

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

‘The Poetics of Space’

When I was a young carpenter, *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard helped fuel my inspiration for building houses. It offered an unusual perspective on space as a sort of elemental substance, like water or air, only not entirely rooted in a physical world. For Bachelard, space, and in particular the space inside a home, is a metaphysical substance, inhabiting both the outer natural world and our interior selves. This idea, which I will venture to explain here, still inspires me whenever I come into a space infused with light and a sense of atmosphere. Creating such intimate and uplifting spaces within a home is what inspired me most to pursue building, and Bachelard’s book helped me understand a little how to think about doing that.

To be clear, Bachelard’s book is more about poetry—an intensely philosophical exploration of poetry—than it is about the design or craft of building homes. And I think for Bachelard, it is not strictly about poetry but about imagination and memory—phenomenological elements that poetry reveals and we inhabit when we read or write poetry. For me, though, poetry and houses are alike. The word “stanza,” the building block of a poem, is derived from the Italian word meaning “room,” and it’s not a stretch to think of a well-built house as a series of stanzas that evoke different essences and, as a whole, have a sense of completeness, a poetic beauty. And the Greek “poiesis” means to make, which is exactly what we do when building. If we embrace Bachelard’s phenomenological approach when we build, we aren’t just standing up walls. There’s more than just physics, materials, and motion. Rather, by turning deliberately towards the poetic nature of our craft, we are leaning on inner experiences as well as physical skills to create the essence of home.

Phenomenology is the philosophical study of meaning and value that comes through the lived experience of human beings. Bachelard takes up this lens to examine the house, with the goal of finding the “intimate values of inside space.” His chief concern is “an intimate, concrete essence” found in houses, especially the houses we were born into and grew up in, places that foster images that we carry inside of us and call “home” or identify as “praiseworthy spaces.” To understand this essence, we have to dive into what we mean by phenomenological experience, which is not simply an experience of physical reality, but an experience in which our memories and imaginations are

always interrupting our point of view, always being infused with observations and actions in the physical world. It is in this actual, comingled experience that our inner world and outer reality coexist.

“The house is not experienced from day to day only,” Bachelard writes. “Through dreams, the various dwelling places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days ... We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection.” Memories of intimate spaces we have inhabited in the past, Bachelard argues, are infused with a sense of solace, for these are the places we have felt free to dream and imagine our highest hopes. This daydreaming of possibility becomes part of the world we long for and establishes a template for what we call home. “Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home,” he writes. “And by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.”

The Poetics of Space feels like a dream. Reading it, I am drawn deeper into a space of thought tinged with emotion from the many passages of poems he cites. And from those thoughts, my own dreams and memories emerge—images of light-filled patches of floor, patterns of light and shadow that reveal the shifting geometries of doorways and stairways and balconies, windows with views that hold me spellbound, an alcove near a wood stove, light reflecting

off walls at certain times of day, shadows of trees appearing on a floor, moving, and then slowly disappearing from the wall. These memories of place melt my anxiety and fill me with comfort.

Certainly, this feeling makes reading Bachelard’s *Poetics* enjoyable, but what I find most fascinating is the idea that space is not just an emptiness; it is a substance that gives meaning and value to architectural form. Architectural space, as poetic space, has both outer dimensions and inner ones, and the interplay between those dimensions is what allows us to “read” a space using a language of images and knowledge that transcends quantitative science. Bachelard gives me words to describe this transcendent reading, helping convince me that houses are reflections of what we call soul, or heart. It’s not an easy argument to make, but perhaps that is the point. Poetics provides what rationalism and physics cannot: an understanding of why we are driven to create.

