

# Between thresholds - the invisible fences

Vlad Alexandru Gaivoronschi, arch.ph.d.

From a conceptual perspective the term threshold is clarified, analyzed and defined primarily by the anthropological and sociological studies on space. Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the Kabyle house, where the threshold-gate pair functions as a symbol., the association between the opening of the door and opportunity, the prosperity and generosity shown by the wishes of the Kabyles is eloquent<sup>1</sup>.

The studies of certain traditional societies, drafted by researchers such as A. Berque, G. Nietschke (the Nippon space), M. Granet (the Chinese space), M. Gaboriau (the Indian-Nepalese), Cl. L. Strauss (the South-American Space) etc. could not have missed having an influence on theoretical discourse and new concerns within the profession (Team X, Arata Isozaki, K. Kurokawa, Chr. Alexander, etc.). to these, we should also add the influences coming from the histories of religions or phenomenology.

From an anthropologist and sociologist, the term threshold has a lot to do with the function of selection, mediation, passage between different spatial universes within dualist relationships with a special focus placed on the function of the threshold to expressively generate space topology and label social hierarchies.

From the historian of religions, as well as for the theologian, what counts is the sacred and symbolical nature of the threshold, associated to the initiating role of passage, whereas the phenomenologist primarily considers the threshold in terms of the being / non-being dualities. Not accidentally, among the spatial-constructive "assemblages" illustrating a poetics, the bridge illustrated Heidegger's tetrad<sup>2</sup> and the last chapter in Bachelard's Poetics of Space<sup>3</sup> is dedicated, in addition to the phenomenology of the rotund, to the duality of the relationship between the specificity of the inside and the vastness of the outside.

As architects, we have a double role to be strategists / custodians and artists of thresholds.

First of all, the pragmatic and rational approach has a lot to do with strategies on limits and thresholds according to the communication, interdiction, safety, comfort needs, etc. We outline schemas, apply parameters, we rationally and objectively define separations and connections. Beyond the physical control of the built reality, the social environment may offer parameters adding to the basic previous ones; the ascribing, identification, possession, layering and generating hierarchy of places and spaces, thus generate different qualities and thresholds between them. The inclusions and exclusions we have to understand and interpret can provide us with fertile themes in the context of the projects.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, LE SENS PRATIQUE, 1980, The wish „may your gate be always open” has a connotation of opportunity; for the traditional man, the threshold is an element involved in the network of unseen forces placing us on a certain path of destiny.

<sup>2</sup> M. Heidegger, THE ORIGINS OF THE WORK OF ART, 1935

<sup>3</sup> G. Bachelard, LA POETIQUE DE L'ESPACE, 1957

The psychological intensity accompanying the passages, the moments of transition, on the ordinary scale of daily life as well as on the bigger scale represented by the major moments in a person's/community's life associates to the threshold-passage areas unusual powers. Opaque walls establish just as many limitations, the gates mark and celebrate in a symbolic way the passage. Instead, thresholds have a lot to do with the subtlety of the suggestion, of the trace, of the more discrete sign. The thresholds imply shades, subtle differences between similar, but different realities. Visible or invisible, the thresholds are the devices we animate inside our houses, ambiances and landscapes.. Thus we make possible a poetics of thresholds, we are dealing with a potential which recalls the quality of certain architectural structures of becoming thresholds between the real and the imaginary space.

The apparently inanimate things we generate – walls, gates, windows, portals, cut-outs, pleas, stripes, etc. may become just as many thresholds towards alterity, may vibrate for those who experience them. We are dealing here with an old theme regarding the role of architecture of transgressing the basic functions of shelter, utility and comfort and of becoming a threshold, a “gate”, according to Ch. Alexander<sup>4</sup> when he defines the concept of “quality without a name”, of having a spiritual role (see Le Corbusier<sup>5</sup>), of hosting emotion, of triggering the feeling.

We are thus artists of thresholds: we highlight, we operate with dialectics focused on thresholds, having the double role of closing and opening, of coming closer and going farther, of inside and outside. Thresholds cannot be fully understood in an abstract, diagrammatical-schematized way. The experienced, living space transcends the geometrical spaces in its very digital-virtual “splendor”. Just like geometrical schemes, digital intuitions are more often than not simplifying, as well.

The reversal, the inversion of outside and inside occasionally generates a powerful poetic imagery. To generate inversions with respect to dimensions, to rediscover vastness within the confines of the miniature, to turn an outside into an insider; these different entities are interconnected by threshold-like structures, intermediary space assemblages, etc.

The dialectics and potential surrounding thresholds, the assemblage of the successive thresholds to which we are used pertain to a certain kind of slow mobility, a slow crossing. The locomotive habits, the dynamics of perception when it comes to mobility and the spontaneous symbolism associated to it are decisive for the potential of the intermediary spaces, of ascending devices (the oblique space of staircases and topologies), of successive assemblages.

The excessive rush and speed dissolve and liquefy, trigger a metamorphosis of these devices which were once so enduring and crystal-clear in terms of physical, as well as symbolical existence. These are replaced by the flows, pleas, metamorphoses and sinuosities of the new morpho-genetical spatialities. Successive dialectics, the play of spatial limits in relation to the limits of the spaces become diaphanous.

However, there emerges an extremely interesting contradiction: the more this transparency, ethereality, liquefying of physical thresholds is desired, the more acute become the needs for security and surveillance: we are living in the era of surveillance

---

<sup>4</sup> Ch. Alexander, THE TIMELESS WAY OF BUILDING, 1979

<sup>5</sup> The messages in this respect are explicit in both *Vers une Architecture* and in *Modulor 1* and *2*, etc.

and monitoring, of automated check-in thresholds; we are dealing with dialectics of visible and invisible thresholds that we must know how to manage.

As far as I am concerned, I continue to believe in the importance of small things. Thresholds may be experienced directly, with the eye, the thought and the heart.

There aren't only visual thresholds; the vast field of the complex sensorial perception refers to us to "slower, but safer ontologies"<sup>6</sup> such as those of heat and cold, of noise and silence, of thresholds generated by fragrances, of tactile sensations. The poetry of the threshold is frequently expressed through qualities we are less familiar with. There are thresholds of silence, thresholds of light, thresholds of darkness-semi-obscurity. They can be neither drawn on paper, nor simulated. They may only be inferred and anticipated.

The poetry of thresholds is superbly illustrated by a villa I recently visited – the Müller villa in Prague (Adolf Loos). Despite being acquainted almost by heart with its spatial planes, its slopes and corners, the unmediated experience of its atmosphere in the course of one hour revealed an unsuspected potential; the most beloved house by Loos is a "Stradivarius cube" whose music is primarily generated by the play of thresholds and spatial relations, enhanced by the essential role of materials, from the exquisitely placed mirrors to the "temperature" of small objects. These are further enhanced by the effect of framing the Hrad on the passable terrace located on the uppermost floor, hosting the Japanese parlor, and once more by the role of the mirror in its relation with the landscape.

---

<sup>6</sup> G. Bachelard