



## Inspiration

Peter Sloterdijk

transcribed and edited by Luc Peters

### abstract

This is a transcription of a lecture given by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk on Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2005, between 13.30 and 16.00, at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, The Netherlands. The transcription is made from a private CD recording. Throughout, Sloterdijk partly worked from notes but mostly improvised. This, added to the fact that the lecture was given in English, or, as Sloterdijk stated, *bad English*, gives a certain flavour to the work undertaken here. The transcription starts with a quotation from Sloterdijk himself. Sloterdijk's thoughts on boredom and its containment bring us towards a consideration of architecture and the ways in which we act in and around buildings. It is therefore relevant not only to students of architecture, but also for students of organisation.

### Introduction

The only promising way in philosophy is to engage in a constellation of art, writing, and philosophy. That form is not exhausted yet.

Sometimes in your life the rules of politeness and your personal inclinations converge. This is such a moment and both sides motivate me to say to you that I'm very grateful for your invitation and that I'm happy to have the opportunity to share a couple of reflections on the essence of architecture and inspiration with you this afternoon. I'm particularly grateful for the organiser's decision to have this meeting in English. This helps me as an author to overcome the linguistic narcissism in which I'm caught all my lifetime and it helps me to understand that the times of good German are gone and that the times of bad English have come. As far as bad English is concerned I can promise you a convincing exercise.

The subject matter of this discourse seems to be inspiration but I'm convinced you're not interested in inspiration at all. I think you want to know what makes people build buildings. What makes you, what drives you on your way to this somehow perverted desire to erect constructions that humankind has designed as architecture, monuments of architecture. And my personal approach to this theme will be a meditation on the relationship between building and time. This will be reflections on architecture in an almost Heideggerian mode.

In order to familiarise you with the basic concept of my approach I think it is useful to refer to a famous saying of the seventeenth century French philosopher Pascal, Blaise Pascal, who is well known for his lamento in his *Pensees*, the collection of ideas, when he said: ‘All the misery of mankind comes from the fact that no-one is able to stay quietly in his own room’. I would like to draw the architectural consequences of this lamento and I would like to demonstrate the implications of this sentence.

I think that what we hear in Pascal’s saying is a projection of what I would like to call a monastic anthropology, and this is important for architects, because the monasteries were the places in European history where, later-on, the so-called individualistic person has been bred. Monasteries are breeders of individuals. And when Pascal carried on his complaint about the incapacity of the human being to stay alone, quietly, silently in a room, he evidently refers to the basic situation of the monastery; because here, for the first time in the history of mankind, a concept of building has been conceived in which a person and a room are brought together in such a way so that the individual becomes, as it were, the kernel of the cell in which he is located. The human being is, as it were, the *Zellkern*<sup>1</sup> of a room especially designed to contain people who learn the support of divine boredom, which is the very centre of monastic existence.

The monk or the religious person in general, male or female, is always a human being that has engaged his or her life in the adventure of allowing God to bore you, because he cuts all his or her natural engagements. This is the deeper meaning of this vow of obedience, that is the basic vow of religious existence. Obedience means you drop your own will and you allow your superiors and finally you allow your God to order your life. From that moment on, you have the opportunity to discover that divine orders are extremely vague and that you are absolutely incapable of catching a clear message from beyond. This means that you have to withdraw into this monkish cell and push the beyond to reveal itself. Obviously it never does and Pascal discovers this profound relationship between the unsupportable existence in a monkish cell: one individual, one room, no message. The consequence is that out of this impossible and insupportable holy boredom, which is the essence of monastic life, arises the drive to rush out. Restlessness, which is the key-concept of modern existentialism, is a discovery of this monastic, or pseudo-monastic, meditation that Pascal has carried out in his *Pensees*.

By the way, I would like to mention the fact that the biological term of the cell is an architectural metaphor that the biologists of the seventeenth century borrowed from the architecture of the monasteries. It was a British physicist, Richard Brooke, who put a piece of cork under his microscope and discovered a strange order, a line of small *carrees*,<sup>2</sup> or rectangles and hexagons. This gave him the idea to liken what he saw in a cell to the orders of the cells in a monastery. This shows that the biologists are deeply indebted towards designs of architecture.

