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Heidegger's hut

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Martin Heidegger's 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' is well known to many architects. But comparatively little is known about the building in southern Germany's Black Forest where this influential work was almost certainly written. This essay describes how Heidegger's Hut came to be built and how it was configured and occupied. No plan of this little building has ever before been published. In the intellectual alignments that the hut displays, particularly at a small scale, it records physically many of the priorities that Heidegger wrote about.

In 1922, a shingle-clad hut was built on a slope in the Black Forest region of southern Germany, in countryside above Todtnauberg. It was built for Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who had recently become Professor of Philosophy at Marburg University. Constructed under the supervision of Heidegger's wife Elfride, this small building was intended as a place where he could think and write in peace. The intention seems to have been successful, he used the house at various times during the following five decades.

Heidegger wrote many of his most important published works at his Black Forest refuge, almost certainly including 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' (1951), which deals with the immediacy of the relationship between life and its places of occupation. This essay has been profoundly influential to the approach of a number of architects during the latter half of the twentieth century; it seems to offer a persuasive account of the fundamental burden of architecture – the identification of place. Heidegger's thinking on the notion of place and its relationship with that of dwelling was influenced by his own experience of the places in which he dwelt and perhaps most significantly by this simple hut where he thought and wrote over many years. With this in mind, this essay describes, illustrates and discusses Heidegger's hut in the Black Forest.

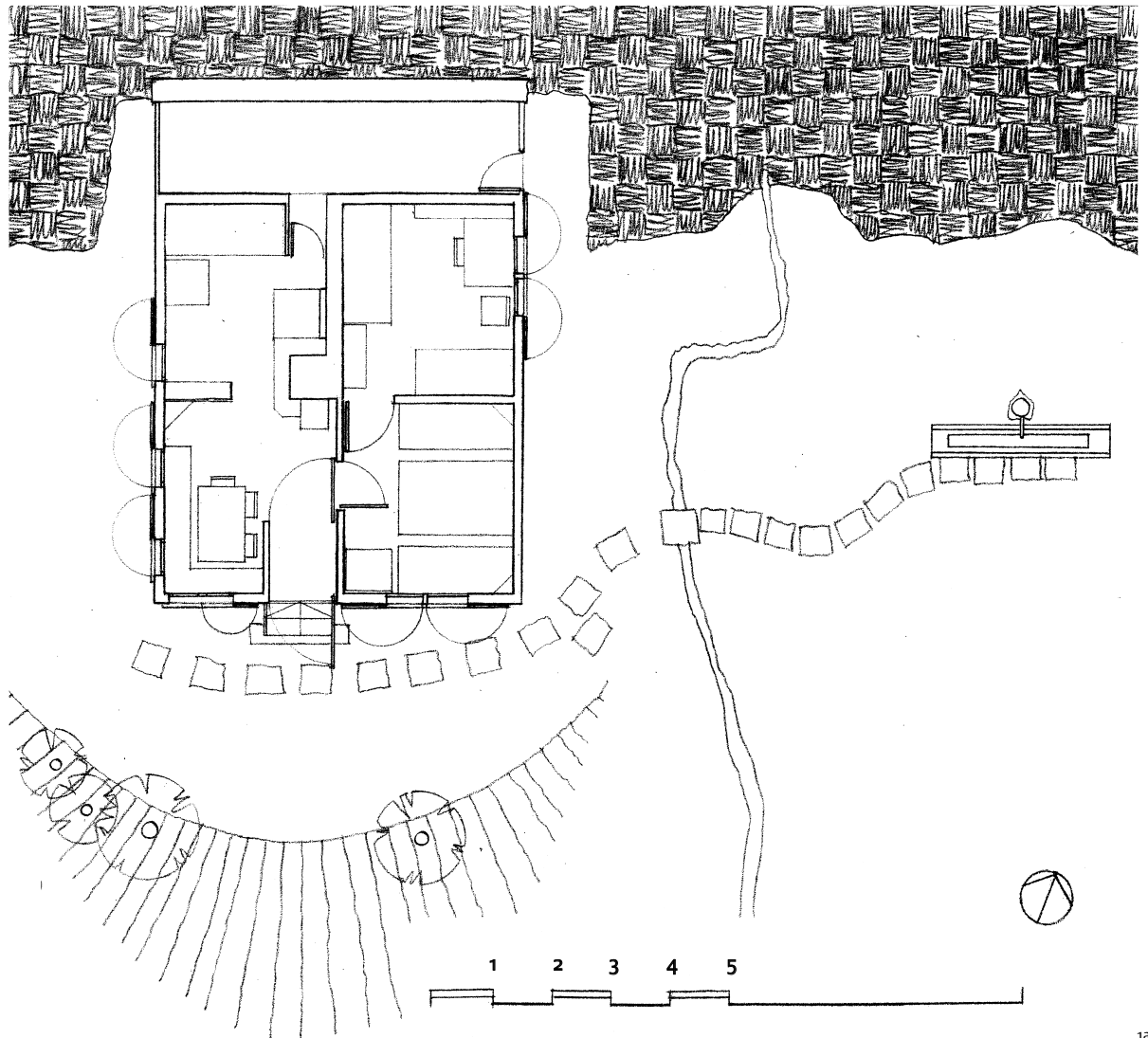
The floor plan has not been published previously. The description and illustrations are based on visits to the hut in May 1999 and June 2000. The hut is little changed and remains in the ownership of the

