Explorations on "*Chora*"

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Abstract: The Ancient Attic Greek word Chora, which is translated as space or place, has been one of the tropes used by philosophers and architects alike during the end of the twentieth century. Chora, for example, has been one of the privileged deconstructivist terms used by Jacques Derrida as well as Elisabeth Grozs. It has also been one of the key terms used by architectural historian Alberto Perez-Gomez who is well known as an architectural theorist and a promoter of a phenomenological approach to architecture. It is rather intriguing that these different approaches to architecture and architectural meaning both use the notion of Chora which relates to the critical issue of space versus place. Although the notions of space and place have been explored extensively within architectural discourse as one of the keys to architectural meaning, they are not the focus of this research. This study rather is an exploration of the notion of Chora through examining its interpratations by different characters. The aim is to explore possible paths that could open themselves for us to understand architecture and architectural meaning.

Keywords: Chora, space/place, Derrida, Grosz, Perez-Gomez

"*Chora*" Üzerine Keşifler

Özet: Antik Dönem Atik Yunanca diline ait, uzay, mekan, bölge veya mesken anlamalarında kullanılan *Chora* kelimesi yirminci yüzyılın sonlarına doğru felsefecilerin ve mimarlık teorisyenlerinin çok kullandığı bir terim olmuştur. Örneğin, Jacques Derrida ve Elisabeth Grozs gibi dekonstruktivist teorisyenlerin kullandığı ayrıcalıklı termlerden biridir *Chora*. Mimarlık disiplinine fenemenolojik yaklaşımı savunan öncü mimarlık tarihçisi ve teorisyeni Alberto Perez-Gomez'de *Chora* terimini pek çok çalışmasına konu edinmiştir. Uzay ve mekan konseptlerine dair açıklama getiren *Chora* teriminin birbirinden farklı bu yaklaşımlar tarafından kullanılıyor olması ilgi çekicidir. Mimaride anlam konusunun temel bileşenlerinden uzay ve mekan kavramları mimarlık disiplininde yirminci yüzyılın belki de en çok çalışılan alanlarından biridir. Ancak bu çalışmanın odak noktasını *Chora* terimi oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmanın amacı *Chora* teriminin farklı karakterler tarafından yapılan yorumlarını inceleyerek, bu terimin mimarlık ve mimaride anlam konusunu aydınlatmada bize hangi yolları açabileceğine dair bir keşif yapmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Chora,* uzay/mekan, Derrida, Grosz, Perez-Gomez

1. INTRODUCTION

Chora, a word in Ancient Attic Greek written in the form of *Χωρα, means "place"* in different senses. The Greek-English Lexicon provides six different meanings of the word *Chora*: place or space in general in which a thing is defined, as partly occupied space, the residence, the habitation, the place where we live, land, country, town, territory; the position, proper place of a person or a thing, filling a person's place, taking a position, to be in his position [1].

Chora has been one of the tropes used by philosophers and architects alike during the end of the twentieth century. It has been, for example, one of the privileged terms in French philosopher Jacques Derrida's deconstructivist discourse as well as the theme of the architectural work produced by Peter Eisenman in collaboration with Derrida for one of the pavilions at the Parc La Viletter in Paris, which is well documented in the *Chora L Works* [2]. The notion of *Chora* has also been used as a trope in philosopher Elisabeth Grosz's feminist [3], and architectural theorist Alberto Perez-Gomez's poetic [4] discourses. It has also been used as the title of the three volumes collection Chora edited by Peraz-Gomez and Stephen Parcell [5]. The last work that will be referred in this study is the book by Indra Kagis McEven, one of Perez-Gomez's students: *Socrates' Ancestor: An Essay on Architectural Beginnings* [6].

The study attends to the task of unravelling rather an obscure notion of *Chora* by examining interpretations of it by different characters as it relates to architecture and specifically to the notions of space and place. The aim is to explore possible paths that could open themselves for us to understand architecture and architectural meaning.