Now Pascal’s lamento is reflected in what is probably the most important diagnosis of the existence of modern man in modern times that you can find: the lectures given by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger during the winter semester of 1929/30 in

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<sup>1</sup> Nucleus: LP.

<sup>2</sup> Squares: LP.

Freiburg: *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik (Basic Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Loneliness, Finitude)*. In this lecture Heidegger develops, for the first time in the history of thinking, the idea that the continuity of history for us has definitively broken. We no longer can afford the illusion of living in the history of mankind. We are the first generation, according to him, that has to realise that history is over and that everything we do is just designed in order to hide a deep feeling of boredom. That is the bottom of our existence. Heidegger's diagnosis is directly oriented to the environment of post-war Germany; but indirectly, it also concerns the totality of the modern way of life.

According to his diagnosis, the human beings of our time are basically bored. And to be bored means that if you look into yourself, what you find is the profound absence of a driving conviction. You find all kinds of interests, games, inclinations, but no convictions. So it's a ruthless, ongoing game of convictionless inclinations. One day you desire this, the other day you desire something else. The absence of convictions means that you have no real job. This deep joblessness is the very essence of the term *existence*. If you hear the word existence, without thinking immediately of joblessness, something is missing. That something, by the way, is what Jean Paul Sartre perfectly understood when he, in his famous saying, explained that for human beings, existence comes before essence. This is just another and more scholastic way of saying that human beings are basically jobless and, according to me, what modernity is all about is the discovery of joblessness, the re-discovery of joblessness, because joblessness will be re-discovered at the very moment when the modern conditions of life are able to reconnect with the original conditions in which homo-sapiens arose during this very long period that we today call the paleolithical stage of evolution. Between the primates or the big apes and homosapiens there is a long transition period in which, as it were, a jobless ape came down from the trees and started this amazing exodus, from the woods to the savannah.

I'm not quite sure if the term savannah is also used in English but I think it can be understood. In German it's *die Savanne*. Die Savanne is our home. Our ancestors are savannah-apes, who sometimes still dream to be tree-apes. Sometimes they dream even to be water-apes, waterside-apes to be more precise. And these savannah-apes are true ancestors because for them existence, in the literal meaning of the term, began by the simple fact that in the savannah you're living in an open space with a very faraway horizon, which gives you a very wide range of security, because all kinds of aggressors usually are visible very long in advance. Human intelligence is shaped in the savannah because usually nothing happens. That's why human intelligence has a profound inclination to fall back into the attitude of, what is this wonderful term we have been talking about? '*Doezelen*'.<sup>3</sup> This is one of the three Dutch words that I have learned recently when I prepared for this conference. *Doezelen* is the basic attitude of human intelligence in the savannah when the alarm-bell of the lion-alarm, the leopard-alarm, has not been given.

So our next relatives in the savannah are the lions, or the kind of animal that has virtually no natural enemies. And the life pattern of lions in the savannah is quite [similar] to those of original androids and homonide forms of life. They hang around for

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<sup>3</sup> Dozing or drowsing: LP.

22 hours a day, moving as little as possible, and are convinced that *doezelen* is just the right way to be in the world, except for the relatively rare moment when a sexual-alarm, a hunger-alarm, or a stranger-alarm is given. Something similar happens to the human beings in the savannah, who become the interpreters of their own basic boredom. This is the original situation of the human race and this is the original way to interpret the difference between stress and alarm. The stress pattern shapes the moments when human beings are totally awake and the let-go pattern lead us towards this situation of divine laziness, which can be so easily brought back again, which comes back on the surface also in modern humans. You just have to allow them to make an experiment about savannah-conditions, what we call 'holidays' usually. But in anthropological terms, 'holidays' is just another word for the generalisation of savannah experience with descendants of savannah-apes. You should not be surprised that all these patterns can easily be brought back.