Heidegger family, who would not permit access for this study. The plan [Fig. 1a] and model [Fig. 1b] have been deduced from a number of sources: the dimensions of the exterior, recent video footage (BBC, 1999), published contemporary photographs (Biemel, 1973; Meller-Marcovicz, 1985; Fedier, 1999) and, most usefully, an interview with Heidegger's granddaughter, Gertrud Heidegger, who remembers how the hut was used when Heidegger was alive and was able to provide a sketch plan of its configuration. The accompanying discussion draws from some of Heidegger's own writings (Heidegger, 1934, 1950, 1951, 1954, 1995; Storck, 1990; Biemel and Saner, 1990) and biographical material (Kisiel 1991; Petzet, 1993; Ott, 1994; Safranski, 1998).

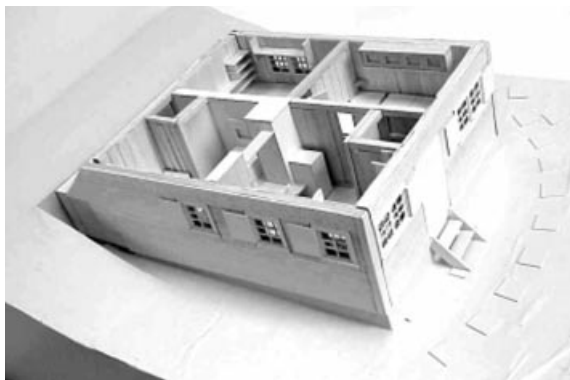
How the hut came to be built

Heidegger's first appointment to a Chair of Philosophy at the age of 33 provided both the incentive and the financial resources to build the hut. The post allowed him the funds to build the retreat he felt necessary to pursue his philosophical work. He sought a place with particular conditions to suit his needs for writing. These derived partly from his upbringing (Safranski, 1998).

Heidegger was born the son of a barrel-maker and church sexton in a small Swabian town on the edge of the Black Forest. He was encouraged to undertake theological study, supported by grants held in the gift of the church, turning to an academic career in theology and then philosophy when his enrolment with a Jesuit order failed in unclear circumstances (Ott, 1994). Having 'found' philosophical questioning



1a



1b

- 1 The hut is still owned by the Heidegger family, no access is allowed
 a This plan, the first ever published, is conjectural
 b The author's model of the hut

through a childhood rigorously ordered by his role in the local church, he continued to work with similar intensity, his thought leading him away from institutionalized Catholicism (Kisiel, 1993). Heidegger found the countryside conducive for work and later admitted his dislike of working in a formal academic environment (Biemel and Saner, 1990). He found movements of nature to be resonant and essential, close to existence and to things (Heidegger, 1995). To him, the landscape particularly accentuated a sacredness in presence. It offered

Heidegger a footing from which to explore the philosophy of others and guided his own. On his professorial appointment, he sought a 'retreat' for work in rural surroundings away from city and university. Once his appointment was secured, he found a suitable site in the mountains at Todtnauberg and the hut was complete by the end of the year.

Gertrud Heidegger reports that the local farmer sold her grandfather the steeply-sloping plot in Todtnauberg cheaply because it was waterlogged due

to a passing stream. However, what primarily led his search for an appropriate site to the immediate locality is not clear. It is likely that he was familiar with the district; the village lies close to the Black Forest's highest peak, Feldberg, not far from long distance paths crossing the region that he would have followed as a keen walker and cross-country skier [Fig. 2a]. The valley was then remote, home to a 'traditional' community reliant on agriculture and forestry for subsistence, accommodated in Black Forest farmhouses [Fig. 2b] like those Heidegger was later to idealize in 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking'. The location is quiet, with extensive views. The landscape is dramatic. Patterns of weather vary quickly and wildly. The high peak and deep valleys create extremes of localized microclimate. If Heidegger was seeking inspiration from nature, then Todtnauberg offered the opportunity at high concentration (Storck, 1990, p.53).

