

PROPORTIO

Harmonia Universalis: *Past, Present and Future*

RENÉ DE BARTIRAL, TATSURO MIKI & AXEL VERVOORDT



FIG. 1

WHAT IS PROPORTION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The exhibition Proportio examines the role that proportion plays in our lives and the complex universe in which we live. By examining wide-ranging and diverse representations found in art, nature, physics, economics, history, science, music, medicine, and many other subjects, the study of proportion uncovers the natural patterns that are used to create everything in the material world.

Proportion is not only a question of numbers. Nor is it a simple comparison of measurements and dimensions in relation to a whole. According to Plato, the definition of proportion is the transition from duality to unity. It's an investigation of how elements and patterns are connected and interconnected. It's an investigation of how we, as humans, perceive those patterns through our senses, as well as through our intuition. It's also

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an exploration of how universal proportions guide our understanding of creation and the dynamic dance between order and chaos.

Throughout the course of known human history, the knowledge of proportions and sacred geometry in particular, has been applied across many civilizations for thousands of years. The sophisticated knowledge of sacred geometry, especially the golden ratio, was considered highly advanced and closely related to secretive spiritual wisdom and religious traditions. As a result, its use was controlled, because it was thought that its misuse might have undesirable consequences. In the Western world, the knowledge of sacred geometry was so secret that it was intentionally guarded for hundreds of years and may have been purposefully forgotten or discarded.

What was known? How was this knowledge used in the past? How can it help us to understand the world around us today?

As an exhibition, the aim of Proportio is to re-start a contemporary dialogue surrounding the lost knowledge of proportions and sacred geometry. The work of artists, scientists, architects, philosophers and others provides a lens to help us see what proportion can teach us about the essential design of the present and how we can use this knowledge to create a blueprint for the future. This exhibition is an opportunity to explore universal proportions and an invitation to reflect upon the interconnectedness of our universe.

A CONVERSATION ON THE THEMES OF THE EXHIBITION

TATSURO MIKI (TM) Axel and René, why did you initially think about proportion and why were you interested in it?

AXEL VERVOORDT (AV) Throughout my life and career, I've been searching for ways to create harmony. For me, this search for harmony is a way to find balance between emptiness and fullness, between silence and sound, between East and West, and even between the past, present and future. It's a key to happiness. The concept of proportion is essential in this search for balance and harmony.

A friend of mine is a famous musician and he said to me recently, "I always define a great musician as someone who values silence as much as he values sound itself. The perfect music is only a frame for silence... The exquisite *objet d'art*, the use of color, form and texture all serve this architectural and

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spiritual goal, where humility and mastery are but two sides of the same currency." It's an essential way to think about the concept of proportion. You can approach the study of proportion through music, science, art, architecture, philosophy, design, medicine and nature. I became interested in proportion and wanted to learn more about this timeless wisdom associated with geometry. Architecturally, the use of proportion is a way to create silence and space, where the space itself is more important than the walls surrounding it. Together with you (the architect Tatsuro Miki), that's why we created the pavilions for Proportio with the most humble materials, in specific mathematical proportions to experience the energy of a space that lifts your spirit.

My personal study of proportion began in 1972, when my friend Jef Verheyen, the ZERO artist, gave me a book by Matila Ghyka, *Le Nombre D'Or*. Jef encouraged me to read and correspond with him about the evolution of this study. Then, in 1984, after my family moved to 's-Gravenwezel, one Sunday afternoon René de Bartiral came to visit us with mutual friends. We didn't know each other yet, but we quickly became friends. He immediately introduced me to the concepts of sacred proportions. We learned that some buildings in the castle were built with the golden ratio and others in the root of two. He showed me that all of these proportions were present in our home.

It helped us tremendously while doing the restoration to preserve these. The

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concepts of sacred proportions have become an important part of my life.

To prepare this exhibition, we organized think tank salons with my friends—architects and philosophers specializing in sacred architecture, scientists searching for the physical basis, musicians who find their inspiration in the past to create the future and those aiming for a universal religion with no dogma to create peace—as a way to continue to learn more and share this knowledge with others.

TM Indeed, we've already studied a great deal and tried to apply this ancient know-how of sacred geometry in real architectural projects. Listening to Axel's introduction, René seems to have already had certain knowledge about the art of proportion before you've met each other. So how about you René? How did your interest in proportion come about?

RENÉ DE BARTIRAL (RDB) The first reason for me was actually the recognition of an amazing pattern. It was something that I found that I couldn't explain rationally. And that was this: In civilizations throughout history that have never been in touch with one another, or at least not likely to have been in touch with one another, how come you find the same patterns? Why have the same proportions been used for the same purpose in different civilizations? There are common patterns to it, which is even more surprising than the practice of using it. I'm speaking about places like Egypt and China. Or the Mayas. There was no human communication that we know

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of between these civilizations, and certainly

not sophisticated levels of communication. So, how come you find the same patterns and proportions? Of course, we are talking about a family of proportions. We're not only talking about the golden proportion, though that is the most well known, and that's certainly the one that you find everywhere, too.

I found the same proportions in the oldest temples in the Andes, Kotosh and the first temple of Chavín de Huántar for instance, the latter being the oldest Andean-sized civilization, dating back to 1500 BC. At that time, their use of proportions already reached a very sophisticated level. These are not just simplistic patterns. So how is that possible? This was for me the first question.

TM When you talk about patterns, what are you referring to? Is it like wall engravings or something else?

RDB No, it's the use of specific proportions, for example, in the dimensions of the temple's ground plan. The ground floor of the Kotosh temple was traced on the golden proportion. It's not a random thing. How come? How is that possible? What was the link? I have three interpretations of the possibilities of how such precise knowledge could be found in such different civilizations and time periods.