I hope you feel we are approaching the problem, because before this background it becomes obvious that architecture is all about the interpretation of the forms of life of an animal, for which existence is profoundly defined by the boredom experience. But architecture is not just about interpreting boredom. It is a very well-defined task to create containers of boredom. It is contained boredom. It is not just vague, it is contained boredom. A good building is always a good boredom-container. That's one of the reasons why, if you don't tell people this in the very beginning, you have to say it in the first or second seminar at the latest, because otherwise the students will feel that you're hiding something. You avoid telling them the truth because architecture is about containing boredom and bored people. A bad building is just misplaced boredom. In order to understand what architects do, you have to go back into this original situation of the savannah and ask yourself: how did human beings manage their existence in times when architecture was not yet there?

There has to be a kind of proto-architecture out of which architecture can arise, because human beings are always condemned to shape their spaces. Space shaping is, as it were, co-existent or co-extensive with human existence, and to exist is the position of a human being that is standing out somewhere in the savannah, within an open, wide, very wide, horizon. So they're always in a huge circle. This huge circle is so wide that you lose yourself inside the circle if you cannot draw a narrower circle inside this wide circle. This small circle is what gives life to original invisible architecture. This is the fireplace of the primitive horde. You know that the history of the human race is accompanied from its very beginning by the fact that the art of making fire is already there. The oldest traces of human existence, again this strange term, are places or shelters that were found in the African prairies, that let us draw the conclusion that some pieces of stone were collected in order to support big leaves that were used as a kind of wind-shelter in order to protect the fireplace.

So the invention of the wall, the principle of the wall, has an intimate relationship to the phenomenon that the fireplace itself can be or should be protected. And with the discovery of the principle of the wall, you discover the possibility to change the side of the wall and through this discovery of changing sides, in front of the wall or behind the wall, the invention of the door is also close at hand. It will take hundreds of thousands of years before this concept is materialised into wooden walls or walls of stone. But the

principle of the wall is already there, and the principle of the door is conceived relatively early. As soon as the wall is there, the question of the other side can be asked. And when it can be asked it can be answered. The answer to the question of the other side is just this: walking through the door.

By the way, all of us still have this horizon habit in our brain. Our brain has an innate concept of a stable horizon. All of you have had this strange experience, this famous train station experiment that our life provides us with almost daily. You're sitting in your compartment in the train station and suddenly you have the feeling that your train is set in motion, you look outside the window and you're still on the right side, and suddenly you see that it is not you but the train on the other track that has departed. What happened? Your brain provides you automatically with the information that you move, because the horizon cannot move. As soon as you see that the other train is leaving your brain is obliged to convert this information into the opposite information: you move, and the horizon is still stable, because a moving horizon: this is a horror, this is the vertigo, and in order to stabilise you're being there, in a given world: a horizon is never allowed to move.

This is, by the way, all the romanticism of modernity to invite us into a world where the horizon itself is moving, which means you have to reprogram your mind, your brain, and reprogramming a brain for a world with moving horizons is an almost impossible task. Next time you're sitting in the train station and you start moving, think about what you heard today. You will discover, even if you know it, the information will be exactly the same, because it is an innate pattern. You cannot do anything about it, because it is a human right, the big ape right, human rights and big ape rights coincide at a certain point, to live in a world where horizons do not move. This has to be known if you want to trace back the history of architecture into the primordial conditions of existence of human beings in the savannah.

Then humans developed the upright position. A gesture we call standing was designed and our body was designed for this upright position. But something which is even more important, especially for architects: in this time, also, the art of sitting arrived. There is a certain anthropological idealism to put the stress only on the ability of human beings to adopt this upright position. But if you ever have been in contact with people still living in savannah-like landscapes, you will be surprised how elegantly and effortlessly they sit. If you're perverted by 20 years at least of sitting training, you have lost the natural grace of sitting on the floor and the position of sitting on the floor in an elegant, effortless way is one of the first abilities that the pre-humans have developed.

