture, one that promises to connect the individual to the environment, the world, and the community.

A QUESTION OF PLACE – THE ATTITUDE TO THE "OTHER"

But was the sin of the Tower of Babel's builders merely inattention to the environment, the land, and the place? Or was something else lost that is related to their understanding of urbanity? We shall attempt to answer this question with the assistance of French Jewish philosopher Levinas (1906-1995). While for Heidegger the question of the place reveals the ethical dimension regarding the world and the environment, Levinas relates directly to the appearance of the place as fundamentally ethical and as connected to the other.

For Levinas, the urban expanse arouses terror and hope simultaneously. On one hand, there is a concern that this space blurs the attitude to otherness, manifested in the myth of the tower that accentuates the uniformity of language and of the community. On the other, the phenomenon of urbanity is accompanied by a sense of hope, by understanding its most basic dimension as an initial structure of which otherness is an inherent part. For him, otherness is the condition on which urban existence is predicated, hence ethical relations exist in this expanse.

In order to understand what he means by otherness it is necessary to return to his point of departure when discussing western philosophy, whereby this thought usually takes place under the hegemony that he calls "identization". The tendency to "reduce the other to the identical", as Levinas calls it, does not remain only in the philosophical field. It is not an abstract outline, rather it is how the human subject builds himself. According to Levinas, the fact that we manage to impart to the "self" a unified structure that has a centre despite the many changes throughout life is an

achievement that allows the emergence of meaning in existence. At the same time, these mechanisms that allow a space of intent are also problematic – a unified self is formed while flattening otherness.

His ethics is generated by a critique of the philosophical tradition that sanctifies the “self” as a point of departure; it embraces and internalises selfhood as a guiding ideal, or as Levinas writes: “philosophy is egology” (1979, p. 35). The logos of western philosophy is the logos of the ego and it fixes human thought (though not always overtly) in advance as closed to the presence of a radical other that cannot be brought into one’s home.

The structure of the subject is characterised by a lack that frequently attempts to fill itself. It relates to anything that differs from it as that quantity which it is capable of ingesting. According to this way of thinking, anything that is the other of the subject becomes identical to it and it does not allow any real otherness that exceeds itself. Think of the apple I eat that becomes part of my body. But not only things that I digest physically, rather also other ideas and contents.

For Levinas, the domain of western philosophy emerged from the Greek conception that establishes itself violently. This violence exists implicitly in many areas of daily life, where there is a predetermined “order” and the other is required to subject himself to that order. The thought of western philosophy, as reducing otherness, is manifested in the state. There the logic of the identical, or the totality, becomes a logic of dictatorship.

He also suggests a course that would allow open thinking with regard to the presence of otherness. The other’s otherness cannot emerge from within us and it is associated with fracturing the closed structure of the “self”, as a disruption that does not allow it to continue taking itself for granted. The disruption originates outside the “self”, it is activated by the other and becomes fractured as a result of the other’s presence. Levinas calls this philosophy ethics. Notably, Levinas’ criticism is not a critique of one philosophy or another but rather a structural critique of a way of thinking that closes our horizon to otherness in advance.

For this purpose, Levinas turns to the philosophy of Descartes, the “father of modern philosophy”. He claims that this philosophy contains an intuition that can help fracture the structure of the “self”, and it exists in Descartes’ discussion regarding proving the existence of God. The concept of God forms an encounter between the “self” and a dimension that apparently cannot exist from within the subject. In essence, finite creatures cannot derive the concept of infinity (which is larger than them), therefore this concept must come from outside. Hence consciousness, though finite, is open to that which exceeds it. On this issue he indicates a direction opened between the subject and infinite otherness. This otherness is not abstract, rather concrete, and it is embodied by the relationship between the “self” and the Other. In accepting the face of the other, the ideal of infinity is realised (Levinas, 1979). The transcendental dimension of the other is not only that which evades the perception of the “self” but rather that which concurrently obliges it to contend with an external standard.

Levinas claims that it is not only Greek thought and the Greek polis that flatten otherness; this does not exist in the past but can occur in the present-day city as well. One example he brings is the café, as a way of living that can be found in the modern city. The café opens directly into the street, and in it easygoing encounters take place, with no mutual responsibility. People come in for no reason, sit down without being tired, and drink without being thirsty (Levinas, 2001).

The problem with cafés, he says, is that they try to transform the hospitality space into a consumer product, to give it the value of exchange trade instead of the generosity of hospitality. Economics and ethics are confused. This is a space that “welcomes visitors” only according to the value of your money. In contrast, ethics is characterised by generosity that involves giving of yourself and that is demonstrated primarily by true hospitality, by inviting the other into one’s residential space.