The first, that this was the spreading of knowledge from the observation of nature. Things like a circle everyone can invent or re-invent at some point: there are plenty of examples in nature. You didn't need to be a genius

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to eventually discover a circle or square, but the golden proportion in sacred geometry is something else.

^{AV} It's the result of a deep study of nature and then arriving at an understanding of universal proportions.

^{RDB} Yes, but it would require a lot of sophistication. In this first hypothesis, people in different ancient civilizations could have been observing nature, which everyone has done, and could thereby have discovered some recurring specific proportions. There are things that are trivial that one can easily copy from nature. However, proportions like the golden proportion or phi-square are not so obvious to observe.

The second hypothesis is that there was once upon a time a primordial civilization that was at the origin of this knowledge.

Here, we could go back to Plato and Atlantis for instance. The idea is that there was in the distant past some important civilization that was very sophisticated. According to Plato, it would have been a maritime empire, with its center on an island supposedly somewhere in the Atlantic, and with commercial or cultural relay posts in several places all over the world. What Plato claims is that this civilization self-destructed some 9000 years before his own time.

There is recently discovered evidence, for example, that the sphinx in Egypt

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could be dated from that time. Indeed, geological evidence has been documented that the sphinx suffered from substantial rainwater erosion, not only from sand erosion. This rain erosion requires the sphinx to be much older than what is usually claimed, to the very wet period that happens to have prevailed in Egypt some 10 millennia BC. Furthermore, this same rainwater erosion was found not only on the sphinx itself, but also on a very old little temple

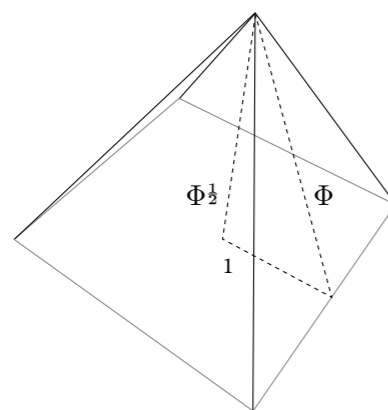


FIG. 2

in front of it. Under this interpretation, there could have been an advanced civilization capable of carving the sphinx back sometime in 10,000 BC. This is completely different.

It's a very different dating compared to conventional Egyptology, and therefore the question becomes: Who carved the sphinx out of the rock bed of the Giseh plateau, and who

built that little old temple in front of it, with its sacred proportions? Once again, where did the knowledge of proportions come from? Although the Egyptians systematically used sacred geometry throughout their history, its origins weren't coming from the Egyptians. Or at least it wasn't what we call the Egyptian Dynastic civilization whose origin dates only to 3200 BC.

Of course, there is the famous inscription on the stele—dating back to 1400 BC—that Thutmose IV placed between the paws

of the Great Sphinx in which he takes credit for

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digging the sphinx out of the sand, and restoring it from oblivion. In other words, nobody in Egypt remembered at that time whoever had built it in the first place. So, there must have been another earlier civilization... Imagine a maritime civilization, a little bit like, shall we say, the Portuguese empire during the Renaissance. The Portuguese built the same types of churches and houses in India, in China, in Africa and in Lisbon. Not because they were dominating the whole world, but because they were having trading posts and these trading posts were places where the knowledge of the Portuguese culture was well established. Even if Portugal had disappeared in the 18th century, the evidence of knowledge of the Portuguese culture could have continued in those old trading posts on different continents. Similarly, even if the island of Atlantis collapsed 10 or 11 millennia ago, the knowledge of its sacred architecture and proportions could have survived on different continents...

The 3rd and final hypothesis is that there are other ways of learning and knowing than talking to other people, such as the shamanic way. Shamanism is clearly the oldest religion that we have, the oldest way whereby people interpreted how the world in which we live is operating.

I'm personally convinced, for example, that the whole Taoist philosophy and its yin yang concept originated from pre-historic shamanism in Siberia. In other words,

Taoism is not dating from Lao Tzu, but it

was formally re-organized by Lao Tzu in the fifth century BC, just like Euclid re-organized geometry around the same time.

^{AV} Yes, it did exist before.

^{RDB} Not only did it exist before, it was a very sophisticated field of knowledge many centuries earlier. Lao Tzu just gave the definite form and organization of this field of knowledge.

So, these are 3 hypotheses for the origin of the sacred proportions, and I don't claim to know which one is true.

Now, the second thing that I would like to point out is, if one of these three hypotheses is true, it's also possible that the meaning of a given proportion could also be transmitted in that way. Particularly in the 2nd or the 3rd hypothesis. If you actually have access to a shamanic way of knowing, this could tap into what the Indian tradition calls the Akashic fields. There are physicists now who claim a reality to such fields in which everything is knowable. For example Ervin László, the founder of the Club of Budapest, has written a book on *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integrated Theory of Everything*. According to him, you could actually have transmission of knowledge between different civilizations without necessarily needing to have person-to-person contact. There is another field, which is more controversial still – let's put it in those terms: Specific forms can change the earth's energy.

^{AV} Interesting, can you explain this further?

^{RDB} The simplest example of a geometrical form, which affects energy flows, is the circle. If you draw a circle in any material, using stones, trees, or even on a simple piece of paper with a pen, the center of that circle concentrates the energy of the field within it. You actually affect a type of energy that most physicists today don't acknowledge. It's sometimes called cosmo-telluric energy because it is part of the exchanges of energy between planet earth and the cosmos. Planet earth is a living being, with a dynamic system of energy flows. It's the same type of energy flows that Chinese medicine calls "meridians" in our own bodies, and on which it works with acupuncture interventions. This isn't the same as electro-magnetic energies. It's another type of energy altogether. Planet earth has the same type of energy flows, and its own meridian system. One can often find these earth energy systems in sacred sites. In temples where there are or have been rituals—places where large numbers of people gather for certain rituals—this actually imprints the site with this type of energy. Sacred geometry affects those same energies. For instance, one finds sacred geometry extensively used in megalithic civilizations and at different megalithic sites, of which the most intact are often on islands. Some are still operational in Malta, Easter Island, Bali, Ireland, or Scotland, for instance. One can still detect those energy fields today. And on that front, an intriguing question is: Who are the people who build