2. CONTEXTUALIZING *CHORA*

The concept, *Chora,* is introduced to discourse in Plato's Timaeus. In this text Plato deals with the physical theory and specifically, on how the universe has come to existence. The argument of Timaeus is based on the premise that the universe is not eternal but has been divinely created. Looking at the order and beauty of the universe, Plato infers a good creator/craftsman, which he calls *demiourgos*, working with an eternal blueprint, a paradigm. This blueprint is an excellent model as its source is divine. While looking at these pre-existing forms, the *demiourgos* gives these forms a sensible inscription, and thus they become perceivable, i.e. as the things we can see and touch. This is how our sensible world came into existence; it's a copy, a representation of these eternal beings.

Thus, Plato argues, there are two kinds of being; *eidos*, the eternal unchanging being, "that what is always is and does not have becoming", the divine; and the sensible world, becoming, "that what is always coming to be and perishing and never is", the mundane [7]. The former, being, posited as a paradigm, can be grasped by thought and reason and is referred as "Idea" or "form." The latter, becoming, a copy of a paradigm, can only be grasped by opinion with non-rational sensation, and is referred as perceivables, or sensibles.

In Timaeus, Plato feels the need to introduce another kind of being, the third kind, *triton genos*. This third kind is neither the eternal *eidos*, nor its sensible copy, but the place in which all these types are inscribed, *Chora*. In order to understand the nature of this third kind, Plato gives the example of constantly producing different shapes out of the same physical material, gold. At any given moment, if one tries to define what this is, one cannot simply say triangle, or circle since it will be misleading. The shapes are

mere different appearances of the same material. Rather, one needs to take into account the underlying unchanging quality of the material, gold, out of which these differing shapes are produced. He posits that:

> The same account also [holds] for the nature that receives all bodies. [We] must always apply the same to it, for it doesn't at all lose its own power. For it always receives everything, and it never in any way takes on any shape similar to any of the [things] that enter [it]. For it is established in [its] nature as a recipient of everything, and is moved and shaped by what enters, and appears different at different times because of them. The [things] that enter and depart are copies of what always is, impressed by them in a way that is marvelous and hard to explain [7; p.61].

Chora has the same nature as gold, which doesn't have a shape of itself but rather acting as a means for the shapes to come into being. It is an invisible and shapeless form; it is the in-between from the Ideas, i.e. the eternal forms, the paradigm, to the perceivables, the things that we can see and touch, the copies of the paradigm. In Plato's words, *Chora* is; "the space… always not accepting destruction, but providing a base for everything that has coming to be, itself grasped by a spurious reason, without sensation, scarcely trustworthy" [7]. Its nature is to hold, nurture, and bring into the world.

3. THINKING OF *CHORA* AS MOTHER

You can compare, Plato says, the divine paradigm with the father, the sensible world with the child or the infant, and this place of inscription with the mother or nurse. It is the substance in-between Ideas and perceivables, such as mother in-between father and child. In Elizabeth Grosz's words, the role of this substance is

> to nurse, to support, surround, protect, incubate, to sort, or endenger – the worldly offspring of the Forms. Its function is a neutral, traceless production, a production that leaves no trace of its contributions and thus allowing the product to speak indirectly of its creator without need for acknowledging its incubator [3; p.50].

The use of mother, father, and child metaphor gives another twist to the meaning and interpretation of *Chora*. It becomes a tool to understand the perception of the feminine in Ancient Greek world, the founding of western ideology.

The insights provided about the nature of parenthood in Ancient Greece in architectural historian Indra Kagis McEven's work, *Socrates's Ancestor,* helps us clarify the perceived role of mother in bringing a child into the world. Although McEven doesn't specifically talk about *Chora,* the discussion of mother and giving birth comes up during her discussion of Plato's understanding of *episteme*, the legitimate knowledge. She mentions that legitimate knowledge, or true opinion as Plato describes, is bounded by the chains of recollection, and that recollection is the memory of the world of Ideas known before birth. Then she asks:

> "Which birth? Whose? Was it the birth of bright-eyed Athena who, in that 'outrageous myth … a diagram of motherless birth,' sprang fully armed from the head of Zeus, never having known the darkness of the womb?" [6; p.127]

This provocative questioning of the birth of Athena in fact questions the Ancient Greek understanding and awareness of the nature of birth and the role of mother and father in this process. McEven then suggests, "The men of classical Greece, especially the men of Athens, for whom Aeschylus spoke when he said 'the mother is no parent of the child,' knew nothing about birth" [6]. Aeschylus' words, which McEven refers follows like this:

> This too I tell you, mark how plain my speech
> The mother is no parent of her child
> Only the nurse of the young seed within her.
> The male is the parent, she as outside friend
> Cherishes the plant, if fate allows its bloom [6; p.127].

