The Agency of a Half-Finished Building
An Active Ruin

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Abstract
When is a building finished? Is a building ever finished or is it just a product of constant transformation? Transformed by its users, by time, by society and nature? When is a building a building? The moment the foundation is created? The moment the first wall is created? When it is airtight? When the workers leave the construction site?

Currently I am constructing a building which functions as an artist studio, a greenhouse, an energy accumulator and an architectural test site. The building is part of my PhD in artistic research at Konstfack University in Stockholm. My PhD and the building’s current state is “half finished”. What does that mean? Is there something to be learned from Romanticism and its obsession with ruins? Is there such a thing as an “active ruin” – a planned ruin? A ruin exposed to the weathering agents of nature but also not forgotten and still in the control grip of its creator. Can a half-finished building feedback and inform theory, which feeds back and informs the rest of a building? Architectural production is different from working with clay on a sculpture.
Context
I explore what the concept of *memento mori* (remember you must die) can offer to an architectural understanding of the human condition in the age of the Anthropocene. The concept, with its morbid outward aesthetic, can be off-putting or rewarding – depending on one’s own understanding of the human position in the cosmos. Architecture’s overlap with the concept of memento mori can perhaps be found in the conceptualization of ruins and its related processes of decay (weathering). Its aesthetic can be seen as a form of destruction (removing value) or construction (adding value). The value which is added is related to a form of revelation: nature’s / the cosmos’ agency, the exposure of processes beyond human timeframes and human fallibility (the limited time frame of human technological endeavors: such as buildings). In a sense the form of memento mori, which can be expressed by buildings, might be related to the Japanese Buddhist concept of wabi-sabi and the contemporary concept of glitch art. Both concepts reveal the hidden (occult) agency of nonhumans – one on a material analogue basis and one on a digital basis (nonhuman-made and human-made nonhumans). Both concepts can be seen to be related to a form of posthumanism – while the former might relate better to concepts developed by critical feminist posthumanism or new materialism the later is closer to cybernetic posthumanism / transhumanism (revealing those system’s basis in human fallibility) (Gatz, 2023). From a more-than-human and from an occultural or Buddhist position there is no death, only continuous change. Is change where we find nonhuman agency? A nonhuman which is neither controlled through transhuman technology nor appropriated as an add-on for human (artistic) projects? One entity’s death is another entity’s energy for life. How can we think about those nonhuman agencies in the context of unfinished buildings?

Introduction
I am building a house (fig. 01) and I want to explain it. But not in the general way of explaining the visual and experienceable aspects but what lies behind the veil of matter. Namely, nonhuman entities, energies, and their overlap with spiritual aspects of theosophical flavor. Not in order to show what is “truly” behind all visible manifestation but to start thinking about architecture in post-anthropocentric terms. How many bodies make a building? What follows is a brief prelude concerning the notion of “body”, succeeded by an interview with myself. The ficto-critical interview touches on aspects of degrowth, posthumanism and occulture – themes which proofed to be fruitful for artistic / architectural research which questions the status quo of current reality-narratives (Gatz, 2022). The self-interview is experimental, open-ended and has no conclusion. It is as unfinished as the building, but it is intuited that this approach is a first step towards a de-centering of the human subject and a loosening of architecture’s notion of “finishedness”.

Body-Building: A More-Than-Human Explanation of Architecture
Architecture is mostly hidden, just the tip of the iceberg is in the visual realm. A building has many bodies, some of them visible, most of them not. A physical body is the body which makes it into the magazines and on the homepages, but the invisible bodies make it into our hearts and into our soul. One of those non-visible bodies for example is what we call home: more of a feeling than a physical place. Other non-visible bodies lay inside of the physical body: the forces which flow through its bones when snow adds weight on the roof and when the wind shakes the structure. Others can be described as atmospheric or energetic. We like how a space feels, we like its smell, its acoustic. We like the memories we found here and there and which we leave in return.
How many bodies make a building? Buildings are made by bodies, made for bodies and are bodies themselves. Body is an idea with many facets. Bodies are made of parts and those parts are made of other parts – all of them have some form of imaginary boundary which demarcates their space from the rest of the universe's. Bodies are in bodies are in bodies – within the final body which often is just called “that”, the indescribable, unthinkable body beyond human understanding (De Purucker, 1996). Some more recent understandings of the human body question its previous boundary-condition: the skin becomes a porous filter which negotiates between “inside” and “outside”. The body extends beyond the skin. The human body becomes a body made of and intermingling with nonhuman others: trans-corpo-reality (Alaimo, 2010). Bodies are never the same, they change from moment to moment and slowly they “die”, starting on the day they are “born”. This is true for all bodies. Even “that” awakes and goes to sleep within some non-Western or non-normative cosmologies (Blavatsky, 1888). The human and the architectural body die (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014). But what kind of body understanding do we have? The “traditional” dualistic Western human whole, made of body and mind, seems to be too limited to describe the contemporary world, a human being or a spatial experience. The new body understanding is cosmic, glitched and queered (Russel, 2020), it ends nowhere, and it blends with all other bodies. Bodies are intra-connected in INTRA SPACE (Jauernik & Tschapeller, 2021). Space itself becomes the body. Space, the highest deity (De Purucker, 1974).