So, who is the “other” in this urban space that is based on the exchange and excessive consumerism so typical of life in the modern urban expanse? More than anything, these others are those who are often disregarded because they lack the necessary capital to consume products or skills. In fact, they are the others who sleep by the roadside, they are those who arouse our fears and who erode our illusion of the safe inner domain.

Nevertheless, Levinas thought that there is hope for the urban space. Since this space contains many people from different traditions, he expects them to maintain ethical relations. Large modern cities are places where people who have no shared customs and histories encounter each other and this encounter, outside the context of shared customs, traditions, and histories, has an ethical essence. Cities, as he writes in “Judaism and Revolution”: emerged “rise from the void., They have no past. Within them, populations coming from everywhere are so mixed together and individuals so dispersed that all traditions have become lost” (Levinas, 1994, p. 112).

We see that Levinas links us back to the story of the Tower of Babel. If we said that the sin of the tower’s builders is that they inflicted an injustice on the essence of architecture, which is to establish a community and a culture, then the mixing of the languages and the dispersal are not a punishment but rather an act of correction. The dispersal and the diversity allow establishment of renewed ethical relations between people, relations that have no place in the original unified project. The tower’s builders sought to flatten otherness, to put an end to it through “the same language and the same words”. The correction here is the possibility of a real city, one established by living together rather than by identification with the other.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We lack considerable biographical information about Pieter Bruegel the Elder, so much so that it is even unclear in what year he was born. This

probably stems from his lack of significance at birth, though when he died in 1569 he was already well known. Nonetheless, many details about him remain uncertain and still hazy at present.

Renewed interest in the artist began to emerge in the mid-19th century, when budding modernism was accompanied by changes in the definition of beauty and the distortions and ugliness depicted by Bruegel the Elder met with more tolerance. An example of the lack of information and details concerning the artist is his unexplained interest in peasants, for example, whom he saw as rough and simple, a central preoccupation in his artistic world. For instance he painted simple scenes, taken from the life of peasants in Flanders, in beautiful landscapes, sometimes even reminiscent of the Italian Alps, as customary in the Renaissance. He also created the impression of a lively and joyful atmosphere even when the message was pessimistic, critical, humoristic, and even grotesque. At the bottom of these paintings he would add the inscription "*naar het leven*" - i.e., "from life" in Flemish.

...the people, groups, and events that seem 'naar het leven' give these epic compositions their humanity and power of persuasion. The small dimensions of the figures in contrast to the space they occupy emphasise the fragility of the human species... (Roberts, 1976, p. 9).

As stated, in the current painting he used his city, Antwerp, and its port as the background for the tower. He also used contemporary labourers, as well as the work tools and types of labour common there in the 16th century. This choice glorifies his city and its inhabitants and also resolves the lack of biblical documentation and visual accuracy of the different sights. Moreover, he reflects human nature, which has not changed, and the human folly and pretence that are still extant. Humanity's wish to invade space and to feel in control of that which is beyond has remained and even intensified.

Whether his painting was intended as criticism of humanity per se or as a political statement, this work by Bruegel the Elder is as a rule pessimistic, philosophically sober, and conveys little faith in mankind that built a deficient tower. In order to understand his approach we must perceive it, as seen above, in a contemporary context. On one hand, he lived in a period of scientific, technological, and cognitive development that was even relatively open: The Renaissance. Then again, as noted, Flanders was ruled by the Spanish Hapsburg dynasty, which restricted national and political freedom.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's approach to the biblical story and its artistic portrayal teaches us that Genesis 11:1-9 is a timeless and universal story that illustrates human pretence, a lack of adequate self-evaluation, arrogance, and stupidity. The artist understood all this very well and possessed the originality and the daring to represent it even in contradiction of contemporary conventions.

The failure of the Tower of Babel's builders and Bruegel's painting also generate understandings regarding our own architectural and urban

expanse. The first failure is the disconnection between the architectural work and the structure of the world and the environment. This aspect recognises the significance of the relationship between the architectural work and its place, between man and the Divine, and between heaven and earth. Also, particularly, the aspect stressed by Heidegger with regard to God's presence and the contention that we must rediscover the holy within the mundane. Thus, if architecture is to regain its ethical function, architectural works should be by nature undefining, indicating something that they can only insufficiently express.

The second failure is the ethical failure, manifested in the deficient approach of the tower builders not only regarding the building-place relationship but also towards the "other". The tower builders indeed declared "Let us build a tower", but they did not comprehend that the relationship between the "self" and the "other" exists as an initial urban state, a basic understanding of the urban structure. Architecture is necessary in order to reinstate humankind as a complex entity open to others, an essence that is threatened by the world's form as presented in the myth of the Tower of Babel and as frequently present in current times. It must be connected to the place (*makom*), in the Hebrew meaning of this term as a physical area but also as a designation of the Divine. The "place" opens a complex relationship with regard to both the physical dimension and the spiritual dimension, between the individual and the other.

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