Physical layout

Heidegger's wife Elfride, to whom he was married in 1917, 'organized and supervised' the hut's construction on his behalf (Safranski, 1998, p.129). As

many of the building's dimensions are metrically regular, it is reasonable to conjecture that certain aspects were drawn first rather than just built 'by eye'. It has not been possible to establish who the builders were or whether an architect was involved; Heidegger's relatives interviewed could offer no assistance and no evidence was traced in local authority or national architectural archives. It has also been impossible to establish precisely what Heidegger's role was in initial building work at the hut. His involvement in the construction was not entirely direct, although it is likely that he would have taken an interest in the layout of a building intended for his work.

Heidegger's hut was similar in construction to nearby Black Forest farmhouses, made with a timber frame infilled with stone and clad with overlapping timber shingles. It is akin to the living quarters of such a house without the integral barn and oversailing roof [Fig. 3a]. Materials used are those available in the forest nearby. Cross-timbers at eaves level support a ceiling that covers an almost square floor. A partition halves the hut, another dividing one side of the remainder [Fig 3b]. Half thus contains



2a



3a



2b



3b

2 The site lies close to the Black Forest's highest peak
a A June 2000 view looking south-west just below the hut, indicating the plunging horizon dominating the

valley above Todtnauberg
b Traditional Black Forest Farmhouses on the track between the village of Todtnauberg and the hut

3 Heidegger's hut is built on traditional lines
a The hut from the south-east in May 1999
b Model from above, indicating the hut

layout. The lower half, divided horizontally, is the Vorraum. The bedroom is behind to the right, the study to the left

4 The Vorraum area
 a The dining table viewed from the kitchen, with Heidegger sat centrally at its head
 b Heidegger in the kitchen area of the hut, the cooking stove behind him and bed to the right



4b



4a

two distinct territories, divided less emphatically, separated by a cupboard and an overhead shelf. This makes a 'Vorraum' – literally 'fore' or 'front' room – almost double the size of the remaining two. It contains a cooking place [Fig. 4b], a dining place [Fig. 4a] and a bed place, along with a variety of shelves and ledges. The smaller rooms suggest a hierarchy of seclusion which assigns Heidegger's study as the most private.

The first room off the *Vorraum* is a bedroom, into which were squeezed four beds and a washing place, also shelves and cupboards [Fig. 5a]. Innermost is the study, with a desk, another table for papers and a further bed [Fig. 5b]. By being sunk into the

mountain slope, the hut has an almost buried edge which is thus assigned as 'back'. Between the bank face and occupied rooms is a firewood drying room, protecting inner walls from the damp ground, using stored logs as additional insulation. The opposite edge of the hut is projected forward giving a 'front' on a low platform [Fig. 6].

Light, heat, water

This alignment corresponds almost exactly with the cardinal points of the compass, the 'front' to the south, opening towards midday sun and 'back' sheltered against the cold north. The arrangement of places inside is opportune with respect to the orientation of each edge and needs for light. The dining table receives lunchtime southern sun and dinnertime western sun. The bedroom window faces south, casting eastern morning light diagonally onto the washing table placed on its west side. The kitchen faces west, catching evening sun during preparation of the main meal. The study window receives sunlight in the early morning when Heidegger liked to work (Petzet, 1993, p.194) and affords a distant prospect [Fig. 7]. Windows also tempered the climate with two layers of glazing, both opening for variable degrees of ventilation, and an outer shutter [Fig. 9]. They were brightly painted, with frames in deep blue and shutters in green.

The hut had two proprietary stoves rather than the traditional single fireplace; one for heating and one for cooking. Above the cooking stove, the masonry wall was made with a splashback and shelf for hot pots [Fig. 8]. There were no connections to mains services: light after sunset was provided by oil lamps and candles, heat from burning logs on the stove and water from a neighbouring well. The well, central to the view from Heidegger's writing desk, consisted of a



5a

5 The bedroom and study spaces lead off from the Vorraum
 a Heidegger sat at his desk in the study
 b The bedroom tightly packed with beds and the corner table set out for washing



5b

6 The model, indicating the hut's relationship with the hillside
 7 The view from Heidegger's study is now almost completely obscured by trees; this May 1999 photograph shows the terrain behind that screen



6



7



8

- 8 The kitchen in the hut's Vorraum with Elfride Heidegger stood at the stove and Martin Heidegger alongside
- 9 A window on the west wall of the hut showing the shutter and two opening leaves of glazing, the outer of which also contains an opening light
- 10 The well, with a carved star fixed to its spout



9

trough hollowed from a split log and a wooden spout fed by a hidden spring [Fig. 10].