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megalithic sites, and why did they do it? We know that slaves were not used to perform these massive works. What could people who were building megalithic monuments be told in order to get them to carry the stones and to build these sites? If you were saying to people today that for the rest of your life, you are going to carry stones from many kilometers away in order to build something as grandiose as a megalithic site, you would have to pay them rather well. What was their motivation? What was the mythology or story that they would need to be told in order to motivate people to perform such huge tasks, over such long time periods? Not just to build one site but many of them. If you go to Avebury in England, or Carnac in Brittany, imagine the extraordinary quantity of man-hours and efforts that would be required to create such extensive constructions. What could have motivated these people? Assume that I tell you that I'm going to provide you and your children with the means to eat for the rest of your life. In fact, there are claims that megalithic sites could have been used to manipulate cosmo-telluric energies as a way to improve the fertility of the soils of the area. So if you want to make your land fertile, or the area where you are going to be living more fertile, they believed that rituals performed on megalithic sites would be providing such results. The second motivation to build megalithic sites involving sacred geometry could be health. The one group in the Andes that

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is still completely faithful to its pre-Colombian traditions is the Kogi of the Sierra Nevada in Santa Marta in Colombia. Their *mamos*, i.e. the equivalent of their priests or shamans, undergo a very special training. That training starts when they are children, even before they walk. They are kept in the dark and can never see the sunlight for the first 14-15 years of life. The result is that their vision is really different from normal vision. They would walk around at night and see everything almost like cats. They can also see the energy fields and flows that we are talking about. They are seeing them as different colored light streams, and use different names to describe these flows. They described them as having personalities—let's call it spirit entities in our own language. They could see with their naked eyes the places where they could be exposed to these different types of energies. To become a *mamo*, they were trained to see these things. That training takes 14 years. ^{AV} Fourteen years without seeing daylight? ^{RDB} Yes, during the day they would live in a cave or in the hut without windows that belonged to their teacher, and they were allowed to go out only at night. They were not allowed to see a woman either during that time period. Only boys can become *mamos* and imagine, they couldn't even meet their mother during that time. It's a pretty extreme training. So, in other words, I can imagine that in another civilization with a similar type of training, people could certainly have

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become more aware and sensitive to the type of cosmo-telluric energies than we are today. What the Kogi still do now is use these cosmo-telluric energies for healing purposes. If they have someone who has some specific health problem, they would say, "Go and sit next to that tree there every day for one or two hours and make an "offrenda" (an offering ritual). And that person would do that for a week and he would come back healed. It turns out the cosmo-telluric frequencies of that specific place correspond to the meridian of Chinese medicine that was particularly weak for that person. The Chinese distinguish twelve different meridians in our bodies, each with its own frequency. Earth has the same frequencies and you can certainly have places in the world where this energy is concentrated. Therefore, spending some time in places where that particular frequency is particularly powerful could help in healing. So, motivation number one you have food; motivation number two you have health and motivation number three you have spirituality. Some sacred sites and their corresponding energy fields could have been used as a means to activate what the yoga tradition calls the rising of the kundalini, or what in the Western tradition is called the mystical experience, or the experience of non-duality. Well, wouldn't you agree that our present civilization is very poor in the means it uses to motivate people? In fact, most of the

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time we only take care of motivation number one. If you want to "make a living", you have to finish high school and then study another five or ten years to become an architect, a doctor or an engineer or whatever—so that you can provide for yourself and your family. Let's now go back to what we call "primitive" civilizations that managed to motivate significant numbers of their people to contribute to extraordinarily ambitious projects like the construction of megalithic sites, in which the knowledge of proportions was deeply embedded. To summarize: the hypothesis proposed here is that it would have required a strong set of motivations. And that the belief that these sites could provide three types of benefits: abundance in food, in health and in spiritual evolutionary progress could have been a strong enough set of motivations to deliver the remarkable efforts required.

^{AV} It's what the monasteries did. I think these systems existed in the past and we are losing that.

^{RDB} In Western Europe, sacred geometry was part of the esoteric traditions. Specifically the Benedictine, Augustinian and Cistercian monks, and the Templars, were the key transmitters of the esoteric traditions in Western Europe. We should add to those religious orders, the operative masons of which the compagnonage is the inheritor. They were using the same sacred geometry and energies we have been talking about in their buildings, and for their initiation rituals. Although

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most of that has been lost after the 17th century.

TM When discussing energy, in China for instance, the Feng Shui practice is coming back. They never distinguished the human body from the earth. It's one system. It's like acupuncture. To build a house or to place a capital or to place people in a certain location, for them it's a whole kind of technology and knowledge, like plumbing. The purpose is to return to a good energy circulation. There is something true which is not difficult to explain to them, we know that they had used it for a long time and it somehow worked.

^{RDB} People that were very pragmatic believed that it worked for a very long time.

TM For example, there was a summit of millennium cities in Kyoto and the participants were discussing the location of their capitals. We know now that the locations of many capital cities weren't the best or easiest locations to build a city in the world. Their decisions weren't based only on convenience. In the case of Kyoto, its creation is based on the Chinese model, and they even changed the flow of the river to make it better. It's based on the female model. It's related to the belief of fertility. Their purpose was to answer the question: How to stabilize fertility and prosperity forever? In that way, it's related to the purpose of acupuncture, of geography and planetary proportions and energy.

^{RDB} Proportion and sacred geometry affects the kind of frequencies that you are dealing with. In relation to China, the big

advantage we have is that Feng Shui is that this was official knowledge: it was taught in universities. We never had this form of public teaching in the West. It was considered esoteric knowledge, to be communicated only to initiates. In contrast, in China they were teaching Feng Shui in the same way that we study engineering, plumbing or architecture.