Sitting on a chair in real boredom, adopted boredom, this is a real plague that came up with the development of higher culture, especially with the development of education, because education is linked to the invention of chairs and bringing people into a position that is neither authentic sitting, nor convincing standing. It is something in the middle and it is still a certain lack of proof that the sitting position is really compatible with intelligent functions of the brain. Sitting is very relaxing, it releases lots of brain energy, and standing is a position where decision-making is indicated. So much for savannah-architecture.

You all know that approximately 7,000 or 8,000 years ago, maybe a little bit more here and there, the conditions of life of the human race changed dramatically with the rise of agriculture. Here, for the first time, architecture intervenes in positive forms, because here for the first time we have architectural forms beyond the caked [mud] huts. We have for the first time real houses. But what is a house? A house, according to our former definition, must be a place to contain boredom. But this time it is a totally different boredom. It is the boredom of the peasant. It is a boredom of those who cannot do anything but wait for the ripening of the plants outside the house. Original houses are waiting rooms, nothing else. They're just waiting rooms where people who have the agrarian capacity of supporting boredom lived all around in order to reproduce the sacrament of the peasant, peasantry life, which means the day when the crops are harvested. They wait one year in order to live and relive this moment. Being in the world as a peasant means to wait for this moment, for this harvesting. This is the centre of time, and the farmers' house is not only a waiting room, it is also a kind of clock that tells you once in a year when the crop is ready to be reaped.

At the same time, when the farmers' houses are built, a new type of house arrives that brings something into the world which still disturbs our existence. That is the house that is used for stocking goods. With the eruption of the stock, the whole drama of history is released, because the stock means that emancipation of our time-horizon becomes possible. For the first time there are things in the world that you have not to wait for. They're disposable, they're already there. Disposable, superfluous, usable, and this is a kind of race towards power. From the stock, there leads a way to the construction of temples, of cathedrals, castles, and fortresses, because a temple, a castle, a cathedral, a fortress needs a stock as alimentionation.

With this, a new type of boredom arises as well. Maybe you remember the famous descriptions delivered by Herodotus on the summer residence of the great king of Persia, Ekbatana. This seven-fold castle was the place where the monarch lived or was surrounded by seven walls, each of which was severely defended by military fortresses and frightening doors and kings who served as servants and guards at the entrances. Every ring had a different colour and in the middle, invisible, immobile, was sitting the king, deeply bored, receiving messages from all over his empire. Always immobile and for the first time giving birth to this gesture that leads to telecommunications, because his spoken word was written down on tablets that were carried by his soldiers all over the empire.

This is the model of all telecommunication systems up until our own day. The Persian king, immobile in the centre, sending out his soldiers that on the way back brought all the information on events in the empire. Again this is the castle as a boredom-container of a very special kind, because in order to become a king or a governor, you have to train your capacity for boredom in a very special way. High-cultural-boredom is nothing that you can compare with savannah-boredom. It has to be established and cultivated in a very special way and for this capacity to support boredom under high-cultural conditions, our ancestors have developed a very special concept. It is a concept that helped people in metaphysical times to develop the ability to suffer boredom with nothing else [but] wisdom. Wisdom is the virtue of the man and the woman who have been trained in this very special kind of suffering, living in boredom-containers,

farmhouses, or castles in which certain types of eventless life are contained. This is the reason why people in metaphysical epochs are trained to develop the ambition to imitate the organisms that are the best designed for suffering boredom: the plant.

The idea of existence, the existential of humankind in metaphysical times, is the *imitatio plantae*. As long as you take the plant as your model, you develop this cardinal virtue of the metaphysical existence, which is patience. Have you ever seen an impatient plant? Becoming plants is a great program of existence in metaphysical times. That's the reason why architects in these times always are, as it were, gardeners. They construct artificial gardens in which artificial plants, human beings, can be kept. That's the context in which the deepest word of modern poetry, as you find it in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, has to be understood: *ripeness is all*. But ripeness means that you develop not only all the virtues of a real plant. You are ready to await the moment when someone comes to harvest you. This is the way a plants reflects on mortality. That is the reason why, in European history, death has always been represented, or very often represented, as a harvester. This strange instrument that you don't see anymore today, the scythe. There is a voice that is always coming down from heaven to the earth, inaudible, but that can be deciphered nevertheless by every intelligent human being: plants of all countries unite! This is the big harvest of the end. God will organise sooner or later a general harvester where all these useless and lunatic plants, who take themselves for something other than plants, will be gathered and separated. Good plants, bad plants.