McEven's critique of the Ancient Greek understanding of the role of mother is taken one-step further by the feminist Elizabeth Grosz's argument. According to Grosz,

> The notion of *Chora* serves to produce a founding concept of feminity whose connection with women and female corporeality have been severed, producing a disembodied feminity as the ground for the production of (conceptual and social) universe [3; p.50].

However, one can suggest that the role of women was already severed in this period and thus was used as a metaphor in the explanation of *Chora*, instead of *Chora* producing the disembodied feminity. Moreover, Grosz's argument might be thought of as a critique of the understanding of the femininity in Ancient Greek world and as a reflection of it in the western ideology, more than trying to contextualizing or providing an understanding of the notion of *Chora* itself.

There is yet another perspective proposed by Perez-Gomez in terms of *Chora* and feminity. Following the line of the previously-mentioned arguments, Perez-Gomez also suggests that the use of the mother metaphor was "appropriate for this neutral receptacle, because biological traits were believed in classical Greece to be an exclusive attribute of the male semen." [4, p.19] However, after briefly mentioning the importance of the believed connection between the head and the womb, without specifying its relevance, he concludes that the nature of *Chora* is both male and female. Here is his argument:

> … in describing the marrow, the male life substance and seed that Plato believed the lofty spherical head, seed of ideas, and of course, the male penis, he also described a substance practically identical to the neutral plastic mass receptacle in question… Genetic misconceptions aside, the prima materia is then androgenous; it's both male and female; it's both the receptacle and the semen, the substance, a receptacle of all visible and sensible things, which is itself invisible and formless [4; p.19].

Although his suggestion of thinking of *Chora* as both male and female is interesting in itself, it is questionable if his argument has a valid ground.

4. *CHORA* IN THE ARCHITECTURAL DISCOURSE

We mentioned earlier Grosz' use of the term *Chora* as a passage way through which she expresses her feminist ideas related to western ideology. For Perez-Gomez, on the other hand, *Chora* becomes an interesting concept that he wants to use to articulate and express his ideas about architecture. One can see support for this argument in his text about *Chora*. In "*Chora as Architectural Meaning*," Perez-Gomez begins with criticizing the current situation of architecture as a discourse and as a practice. He questions, "What architecture represents within the context of our everyday life, other than male egocentric will or repressive political or economic forces?" [4; p.16] According to him:

> We simply cannot afford to give up our quest to identify what constitutes a meaningful order for human life—the promotion and perpetuation of which has been the embittered concern of architecture—and accept market indicators, personal success, aesthetic fashion, some vague formal mysticism, indices of giddiness and titillation, or mere difference as the criteria for an appropriate, reportedly significant architectural practice in the age of Nihilism [4; p.16].

Once can only glimpse the core of his argument about the meaningful order of life. He then questions, "Could architecture then embody values of a different order than these rooted in fashion, formal experimentation, or publicity and be cast in forms other than the seductive gloss characterizing all present mechanisms of cultural domination?" [4; p.16]. The way to find that alternative order is proposed by means of exploring the notion of *Chora*. It is even postulated as "…our only legitimate means for the articulation of practice" [4; p.18].

Perez-Gomez suggests that discussing the original Greek understanding of the space in architecture will help us to clarify the values we need in the architectural discourse. He equates Plato's use of the term *Chora* with that of place as well as space. He says, it is "both cosmic place and abstract space, and it is also the substance, the material, of the human crafts." For him *Chora* is the "*prima materia*" which has no definite character of its own and yet is the ultimate reality of all things. His way of describing *Chora* resembles the McEven's suggestion of the importance of making.

According to Perez-Gomez, *Chora* is "the substance of dreams…distinct reality to be apprehended in the crossing, in the chiasm of being and becoming." [4; p.20]. In order to support his argument, he suggests the connection of *Chora* with chorus in the Ancient Greek rituals, and especially *dromen*a, which developed into drama. The significance of his argument comes from the fact that the word *chorus* is derived from the word *Chora*. In these rituals, the *chorus*, the group of dancing and singing men often in charge of lamenting destiny, is presented as the center of the activity. It has the function of cheering, acting as part of the spectators as well as actors, and thus crossing the gap in-between the two. He describes;

> Tragedy inhibits a space of transition… The event takes place in the choir, the space of the *Chora*, for an epiphany of what Plato called metaxy… A disturbing moment in the in-between of ignorance and knowledge, of time and timelessness, of imperfection and perfection, of hope and fulfillment, and ultimately of life and death [4; p.20].