TM It's interesting to note that when they were building the HSBC Bank in Hong Kong, they called an expert on Feng Shui for advice and he said, "The ground floor should be a hole, or like a window to pass through." So, they made exactly that—an open public space. They relied on this old knowledge to make a very modern, high-tech building. For me, it's interesting in Asia—and still in Japan as well—just because we believe one system it's not enough of a reason to reject the other. We

have to try and find a way for both systems to live together. I think that's very important to remember in our research of proportions—not to give reason to one thing and thus reject another.

^{RDB} Exactly. But that has been the way that Modernism has worked. That's how it ties into what Axel was talking about in terms of making sense of the past, reconnecting and integrating it now, in order to make use of it again in the future. In contrast, what many Modernists have claimed is:

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"Here is progress. And everything that is not like us is primitive and therefore needs to be thrown away."

There was knowledge from the past, like in medicine or engineering, in which old beliefs needed to be abandoned because they didn't work. But too often Modernism threw everything away. Esoteric knowledge was rejected and thrown away. The church claimed

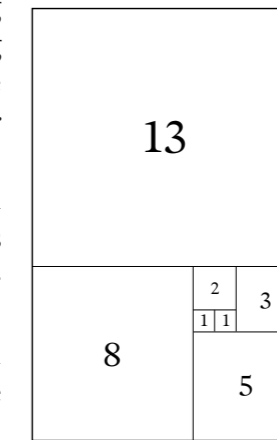


FIG. 3

that only devils knew about these earth's energies. I'm thinking of a picture in my mind that shows a priest unmasking a dowser and finding a devil.

There are clearly some obsolete ideas that need to be rejected, but importantly, there is also old knowledge to be recuperated.

TM Nowadays, and it's just a feeling that I have, people have a sense when looking at the 20th century that we know what's been done in

the past. We think we know the result of this. The new system is to reject the old ways, the totally old ideas. We have a lot of problems now, because one system is resolving one problem but not the others. I think people now try to combine both modern medicines, for instance, with a practice like yoga. When I'm really sick, I would go to the hospital and when I'm relatively sick, I will try to cure myself without drugs.

^{RDB} Western medicine is not preventive, while Chinese medicine is.

^{AV} In Chinese medicine, they see the whole thing, while in our countries you go and see a specialist for your toe or your head or your back and there's nobody who sees the entire picture.

^{RDB} By the way, there is an economic mechanism behind that.

^{AV} Yes, all of the medicine they have to sell.

^{RDB} In traditional Chinese medicine, you used to have a contract with your doctor so that while you were healthy, you paid your doctor. But if you got sick he paid you. That was an incredibly strong motivation for your doctor towards preventive medicine!

TM The economy has the purpose without the morality, so the practice will overdrive the system. In a way you could say that we are slaves of the system somehow. I think even the average person in the street is conscious of that as well. They know what this system can offer and what its limits are. Using an example of supermarkets, we know what's available and yet we also know that if we take the time to go to the countryside, we can buy fresh fruits and vegetables at half the price. We have a way to find balance and we have choice.

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^{RDB} Modernism affirmed itself by eliminating choice. Western medicine threw away everything that was not itself. One of the best examples that I discovered recently is the training of Cuban doctors. In Cuba, to become a doctor, you need to know Western medicine, acupuncture, and traditional Indian Ayurveda. It does provide a much more balanced approach to health!

TM If we get back directly to proportion, I like your word that's coming back several times. The proportion that you are talking about, the purpose of proportion is to return or restore the polarity to a unity.

^{AV} That's very important.

TM It reminds us that as human beings there are only several divisions, let's say, that we can perceive, recognize and understand by some proportions. So with a divided proportion, the aim and the orientation is bringing it back to a level we can understand.

^{RDB} That's what integration is all about. Integral. Integer. Back to the One.

TM It's not only unity. They still keep their divided portions.

II

WHY IS THE STUDY OF PROPORTION RELEVANT?

^{AV} I'm absolutely convinced, and I've experienced it myself, that our mental reactions are based on proportions. Proportions in which you can feel something is not

right can bring you down, while sacred proportions lift you up. They make you stand and walk upright and with pride. They are more connected. It has the power to change civilization. This is something that I find so sad, that most of the buildings being built today

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are being done because they are cheaper than the alternatives. Or the intention is to make them as big as possible for the only reason of being big. It has nothing to do with mathematics or proportion, but rather about egocentrism. It's all about materialism and selfish expression, which contains so much negative energy. It's a pity for civilization, especially for those who don't realize it.

^{RDB} Winston Churchill summarized it very well: "We spend a few hours of our lives designing the houses we live in, and they design us the rest of our lives."

^{AV} Yes, that's true. Nicely said.

^{RDB} To use an example from the Greek civilization, there was an obligation for the citizens of Athens to have annual visits of the Acropolis. The point was not to listen to a speech by someone, but to be exposed to beauty. They had the expression, *kalos kagathos*, which means *beautiful is good*. In other words, if you want to become *agathos*, "good", you need to be exposed to *kalos*, to beauty. That was their way of shaping good humans. The buildings were built in order to induce in people the feeling you are talking about. Through this internal harmony, you become a different person.

^{AV} For me, this is essential. This is the main reason one must have the courage to study sacred proportions as deeply as

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possible in order to share the experience with others. That's why we are producing such a big exhibition.

We've never prepared an exhibition as extensively as this one. We've held salons and think tanks with scientists, musicians and others, and yet, the closer we've come to the subject the more we realize the further we are away from truly understanding. It's such a vast, vast world and yet, I think we have to start. We have to continue. It's absolutely time that more and more people pay attention to proportions. Not proportions for practical reasons. But proportions for spiritual reasons in order to lift yourself. It doesn't belong to a certain religion or non-religion. It's pure; it's our basis. We're made like that.