The last chapter of this evolution. Modern times. Of course, the conditions of possibility of constructions dramatically change at the moment when the technical age begins, when the urban age begins. When people unlearn the art of being well-disciplined plants, because the capitalist society no longer wants plants, it wants animals. In anthropological terms, capitalism is all about the program of the *bestialisation* of human beings. When metaphysics, the high-times of religious hermeneutics, was obliged to transform the human soul into a kind of high plant, capitalism and consumerism are condemned to turn human beings into animals, because the purpose of our existence is to become very performant metabolic machines. The deep vocation of human beings in modern times is to become a metabolism-maximizer. If you're looking for an alternative term for human being, try this one: a metabolism-maximiser. Here we have the full program of modern existentialism and here we come back to that deep and frightening diagnosis that Martin Heidegger has formulated in the early thirties of the twentieth century, because the modern man and modern woman are exactly those human beings who have entirely unlearned the art of boredom. This is the deep meaning of the loss of metaphysical orientation.

Also, Catholicism was nothing but a great school of divine boredom and cathedrals were the places where the highest motivation that human existence can provide is linked to the feeling of the sublime eventless-ness. You enter into this room and immediately feel something breathtaking, literally. Useless to breathe in such a place. When nothing happens, breath is just superfluous. Breath is no longer needed. But from the eighteenth century on, the rural forms of existence disappear. Today only two or three percent of the modern population still live within agriculture and bi-agriculture, everyone else has found one way or another towards urban forms of life. The art of building becomes

necessarily the art of building for people without convictions, people who now have an unlimited demand for entertainment.

That's what Heidegger's diagnosis on modern times was all about. He was not only speaking of boredom, his analyses of boredom carried out from October 29th until December 29th is a huge philosophical event: the deepest phenomenology of boredom that's ever been pronounced. He begins with the phenomenology of entertainment. We are all splendidly entertained. But returning from entertainment for him becomes the new form of fulfilling the Augustinian motto 'go back into thyself', it is in the inner man that truth lives. This was the great motto that Augustine had launched at the beginning of the Christian age, and Heidegger repeats this movement by proposing an analysis of entertainment, returning from entertainment into ourselves.

What do you find if you come back from entertainment? You find the total lack of convictions. You find that nothing in the world is strong enough to hold you, to orient you, to direct you, to exercise any kind of authority. You can chase one form of entertainment by another form of entertainment. That once was the case with a famous colleague of mine of the twentieth century – Max Scheler – who was also a very gifted person, a contemporary of Heidegger, who has learned a lot from him, but he was a living document, a living proof, to the fact, for the truth of Heidegger's interpretation. This is because he changed his religious belief just like other people change their wives or their clothes or something else. He became a Catholic, a Pantheist, a Buddhist. He became everything you can become, because in this big conviction-park, this big religious bazaar, which is the modern world, so-called ultimate orientations can be exchanged more or less easily. That's exactly what the biography of Max Scheler seemed to prove.

So Heidegger knew exactly what he was talking about. If you go back from entertainment into the inner-most core of your existence, you find that there is nothing that holds you. There is no ultimate conviction and that time gets long, that's what the German word '*Langweile*' means, the exact translation of '*Langeweile*'. Boredom now has to be replaced by the German word '*Langeweile*', because the word '*Langeweile*' is in itself a philosophical concept. It shows that if you have nothing to do, this situation of deep joblessness is given, then the time that is a kind of inner-pool in your existence gets loose, and this loosened tension of time makes you feel extremely bored. When the string of time is pulled, you feel engaged and you have the feeling that your life is meaningful, oriented to what Musil calls 'the utopia of motivated life', seems to be realised. But Heidegger made his experiment with the contrary, the string of time is loosened, nothing pulls. There is only one form of evidence that meaning is missing: all attractors are too weak to catch you, your life just becomes a meaningless drift.