Perez-Gomez further argues that *mimesis* in this context signified not imitation, like a copy, but rather the expression of the feelings and the manifestation of experiences through movement, musical harmonies, and the rhythms of speech, an acknowledgement through the body's presence of its intermediate location between being and becoming in the *Chora*. Another Greek word Perez-Gomez incorporates to emphasize the crossing of the chiasm is *katharsis,* meaning a purification or reconciliation between the darkness of personal destiny and the light of the divine, *dike*, divine destiny.

And finally, Perez-Gomez describes what we could get out of this study of the Greek word *Chora*. He argues that the understanding of *Chora* as closing the gap between ideas and perceivables "would immediately undermine the common distinction that, in fact, dates from only 19th century between contained space and material container. It is simultaneously the work, the physical substance and the space; there is no distinction." [4; p.21]. *Chora* is the *significature* of architecture, providing the base for the poetic discourse he is looking for.

While for Perez-Gomez *Chora* is a means to explain his poetic discourse, for Derrida it is one of the terms he uses in his discourse of deconstructive reading of texts. As Grosz suggests,

> *Chora* thus follows a long line of deconstructively privileged terms in Derrida's text… These terms each designate or locale a point of indeterminacy or undecidability, a point at which the text's own writing exceeds its explicit goals and logic where the text turns in on itself and ties itself into a strategically positioned knot [3; p.48].

Derrida's reading of *Chora* also shows how the logic of *Chora* relates to other apparently unrelated claims of the Timaeus and its explanation of the origins of the universe. One of the examples is Derrida's analysis of Plato's own self-conception, generally represented as Socrates in his texts. Socrates, according to Derrida, pretends to include himself among those

> … whose genus is to have no place, he does not assimilate himself to them. Hence he holds himself in a third genus, in a way, neither that of sophists, poets, or other imitators, not that of the philosopher-politicians. In a third genus and in the neutral space of a place without place, a place where everything is marked but which would be 'in itself' unmarked [2; p.23].

Derrida's text about *Chora* as well as the notion of *Chora* itself has been the theme of the work that has been produced as collaboration between Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman. Bernard Tschumi, the architect of the Parc La Vilette in Paris, France, invited Derrida and Eisenman on May 1985, to work together on one of the Parc La Vilette's gardens, which is one of the several gardens that he proposed to different artists, writers or musicians, as to make a contribution to the urban culture of the time and La Vilette. The collaboration is documented in the work *Chora L Works* (Figure 1). Derrida presents the role of *Chora* in the dialogue with the Jeffrey Kipnis as follows:

> *Chora* is the theme of which we have been speaking; *Chora* is the scene we played; *Chora* is the character, which I play with Peter. But *Chora* is also the space in which all these take place, and whence appears the unstable character of metonymy in all of this [8; p.166].

For Derrida architecture, as well as law, is the ultimate test of deconstruction. The work could even be considered as testing the strength of the resistance to deconstruction, especially technological and economical resistance. The project's budget and its incompatibility with the proposed work is one of the examples. Tschumi writes,