Self-Interview

B: I am quite interested in the concept of the posthuman and the agency of the nonhuman in my work. I am interested in the technophile notion of cybernetic posthumanism, which borders on the transhuman, but also in the understanding of the posthuman from a feminist or critical theory perspective. The former is more in line with total human control, to a point where one is more-than-human, superhuman so to speak, while the latter is acknowledging human limitations of knowing and acting: what do we really know about the world? Should we be a bit humbler and (re)consider other nonhuman entities? This idea is also more-than-human, but in a different way.

S: But aren’t both terms quite contradictory? One wanting total control over the human-self while the other is promoting a kind of letting go.

B: Yes, exactly and I am specifically interested in this friction. Because as humans we do both. We control things all the time. When I walk over the grass, I decide that my freedom to walk that way is more important than the lifes which I might end by stepping on the ground. But it also makes a lot of sense to rethink the human position. We are aware as a species that the planet has material and spatial limits which we are approaching in big steps and that the way we live and structure our societies must change.

S: But you like both forms of posthumanism? Isn't the former quite human and egocentric and the latter maybe a little bit naive?

B: When you think about it, it becomes more of a question of spirituality. The more we go back or deeper or higher - or whatever spatial metaphor you want to use - you reach a point where you must question everything. Why am I here, is this all an illusion, what is the world,
what is the cosmos, who makes the rules, what is correct, what is wrong and so on. Is it wrong to kill nonhumans (animals, plants, bacteria, …)? If so, why was I made in a way that I have to kill? Is it good to kill nonhumans? If so, why do I feel bad killing a fish or cutting down a tree?

S: So, you think posthumanism is a question of spirituality and ethics?

B: Well, I think that there are similarities in the two branches of posthumanism, one being about control and the other being about acknowledging nonhuman agencies, and the idea of the left-hand and the right-hand path in spirituality.

S: Can you explain a bit better what you mean by left-hand and right-hand path?

B: Sure. In order to do that I have to introduce another idea first: the occult. Occultism is not satanism and not by definition evil. It is, in my opinion, a set of different belief systems which are contrary to the Western rational and mostly Christian hegemony. It is quite a messy field which includes alchemy, western esotericism, the kabbalah, magic, theosophy, anthroposophy, thelema, wicca, paganism and many more branches. What I think they all have in common is a refusal to see the world as a rational place where everything is understood and figured out. It is a way to see the world in a more symbolic and artistic way, a world behind the rational face value world. Magic and art, in that sense, are almost identical – at least historically.

S: But what does this have to do with the left-hand and the right-hand path, posthumanism and, let’s not forget, houses?

B: That is a very good point. The left-hand and the right-hand path is a way how you position yourself “on the path”, or your life, in relation to human and nonhuman others. Depending on your belief system(s) those nonhumans can be either gods, or demons, or fairies, astral-bodies or - and that is true also for some interpretations of the just named - mental concepts. In art and in the world of the occult it is not always clear if we talk about actual gods, which sit somewhere and look at us, or if we talk about the concept of a god which exists in our mind. The left-hand path, and others may disagree, is more self-centered while the right-hand path is about giving away control. For example, the letting go of desires and negative (and sometimes positive) thought patterns in some forms of Buddhism can be understood as a right-hand path practice. Things like love-spells, in some forms of contemporary magic, are more on the left-hand side of things (where one tries to get control over someone else). And now you can maybe see the parallels to cybernetic posthumanism and critical feminist posthumanism. It is an ethical question about human control over the other (or nature).

S: So, the one form of posthumanism is egocentric and the other is not?

B: That’s how I see it at least but I am not necessarily saying this is bad or good. I think that thinkers, who become practitioners, of posthumanism do not differ greatly from practitioners of different occult worldviews. The way you see the world is the way you live and act in it. And as an architect I propose houses or lifestyles in the way I see them fit into my / the world.
S: So, you think this is all necessary to think about in order to build a simple house?

B: Well, it is not necessary to think about this in order to build a simple house, but it is necessary if you want to rethink the human position / condition in relation to the rest of the world (and the cosmos). In fact, you should probably rethink everything and start at the root of it all when you are not happy with the status quo (Anthropocene). So, I think that if you are interested in a truly sustainable and different way of living you might have to go all the way back to the first principles. Why are we here, what are the rules, who makes the rules, should we break the rules if we find a way to do so and so on.

Conclusion
The overall structure and experimental nature of the text hopes to ask more questions than it answers. Can architectural production be a posthuman production, one open for nonhuman agencies, in order to decenter the human subject as demanded by voices of the Anthropocene? Is giving agency to the nonhuman and removing control from the human possible in the current human-centric Western worldview? Thinking about architecture as an active ruin – a building not yet finished, not yet ruined, positioned at multiple states in time simultaneously – might allow us, Western humans, to rethink architectural human-nonhuman control relationships.

Bibliography
The second volume of Urban Corporis, titled “To the Bones”, compiles reflections from architects, artists, and scholars who have extensively delved into the fundamental themes of contemporary architecture. By navigating a constant interplay between past and future, memory and innovation, and the realms of the natural, artificial, and virtual, these contributions put forth strategies for architectural, artistic, urban, and landscape projects that resonate with the fundamental principles shaping our built and perceived environment. They advocate for design approaches that synchronise with the foundational elements, referred to as “the bones”, that structure the landscape while promoting forward-thinking considerations.