And here you have what modern architecture is all about: producing containers for these kinds of people. And if I would ask you to name two or three outstanding features of modern architecture, I hope you would give me two answers. In my eyes the two major features of modern architecture, the real innovations are, *on the one hand*, the apartment as a container of the single individual living alone, the individual who is driven by the idea to manage his own completeness. The apartment-dweller is an individual who tries to marry himself or herself and to form the perfect couple with himself or herself. This

is apartment-existentialism. I think that among the achievements of modern architecture, architecture of the twentieth century, the apartment is certainly one of the most characteristic patterns. I call these kind of buildings: isolators, or even better, taking up a formula created by the Californian couple of architects Morphosis, 'connected isolations'. I do not know any better formulation for the existential situation of modern human beings, because in order to be human in a modern way, you have to be sufficiently isolated. In order to retain the important features of being human you have to be connected. Connected isolation is just what modern existence is all about. *On the other hand*, you find the collectors, architectural structures designed in order to collect massive numbers of human beings.

And here I would like to draw your attention to the fact that, among the forms of architecture of European antiquity, only one big form did not return until the twentieth century. In the fifteenth century, you see the return of the villa, the Greek temple, the small amphitheatres in universities. Virtually everything antiquity had built came back. One architectural structure is waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting, and it comes precisely at the beginning of the twentieth century. You know what I'm talking about: this is the stadium. One of the most perfect forms that the history of architecture ever has produced. It has definitive form, it cannot be improved. The only thing that modernity has added is the Romanization of the Greek form. That means the real stadium was a U-form, [it] had an open side for religious purposes that I cannot explain here. And the Romanization of the stadium means that the arena-principle copes with the stadium-principle. And in our days when we are talking about a stadium, we always mean the arena, because the arena is closed. The arena is the temple of fatalism.

This is the true religion of late-antiquity and it is also the true religion of modern times and postmodern times. Fatalism is a cult of success. The cult of success means you arrange games that allow the Gods to show who they prefer and you allow the Gods to make the only difference that makes a difference, between winners and losers. In order to make this visible, you need an arena called a stadium and you bring 10,000, 100,000, deeply bored people into the arena and transform them into observers of this difference, of this distinction-drama that shows the only difference that really makes sense for all those who are caught within this cult of fatalism, decisive fatality. Winners on the one side, losers on the other side.

Now you see what I mean when I'm saying that the deep purpose of modern culture is to transform human beings into consuming animals, animals that like to be entertained. Entertainment is the most successful form of containing boredom. The biggest boredom-container that we know so far is that huge construction that I had the pleasure to describe in my last book: *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals* [*The Interior World of the Capital*], where I deliver a re-description of modern Western society in terms of the metaphor of the Crystal Palace. I refer to this famous construction by the British garden architect John Paxton, who erected the Crystal Palace in 1851, on the occasion of the first World Exhibition in London. And what I'm saying is just that this Crystal Palace has been widened and generalised to such an extent that our lives in our days are all contained in this ultimate container of boredom.

The great performance of modern architecture and modern culture as a whole is that we have elaborated this perfect equation between boredom and entertainment, so that this art of containing jobless humans is really pushed to a very high peak. This means, by the way, that also politics long ago have already become a part of this arena-game. The Dutch people will have a very nice opportunity to play the game next. Within the big container the difference between yes and no is no longer so important, because it is not just yes and no, or not coextensive with inside and outside. This is a serious distinction. Yes and no is a play-distinction and for the sake of the play, the no is much more interesting. That is, by the way, exactly what Baudrillard recently explained, to an astonished French audience, and they followed the advice of the first complete game-philosopher who has abolished every serious meaning out of his discourse and gave very wise advice to his fellow country-men, just the advice that can be given to people without conviction, to vote no, just for the fun of it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A reference to the Dutch European Constitution referendum of 2005: LP.