> The first project submitted by Eisenman-Derrida was twice over budget. The collaborators were then asked to modify the design to fit within the cost constraints. However, when the project was resubmitted it was six times over the budget. The French administration even questioned the collaborators' desire to build the garden [8; p.166].
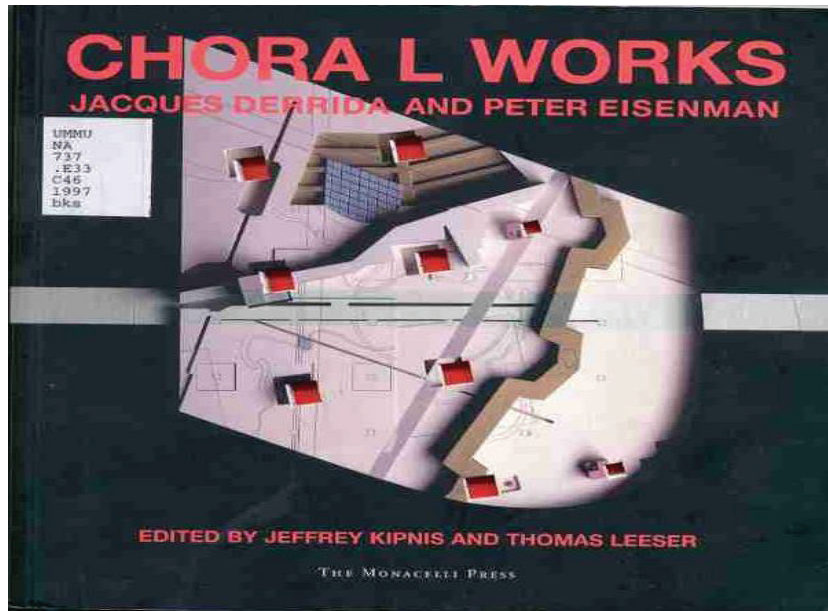

Figure 1. Chora L Works

This project provides an opportunity for Derrida he experiences working on an architectural project. His role is to provide the philosophical inspiration for the project, as well as for the architect. While he is trying to stay away from the role of the architect, he still cannot escape getting involved in the architectural aspects of the project. He describes his approach as follows;

> To the extend I was engaged in this collaboration with Peter, perhaps I felt myself to be too much the philosopher to assume any architectural responsibility. I was therefore resistant to architecture while at the same time hoping, no doubt, to be more of an architect than Peter [8; p.166].

For the architect of the project, Peter Eisenman, *Chora* is a concept proposed by Derrida as a philosophical basis from which the architectural work will spring. Eisenman is delighted to work with Derrida. This collaboration provides an opportunity for Eisenman to work directly with the philosopher whose ideas he adopts for his own discourse. Eisenman describes his admiration of Derrida as such, "First of all Jacques, I am too much in awe of you… in our collaboration I am in such an awe of you that it was

very hard for me to confront you." [8; p.93]. Still this condition doesn't eliminate the contradictory positions of the two. Derrida himself, for example, criticizes Eisenman's approach to make the project an object rather than an architectural work.

5. PARADOXICAL *CHORA*

The use of the mother metaphor, apart from shedding light on the Ancient Greek understanding of femininity, helps us to understand the notion of *Chora*, as does the use of the golden shapes example. Still, Plato's presentation of the notion of *Chora* itself is problematic. It seems as though whatever Plato might have tried to express the nature of *Chora*, it was not, and would not have been enough. Why the definition of *Chora* is so problematic for Plato seems to be a key point to understand the very notion of *Chora* itself.

I suggest there is a relation between the description of *Chora* being problematic and the use of the Greek term *Chora* itself as a terminology and not one of its translations as space or place. For Derrida this is related with the interpretation of the word *Chora*. He explains,

> whether they concern the word *Chora* itself (place, location, site, region, country), or what tradition calls the figures proposed by Timaeus himself (mother, nurse, receptacle, imprint-bearer), the translations remain caught in networks of interpretation [2; p.16].

However, I believe there is more than just the lack of proper translation. *Chora* itself is presented to us as a new concept that we are not accustomed to, for which we don't even have a suitable word. Derrida, for example, insists on not using the definitive article for *Chora*. The article "presupposes the existence of a thing," and according to Derrida this is unacceptable. His argument is supported by Plato's description of *Chora*, which is not a part of the types of existence that Plato himself based his discourse on. Derrida's own explanation follows:

> But what is said about *Chora* is that this noun does not designate any of the known or recognized or, if you like, received types of existent, received by philosophical discourse. i.e., by the ontological logos which lays down the law in the Timaeus: *Chora* is neither sensible nor intelligible [2; p.17].

Derrida further argues that *Chora* was even alien to Plato himself: "*Chora* is irreducible to everything that gives Plato's philosophy coherence… It's something which cannot be assimilated by Plato himself, by what we call Platonic ontology, nor by the inheritance of Plato." [2; p.10] This description suggests that not only Plato himself couldn't assimilate *Chora*, but also we, the contemporary modern human, sharing the western ideology with him, cannot assimilate it. And, the reason for not being able to understand *Chora* is presented as being related with the Platonic world-view. Derrida argues:

> What Plato in the Timaeus designates by the name of *Chora* seems to defy that 'logic of contradiction of the philosophers', that logic of 'binarity of yes or no.' Hence it might perhaps derive from that 'logic other than the logic of logos… the logic of the myth, mythos [2; p.15].