^{RDB} Our modern cities are inducing chaos. They are building chaotic spaces and thereby inducing chaotic feelings. That's part of what the young people are rebelling against.

TM From a professional point of view, it's very difficult to design a house and determine the location. If I think, "I don't want to build it on this plot, but a little bit further," I realize that I can't because the system doesn't give us any alternative solutions. The system has even been organized before we were born. We can ask ourselves the questions: "Why

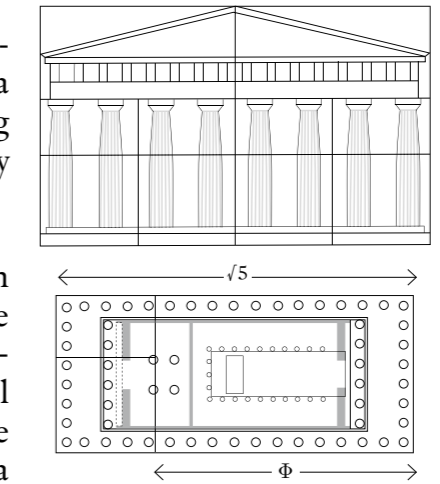


FIG. 4

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is that? In this limited space, how can we restart again? How can we think about bigger dimensions? Not just our limited lives but something bigger?”

^{AV} Not just our individuality and not just our egos. How can we think more globally? Thinking global and acting local helps us to return to the oneness feeling. Proportions are very important. All of the mathematic proportions can return to one. That’s why there is a relationship between the circle and one. They are part of an organic world that will always be productive.

TM There’s another lesson there. Once, when we built a project together in Belgium, the Japanese carpenter said to us, “When you build the house, you have to choose your tree.” To build a house you have to go to the forest. What’s missing in an efficient system nowadays is that you aren’t reminded how these things originate—objects, food, materials, buildings, people. We don’t know where materials come from and how it gets there. Everything is too far from its origin. You don’t see the cycle.

^{RDB} You don’t see any sign or cycle of life.

TM No. If you don’t see this dynamic cycle, then you cannot be connected somehow. When you see the forest and personally cut the tree, you feel guilty.

^{RDB} In previous civilizations, people would be reminded of meanings through rituals. If you needed a tree, you would get in touch with the tree and ask permission to cut

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it. The same thing you would do for an animal before a hunt. All of these things have been eliminated, automated and emptied of meaning.

TM We have the capability to buy everything without feeling guilty because of this missing link. The distance between the place of production and the place of consumption is very far. We aren’t that clever to see the link.

^{RDB} It’s been shown that some kids these days believe that vegetables are grown in a supermarket.

TM Proportion should make this link of divided unity between dynamic things and static things. When talking about proportion, I’m concerned by forms, but not exclusively. Proportion is a tool or an instrument that can be used to balance things. Even if these things are not equal. Even if they are totally different.

^{RDB} It’s all about balance!

TM One of the problems is that we are developing so far away from ourselves. We create systems to analyze our systems without thinking about what each number means. Food is how many million dollars, and health is how many million dollars, etc. They don’t think about the dynamic side of things. Everything is connected. We talk about balance sheets, but the content and meaning is not defined nor is it discussed.

^{RDB} We have lost important things by becoming modern. This is for me the summary about what we agree upon. The time has come to understand what it is that we have lost

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when we threw the baby out with the bathwater.

What’s the cost of neglect and ignorance? Our society is out of balance. Meaninglessness has become a societal disease and the youth is rightfully rejecting our civilization.

^{AV} I think we are definitely building a new civilization.

^{RDB} Yes, a new civilization based on integration of the different wisdoms of the past.

^{AV} The esoteric has the deeper meaning.

^{RDB} The deeper meaning was lost—with the consequences of the meaninglessness where we are now.

TM Do you think that during the Renaissance time that they recognized the problem and felt the loss as well?

^{RDB} All progress casts a shadow. When someone invented writing, we lost memory. When someone invented cars, we lost walking. Which is now a health problem. So, in other words, all change actually has a cost and it’s a cost that’s not necessarily borne by the same people than those that benefit from the change.

But we are all losing something. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t make progress. The wisdom of trying to keep the knowledge of the past—which you also find in the Chinese way of thinking—is essential.

^{AV} It’s like in Japan they have several different words for “the void”.

TM For my Japanese language, I think it’s not science oriented because when we talk about one thing, it’s more associative. It evokes other images, so your mind is not dis-

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turbed but fulfilled. We have a way of creating a

kind of thread so that when we talk about a certain subject and it reminds us of this, and this and this, and so on. It is more poetic and that’s one of the reasons why I think that this collaboration between different systems can happen without one rejecting the other. It’s possible in Chinese or even Japanese, because the language is more associative. If we can return to this kind of system, we are better off. It may be simultaneously weak and strong, but it has to be complementary. If it’s strong, it will stay strong. If it’s weak, it will stay weak, but don’t neglect the weak presence of something. Like when we were talking about the structure of something, even in architecture or economics, there is a modern engineer to eliminate the weak. When I build things, I give it to an engineer for example, and they eliminate all of the useless columns. One column is gone and the whole building collapses. But in the old system, it was hyper static, so you have more than what was perceived as necessary.

^{RDB} Yes, they had more than what was really needed, therefore it was safer.

TM Yes, the other weaker pillars support the structure. It’s not only metaphorical or metaphysical thinking, but it’s also physical in the sense that elements that are perceived as “weak” or “weaker” can also be interesting in terms of their value.

^{RDB} Instead of weaker, I would use the word redundant. It’s more accurate. It’s not weak, but it’s not indispensable. The col-

29

umn example is a good one. You can have extra columns just because they are pretty. So, it's an allowance of redundancy, which improves

RDB – TM – AV

resilience. It's the tolerance for redundancy. That's also something you find in the monetary domain.

