

# The Designer's Philosopher

## Gaston Bachelard and *The Poetics of Space*

Contemporary designers and architects would do well to revisit Gaston Bachelard's work to imbue the spaces they create with meaning.

ABHISHEK KUMAR

A house is not just an economic dream, but also a space where we grow roots. It is the site where our lives unfold, as also the place where we construct ourselves. Through the door, we enter a world that is unique and complete in its affected reality. This sway that a relatively small space under the sun holds over the minds of its inhabitants is at once confounding and nurturing. While the science of creating a house may simply involve optimal use of space and creative application of technology, the art lies in promising an experience that resonates with the poetry of living. This idea has held sway for centuries, but there wasn't quite enough engagement with how science and art come together to form the essence of a house. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), in his magnum opus, *The Poetics of Space* (1957), responded to this challenge and studied the house as an intimate space and proposed that it was a site at which the edifice of human imagination is erected.

If the dualities of scientific spirit and vivid imagination came together in one personality at its vigorous best, it was in Bachelard. In his early life, he broke new grounds in mathematics, physics, and chemistry, and held a chair in the philosophy of science at the Sorbonne in Paris. His work titled *The Experience of Space in Contemporary Physics* (1937) was a philosophical critique of the methods by which scientific knowledge is acquired. He introduced the idea of science progressing through a series of epistemological discontinuities or breaks: as an older world view and an existing base of knowledge exhausts its fertility to nurture further theoretical development, it becomes a hurdle and prevents further progress; to move beyond the stalemate, a dramatic turn or kink is needed. Bachelard termed this as an “epistemological break.”

Bachelard's thoughts, however, took a most unexpected turn, almost like the rupture that he spoke of, when he engaged himself with the study of the aesthetics of spaces. He argued that the house is the first universe that a person inhabits, where they dream and live, and where they discover themselves, thus making it an intimate, felicitous, and loved space. It is also a protected space that defines the boundaries of exterior and interior, a space that must be grasped and defended. It builds the contours of their mind,

lends texture to their thoughts and feelings, and acts as a centre towards which their life gravitates. Bachelard uses C G Jung's analogy (*Mind and the Earth*, 1928) of the human mind and its architecture to introduce *The Poetics of Space*.

We have to describe and to explain a building the upper story of which was erected in the nineteenth century; the ground-floor dates from the sixteenth century, and a careful examination of the masonry discloses the fact that it was reconstructed from a dwelling-tower of the eleventh century. In the cellar we discover Roman foundation walls, and under the cellar a filled-in cave, in the floor of which stone-tools are found and remnants of glacial fauna in the layers below. That would be a sort of picture of our mental structure.

“Man is an imagining being,” is the cornerstone of Bachelard's philosophy. His premise establishes “imaginary” as the surplus of human existence that is constructed, brick by brick, by the house one inhabits. He, thus, posited “house” as one of the agencies for the integration of thoughts, memories, and dreams, and the housing of dreams and emotions became its unconscious function. As people spent time, developed and extinguished emotions, performed customary roles, acquired and lost relationships, they lent a poetic depth to their existence at the site of their home. Bachelard gave the term “topoanalysis” to the study of the spaces we love and sometimes hate. The roof and the cellar represent the vertical polarity of the house. While the slant of the roof is a rational way of handling the peculiarity of the

geography and hence the surest indication of the climate, it also represents clarity in our thoughts. The cellar or the garret represents the dark regions of the house and also our minds. The cellar is where the irrationalities dominate and the subterranean forces reign. Therefore, when someone hears a suspicious noise in the cellar, they rationalise it by calling it pure imagination or ascribe it to cats and rats, but in reality, they avoid venturing into the cellar. Bachelard so underlined the poetics of the dramatic tension between the aerial and the terrestrial within a house.

Bachelard referred to modern skyscrapers as horizontal houses that have no roots and are situated under the tent of a horizon-less sky. The superimposed boxes stretch unlimitedly towards the sky, with the elevators robbing us of the heroism of climbing stairs and consequently of the privilege of living

**As designers succeed, the temptation to follow and replicate tested methods grows stronger. The creative imagination, in its truest sense, also needs a break from the sterile templates of historical knowledge and stale world views**

near the sky. This idea—also called verticality—of living near the sky is possible even within the house with attics and cellars. Looking up subconsciously indicates admiration for the gods as they dwell in the skies, and looking down is supercilious behaviour towards “lower beings.” Both acts lead to the formation of a subject and an object, so necessary for intimacy to come into being.

Bachelard’s first point of relevance to designers begins at the origin of the creative process that yields forms and corresponding functions. The creative process begins when the poetic image is envisioned. He argued that the envisioned image may be understood with the help of a conceptual triad: of the moment of its creation, the personality of the designer, and the relationships with their parents that the designer’s unconscious perceives. The designer, therefore, animates their designs with meaning that carries within itself this conceptual triad.

Bachelard’s second point of relevance to designers is in the importance of taking an epistemological break, which, he argues, is necessary for their profession. As designers succeed, the temptation to follow and replicate tested methods grows stronger. The creative imagination, in its truest sense, also needs a break from the sterile templates of historical knowledge and stale world views. Unless this break in the creative process is sought or engineered, designers’ output would remain a mere variation of what they have produced earlier.

Bachelard’s third point of relevance springs from the importance he placed upon the house as both the source and the fashioning agent of the dreams of its inhabitants. The intimacy experienced in the house of one’s childhood finds echoes in one’s relationships throughout life. A designer, therefore, must pay attention to the house of their childhood, the corners of the houses they have enjoyed, the cellars that they have feared, the attics that they have looked up at, the chests they have dreaded opening, and the drawers they have eagerly rummaged through. Such explorations would furrow their creativity, making it more fertile.

Bachelard, thus, wrought new tools for designers that they could use for inspiration. His works brought the focus back on the capacity of spaces to create meaning for its user, which today is the primary task of a designer.

---

Abhishek Kumar (abhishek.kumar@anu.edu.in) teaches at Anant National University, Ahmedabad. His work lies primarily in the field of design philosophies, leadership and brand personality. He is currently writing a book titled “Design Dialectics.”

**Permission for Reproduction of  
Articles Published in EPW**

No article published in *EPW* or part thereof should be reproduced in any form without prior permission of the author(s).

A soft/hard copy of the author(s)'s approval should be sent to *EPW*.

In cases where the email address of the author has not been published along with the articles, *EPW* can be contacted for help.