The logis of the myth here refers to the world-view before Plato. In order to shed light on this logic of the myth, I will refer to different universes proposed by Plato and Anaximander.

6. DIFFERENT UNIVERSES OF PLATO AND ANAXIMANDER

McEven contrasts Plato's description of the universe in Timaeus with that of Anaximander's. In Plato's description, she argues, "The entire universe is an artifact constructed as a *paradeigma* by a craftsman, a *demiourgos*." [6; p.41]. In this description, the universe is the definite, eternal nature, whose pattern or paradigm is the immutable Idea that Plato's *demiourgos* copied when he made the world of Becoming in time. On the other hand, Anaximander talks about a "boundless nature (*hetera tis physis aperios)* from which all the heavens arise and the *kosmoi* (orders) within these heavens." [2; p.13]. Heavens in Anaximander's universe might be compared to Ideas in Platonic universe. However, there is a significant difference between the two. Plato's Ideas are eternal, non-changing and prioritized over perceivables, which are considered mere copies of Ideas. In Anaximender's universe the source of heavens as well as cosmos is the same boundless nature, "*hetera*". The structure of the universe proposed is not hierarchical. As McEven suggests, Anaximander

> does indeed postulate (*hetera*) some other boundless nature-as-coming-to-be, which encompasses and, like the helmsman of a ship, steers all things, giving rise to heavens and the *kosmoi* within them. But this boundless source is *hetera* 'other'; it is unknown and unnamable. [2; p.16].

In other words, there is an intricate closeness between heavens and the *cosmoi*. The difference, the separation proposed by *Chora* between the nature of immutable Ideas and copies of them is not here. There are no Ideas different from perceivables, no heavens different from *cosmoi*. McEven suggests this source, this boundless nature, "other," was simultaneously made to appear and discovered through the making. It might be helpful if one thinks of making as the creation of the heavens in one's hands. In Plato's description, on the other hand, the Ideas, ideal immutable forms, are completely away from one's reach; they exist apart from the living being.
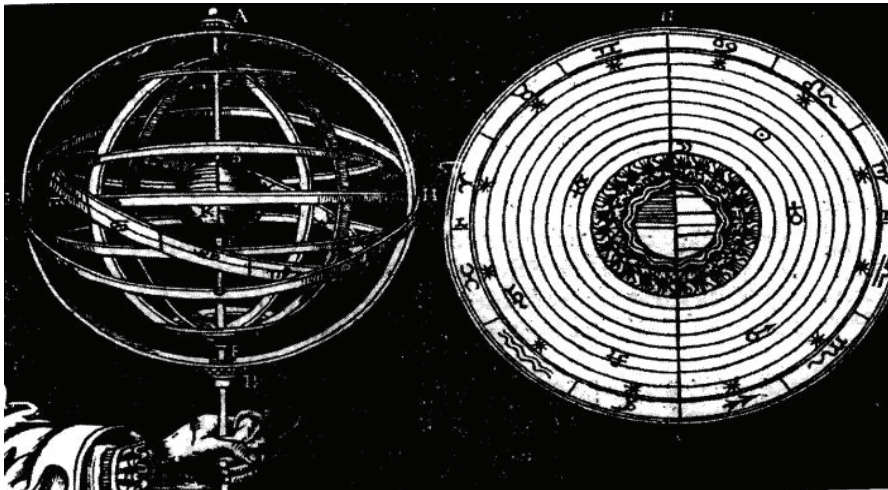

Figure 2. Anaximander's Image of Cosmos

The difference between Plato's universe from Anaximander's, and thus the difference between the nature of *Chora* and *hetera*, becomes clearer when she describes Anaximander's model of the universe. Anaximander, "presiding at the birth of theory", made an image of *kosmos*, whose constituent parts were

a celestial sphere, a map of the world, and a sun clock (gnomon). According to McEven this is a critical point in history since "the image, as an image, for the first time presented *kosmos* as a spectacle, a *theoria*" [2; p.20]. McEven argues that Anaximander's cosmic model,