III

HOW CAN WE INTEGRATE THE KNOWLEDGE OF PROPORTION IN TODAY'S GLOBAL SOCIETY?

^{AV} I think we have to get to a place eventually, where we have a practical way of bringing this tolerance back. The new civilization needs ways to apply the wisdom of the past.

^{RDB} So far it has failed. Post modernism—if I may use that expression—is not a description of what is, only what it isn't anymore. That is what I suspect is going to happen: a new civilization with planetary wisdom needs to integrate the wisdom of all other civilizations, of all previous civilizations. We need to acknowledge the role and usefulness of what we have dismissed as more "primitive", or other ways of thinking. There is a role for some older level of consciousness, and that's highly relevant for the future.

TM Definitely. I think it's because of this that things start to be organized differently. For example, if you buy electronics now, there is an obligation to indicate where it's made, with what type of material it's made and we even have to pay in advance to be able to throw it away once we are finished using it. The government thinks to impose more information than what you have in front of you.

It makes us conscious about the history of each object. As a result, me and of course my architectural clients, start to think about materials, which have been rejected. Form has been the focus and as a result the materiality has been forgotten. Material without form doesn't exist. The people who think about materials now are often thinking, "Is this good for health or is this bad for health?"

^{RDB} It's an integrated way of looking at the overall cost, which is precisely what we don't do often enough.

TM Yes, that's one of the reasons why a modern economy is not that bad after all, because the system imposes us to get back to our roots. A narrowly focused system doesn't work. These days, people are more and more conscious about what's behind the products they use and the products they buy and what's behind the system in general. One negative point is that as a result, we are flooded with information. It's too much information. We have to find another way.

^{AV} Too much information is not good for intuition. In the new civilization that evolves from the current one, we need to emphasize that there should be more attention to intuition. There is this knowledge that we have that we don't even know where it

comes from. I think we have to make room for that and explore that. It needs more openness. We also need more knowledge about the old knowledge, like proportions. We have to make this intuition more open, but it doesn't come easily. You have to be trained, like every good musician. In the same ways that he or she has to train for hours and years before they have the knowledge and skills to be truly free, you need training and knowledge to build your intuition.

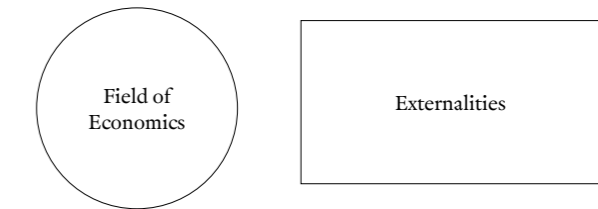
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TM In that way, it's not knowledge in a strict sense. It's your body—your being—that knows about it.

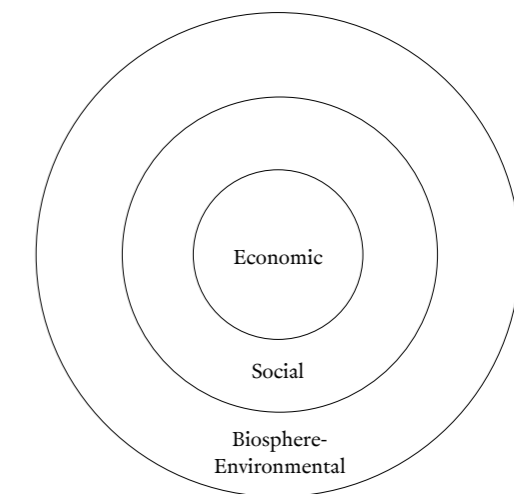
^{AV} It's a feeling of oneness. It's a universal beginning, which is all the same. What's so exciting about studying proportions is that the knowledge is even older than we think. It's older than the Egyptians; it's even before. When they say civilizations are growing and we have more and more knowledge, what I want to emphasize is that along the way, we've lost a lot of knowledge from the past. The computer is replacing this global knowledge I suppose. But, of course, what the computers of the world know is amazing.

^{RDB} There's an image that this part of the conversation makes me think of. First of all, modern times have also been the times when economics has become the decision-making tool that's applied to all other domains. We use economics to decide on practically everything, such as health, education, or on culture. The common decision-making driver is

money. The problem is that conventional economics has a very distorted vision of our world (draws a diagram). Economics is considering only its own internal logic... You have the economy here and then you have the rest of the dimensions outside, called "externalities."



That's how economics actually looks at everything; an autistic view. In fact what I think what we should be doing is...(draws another diagram).



The economy should be treated as only a subset, not separated from, the whole system. It's a concentric circle model as

opposed to a separate circle. In Western medicine, we have a medical model that's similarly closed on its own worldview. Separated from all kinds of other things, even highly relevant things such as food. Many doctors don't know much about food. Which is quite extraordinary.

TM But the integration is coming.
^{AV} There is a consciousness that we have to change. And it's coming... a return to nature and natural things. You feel it. When there is something that's growing very decadent, there are other things growing to provide balance. We are in the middle of this change I think.

TM The most important question in relation to this discussion is that in this movement to get back to bigger things, such as integration of nature or environment, it shouldn't start just in order to control it better. It's a narrow-minded and shortsighted approach if we want to control it better. It will be about efficiency and power. The power is dangerous when it's only about control. The nature is there. We are part of nature, our bodies as well. It should work all together. I think you were saying that some shift is happening, in communications such as the Internet for instance. Nowadays, everyone has access to the center, which is interconnected. Even for energy systems, such as the nuclear plants, we are trying to shift to make smaller plants.

RDB – TM – AV

Maybe we are even creating ones that are weaker, but more plants with an interconnected system. When one plant needs more energy, then we can borrow from another one. It's more natural and a model type of distribution.

^{RDB} This change you are referring reminds me of an image from the movie by Stanley Kubrick, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which came out in 1968. The future was seen as driven by a giant computer called Hal that knows everything and that controls everything. In fact, that's not what has happened. We haven't gone further in that direction since 1970. What has developed instead is the Internet, which is exactly what you are talking about. It's a highly distributed, uncontrollable, chaotic thing, in which everyone and everything is a center.

TM That technological development is highly significant and very important. That's where this civilization is going. It points to the same point.
^{AV} It's more about global knowledge, but in a distributive way. It's more accessible.
^{RDB} Yes, in a distributive way, because it's not Hal who controls us. You have a network of millions of computers talking to each other as the future, and I think this will apply in a lot of domains.

^{AV} This was my point and one of my questions. As we are now living in this global civilization in which knowledge is more ac-

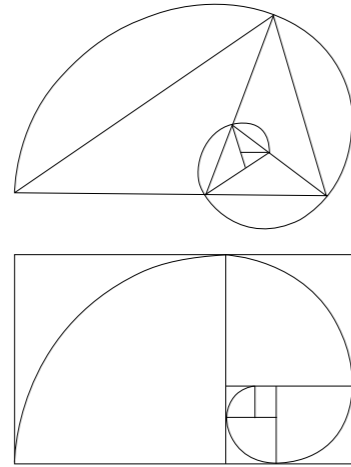


FIG. 5

cessible and more open, how does proportion fit in? Why has the knowledge of proportion been such a secret knowledge for thousands of years?

^{RDB} It's been a secret only in Western civilization. As we are rebalancing now with Asia, in Asia that knowledge was not secret. You actually had two universities teaching Feng Shui in China—the University of the North and the University of the South. The University of the North was the one concerned with forms, and the University of the South was focusing on directions, and is the one that invented the compass. The compass was invented not to find the north or for navigation as we have been taught; the Chinese invented the compass in order to do Feng Shui.

The emperor was the honorific leader of both universities. It was a very important field. That's what we said earlier in the beginning of our conversation, that the big difference between the West and the East was that in the East it was public knowledge and in the West it was secret knowledge.

TM If we get back to the ideas explored in the exhibition, we will have a lot of art that explores the dynamics of proportion. I think this was balanced as well. What do you think about this connection between knowledge and art? In China, this was in balance as well. Science and art were complementary. What we see in Durer's studies, it's both. What do you think about this balance between knowledge and art?

^{RDB} In Asia, in China particularly, art was a way of expressing philosophy. There-

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fore, the void was as important as the drawing.

In the West, we focused mainly on the drawing, or even only on the drawing. The difference between a Chinese painting and a Western painting is exactly that. We emphasize what's there and they emphasize the balance between what's there and what's not there. Again, it's the yin yang philosophy.

^{AV} It's this Oriental connection that's been very important to me. It's a connection that was explored when creating the *Wabi Inspirations* book through Japanese philosophy and the imprint that time makes on the objects we live with. We're also including work by Korean artists in Proportio. The Korean philosophy of Sunbi in particular was a great inspiration for the *Wabi* book as it is the expression of humble silence in a very noble way. I think this is why these Korean works are very important for Proportio.

Sunbi is a Korean philosophy of people who are extremely knowledgeable in the arts, including everything from history and literature, to language and science, at a very academic level. But it wasn't to achieve certain skills nor to be successful in certain aspects in society, but to understand the world and to understand nature—which was often connected to the universe as a whole. This spirited way of looking at the world through a trained eye is important. They find beauty in bare simplicity. They don't harm or change the forms of nature or the law of nature in general. Therefore, for them it's a virtue to be harmonious and to

live a righteous life, free from a sense of materiality or artificiality. Although they belong to an inherited noble class, they are men of humility and integrity. Sunbi is about spirit and state of mind. They read and study to achieve enlightenment and contribute to the community in a very profound way.

^{RDB} The basis for the 21st century will be much more influenced by Asia and that's no surprise. The new global civilization will treat non-Western thinking at least as an equivalent way of thinking, if not a new dominant one.

^{AV} For me, as a Western person, I'm very influenced by the Asian way of thinking. It helps me a lot to understand myself. It's a way of being.

^{RDB} It's a way of being, not just a way of knowing.

^{AV} I think in our Western thinking, we were always so scared of the void. In the Eastern way of thought, the void is the sublime, the essence of everything.

^{RDB} The void is that from which everything emerges.

^{AV} So I think that's something we have to change. For me, this concept has been very important. Giving body to the void and feeling a difference in the quality of the void – that is for me all about proportion. Every proportion creates a void that has its own character and expression and influence. Living with objects and other things in your home is like looking into a mirror. It's like having a friend in your home. You start resembling to it.

RDB – TM – AV

I hear you say that and it's a very interesting thought. I'm trying to grasp what you are saying. Take two different proportions for example, the golden proportion versus the square root of three. How do you see the difference in the role of void in these two examples? Can you elaborate because that's something new for me?

^{AV} Yes, I feel that there is a difference. You taught me to understand it better. For example, a passage that leads from one to another level. Everything is related to two. The double

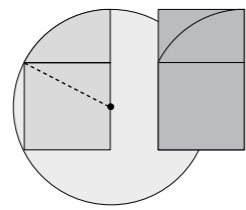


FIG. 6

cube or the root of five is very interesting for passages, or for rooms after passages. The golden section is very noble.

^{RDB} It's perfection.

^{AV} It's perfection and harmony. You have to be careful when using it for things that are not worth it.

^{RDB} For a bathroom for instance, to use the golden section may not be an appropriate use.

^{AV} Yes, absolutely. Sometimes, when I'm working on a project and the architectural assistants are drawing something, they are so focused on one thing and getting the proportions right that in the main room, they totally forgot about it. With proportions, sometimes they say it is secret knowledge because you may not use it in the wrong way. Proportion is something sacred and you have to pay respect and use it for the right thing. Once you draw it a lot, you get used to the feeling. I draw the proportion and then I calculate afterwards.