> as he himself was well aware, could have taken any number of forms, for as he speaks of them, the heavens and the kosmoi within them are plural. Indeed, part of his speculation was the positing of the existence of unlimited worlds [2; p.47].
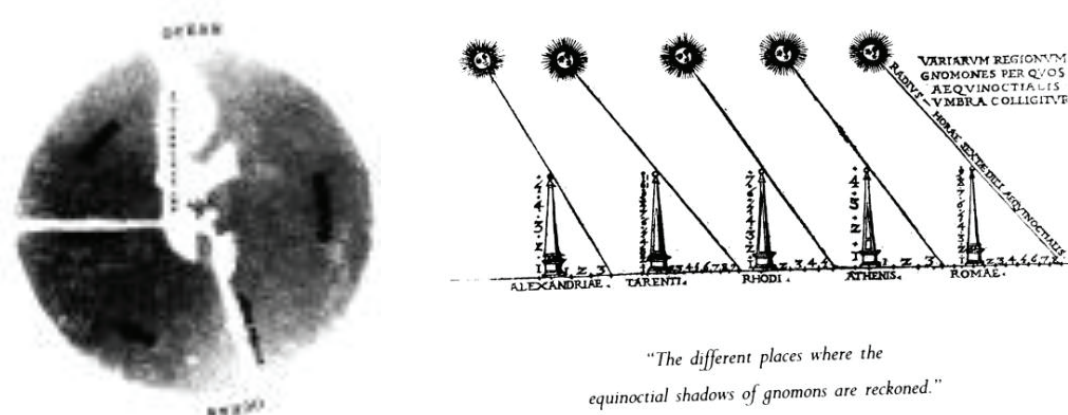

"The *different places where the* equinoctial shadows of gnomons are reckoned."

Figure 3. Anaximander's map of the world (left) and Sun clock gnomon *(right)*

However, Anaximander's model, once made, was recognized as having coherence, and confirmed the configuration of a universe from experience to have the Earth, and Hellas, at its center. Because of this, and because there were no others, McEven argues, Anaximander's became the model: "in Plato the *paradeigma* for a *demiourgos* whose creation of *kosmos* was no longer a question of *making* a world appear, but a matter of representing one through the duplication of an immutable pattern." [6; p.47]. The point McEven directs our attention is the devaluation of making, the craftsmanship, and elevating the value of *theoria*, theorizing, and most importantly their separation. This, I believe, is directly related with the difference that is put between the object and subject, which is necessary for theorizing. Although this point is interesting in itself to examine further, it's outside of the scope of this paper.

Although McEven, Perez-Gomez's student, argues that Plato's universe reflects the hierarchy, duality, of being and becoming, and thus puts the corner stones of the western ideology, Perez-Gomez himself criticizes the very understanding of Plato's articulation of reality as a simple duality of being and becoming. He suggests Plato's feeling of "the need to introduce a third term to do justice to his experience of human affairs," [4; p.19] as an indication of his postulation of reality as a unity between the two worlds, the Ideas and perceivables. This argument is very questionable given the body of literature about the significance of Plato's role in the creation of dualistic western ideology.

7. FINAL WORDS ON *CHORA*

For Perez-Gomez, "*Chora* is the sight of darkness that is our nature and must be preserved for the survival of humanity" [4; p.31]. To understand and to explain *Chora*, however, has been problematic since the day Plato introduced it into the discourse. Derrida further suggests that it will be always

problematic and that Plato's words that "this is how one can glimpse *Chora* – in a difficult, aporetic way and as if in a dream," is equal to saying "This is what hence forth all the interpretations for all eternity, of what I say here, will look like" [2; p.19]. The reason why is critical. *Chora* has been introduced by Plato out of the necessity to make the creation story introduced earlier a coherent one-in spite of the fact that the third kind introduced made the ontological logic laid down in the Timaeus more incoherent. And I argue that it is because *Chora* itself cannot be part of the universe proposed by Plato. Rather it is reminiscent of the logic of myth existed before him. [10] And although Perez-Gomez is right to direct our attention to the problems that architectural discourse and practice are facing, *Chora* itself cannot help us clarify the meaning of architecture and thus create meaningful environments necessary for the survival of humanity.

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