^{RDB} That's because you are primarily an artist. Not a scientist.

^{AV} Yes, that's my way. It's like going through science, but I have to make it open and trust my intuition. Science helps confirm my intuition and to give body to what I want to express. It helps me to be able to explain it to others to realize it. It makes things possible to realize and to pay a lot of respect for that power of proportion. You may call it sacred power and some people are unsure when they hear the word sacred because they think it belongs to one religion. I think it belongs, in a way, to all religions.

TM Someone like Le Corbusier, he used a lot of sacred proportions in his work.

^{RDB} He tried. Yes, he tried in modern civilization to recover that knowledge and put it in a wrapping that would be acceptable in the West. He failed. He didn't fail on a personal level, but he failed in terms of building a school. It was too early.

TM That for me is very, very important. His purpose was great. He was struggling with America's system and the European system. As an architect, he was confronted by centimeters and feet and he wanted to unify things. His main concern was correct I think.

^{AV} He also wanted it to be more social.

TM He wanted it to be more popular and more affordable as well. In terms of materiality and size, I think it could have been much better, because he made a lot of beautiful things but things that couldn't last. It wasn't a

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part of the life cycle. All of the material was forced

to resemble something else and to be adapted as a commandment of form. There was no dialogue between material and how this material ages—where it comes from and where it goes back to nature. In terms of proportion, form is an aspect but this whole idea of life cycle is also very important. We have to keep several aspects in mind all of the time, otherwise it fails. It can be great, but it's going to be just fashion.

^{AV} It's an aspect of appearance that one makes and then destroys and makes again and then destroys. In our world now, there is no room to throw it all away. We have to start again. We have to think what can we do with something we are going to throw away. Can we make something with it? Or we have to think that we must make things that will last much longer. In this case, the material itself will have to adapt and become much better over time. The mentality in the 20th century was too often at a conflict or in disproportion with nature.

^{RDB} It's a lack of respect.

^{AV} Yes, that's it. It's been a lack of respect, because we thought we knew better than nature. Our industries thought that we wanted synthetic paints or plastics that don't change. Because we hate when nature changes things.

We must change that mentality. It creates a total disconnection. Everything is plastic and synthetic and not natural, and then you have to throw it away and what was cheap becomes very expensive. It becomes very costly because it never disappears. We bury it,

but it never disappears. Beautiful countries have been ruined because of what they waste.

TM Fish are dying because of the fine particles of plastic in the ocean that are killing them. After 20 years, we now recognize the problem.

^{RDB} We are now aware of the limitations of modernism. The shadow aspect cannot be ignored anymore. We have to go deeper.

^{AV} When we analyze something it gives us a way to try and understand it better. To study proportion is to think about the origin of our origin. Being from Antwerp, I'm interested and influenced by medieval proportions, particularly the proportions of the European cathedrals and all of that knowledge they used. Which is very different than the Oriental way or Eastern approach, but I think if you can combine both it's much more in balance. There's always this yin yang. I think in Western civilization throughout our time, we were splitting things too often. In a way, we were saying, "It's this or it's that. Not both." And in the Eastern way, it can be, "It's that and it's that as well." Never or.

^{RDB} The theme of integration is so important.

^{AV} It's been a very important process for me to learn this throughout my work as well as the preparation for this exhibition. Particularly, the proportion between silence and sound, between emptiness and fullness; the dialogue between these concepts is so important.

RDB – TM – AV

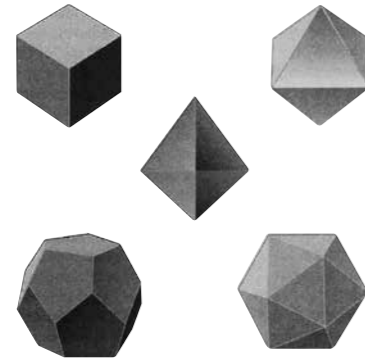


FIG. 7

Even in my own work, I am searching for the harmony between silence and fullness. It's one reason why I think art is so important to our lives, because artists are very free. Artistic work comes from intuition. Artists express things and sometimes they don't even have an explanation for it. When acting on their intuition in a spontaneous way, they make a connection to the future.

^{RDB} Yes, artists are the antennae of society. They are the ones who connect us with what is coming. They help us make connections ourselves.

^{AV} Yes, that's why time is so important. Sometimes those connections happened fifty years ago and when looking at it now, we see the result of that intuition.

TM In this way, they are a little bit like shamans.

^{RDB} Absolutely, genuine artists have a shamanic side; they are not rational types.

TM True, they exist a little bit outside of civilization.

^{AV} They are so influential and this is one of the reasons why I think an art exhibition is so important. Through art, we learn to feel what's coming.

^{RDB} That's the connection to the future actually.

^{AV} This exhibition is a connection with the future. With the artists, we are working with those people who are constructing

the future and building on the past to create the future. I think artists teach us how to look. For example, I always think of Magritte when you see a moon through a tree, or when you see a blue sky at night. It's because of an artist like him that we understood this idea, which was a new way of looking and seeing. Through Magritte we saw that there can be darkness and a blue sky.

TM It's very realistic.

^{AV} Yes, and I cannot understand that before this artist, nobody had ever painted this before. After sunset, there is this blue moment just before the darkness when everything is bright

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blue. This had never been painted before.

Artists teach us how to discover and rediscover new dimensions. They force us to pay attention to something you didn't even look at and to things that we haven't seen before. Proportio is studying the past, but the knowledge is timeless because the future is already present in it.

TM The exhibition can be a place where we learn from various kinds of prophets to understand several possible outcomes. Together, the work presents an inspired vision of what we don't know yet, but what we are seeking to learn and discover.