Sacred places

Although Heidegger's hut is in the Catholic country of southern Germany, it has none of the conventional sacred places of traditional local houses; there is no priest's blessing recorded in chalk over front door, nor places like those in the farmhouse he wrote about in 'Building, Dwelling,

Thinking': 'Totenbaum', coffin place; 'Hergottswinkel', Lord's corner; or 'Gemeinsamer Tisch', community table. However, there were places that had similar sacred qualities for Heidegger. In summer, he found inspiration at a temporary desk set up outside, on the levelled earth, under the open sky, surveying the valley (Petzet, 1993, p.169). Moreover, the well had great significance for him (Petzet, 1993, pp.192–193). He found metaphoric power in the absence of a visible provenance for the spring that supported life.



10

On top of the well was fixed a carved relief star. For Heidegger, it stood for the wandering thinker, a bright trace against a dark sky. This iconic star, which was repeated on Heidegger's gravestone, was also of great symbolic importance to the Jewish poet and concentration camp survivor Paul Celan whose visit to the hut in 1967 was recorded by his poem 'Todtnauberg' (Celan, 1996).

The landscape presence

Todtnauberg and its landscape sustained a nourishing relationship between thought and presence for Heidegger. Although he spent time at the university by necessity, he sought to immerse himself in work at the hut as often as was practicable (Storck, 1990, p.53). Nevertheless, despite returning many times until his old age, he remained an occasional occupant, always maintaining another residence in the town of his academy. The hut became the site for many key moments in his life, some more controversial than others (Ott, 1994; Safranski, 1998). Much of his thinking was done there throughout his mature career. He preferred quiet, allowing few visitors. Heidegger came to feel that his work took place through an opening to the landscape, receiving its changefulness in the constancy of solitude.

There appears to have been an intense relationship between Heidegger's mind, the landscape's presence and his writing, for which there is a good deal of published evidence. His correspondence with Karl Jaspers offers an illustration (Safranski, 1998; Biemel and Saner, 1990):

'I'm off to the cabin – and am looking forward a lot to the strong mountain air – this soft light stuff down here ruins one in the long run. Eight days lumbering – then again

writing ... It's late night already – the storm is sweeping over the hill, the beams are creaking in the cabin, life lies pure, simple and great before the soul ... Sometimes I no longer understand that down there one can play such strange roles.'

In letters from Todtnauberg, Heidegger wrote of life elsewhere as 'unter', literally 'under' or 'below' (Storck, 1990, p.53). Life at the hut was 'above', superior; he came to refer to it as 'up there'. The term described writing mixed with walking and skiing, an intense relationship with the hut and seasonal movements enveloping it. In 1934, Heidegger was offered the Chair of Philosophy in Berlin – the most prestigious appointment in Germany. He turned it down and life at the hut was central to the argument of his official justification, published as a newspaper article and recorded as a radio address (Heidegger, 1934):

'On the steep slope of a wide mountain valley in the southern Black Forest, at an elevation of 1150 metres, there stands a small ski hut. The floor plan measures six metres by seven. The low-hanging roof covers three rooms: the kitchen which is also the living room, a bedroom and a study ...

'This is my work-world ... Strictly speaking I myself never observe the landscape. I experience its hourly changes, day and night, in the great comings and goings of the seasons. The gravity of the mountains and the hardness of their primeval rock, the slow and deliberate growth of the fir-trees, the brilliant, simple splendour of the meadows in bloom, the rush of the mountain brook in the long autumn night, the stern simplicity of the flatlands covered with snow – all of this moves and flows through and penetrates daily existence up there, and not in forced moments of 'aesthetic' immersion or artificial empathy, but only when one's existence stands in its work. It is the work alone that opens up space for the reality that is these mountains. The course of the work remains embedded in what happens in this region.

'On a deep winter's night when a wild, pounding snowstorm rages around the cabin and veils and covers everything, that is the perfect time for philosophy. Then its questions become simple and essential. Working through each thought can only be tough and rigorous. The struggle to mould something into language is like the resistance of the towering firs against the storm.'

Heidegger, the phenomenological reporter, seems to have felt duty bound to respond to what he considered the landscape's challenge to philosophy. For him, the landscape was not a fancy to be admired and 'observed'. He felt that its tangible presence helped him to explore being there. Heidegger challenged philosophical aesthetics and empathy, finding greater authority in a bluntness of existence, intensified by the reality of mountain territory. For him, the very being of place preceded interpretation. He appears to have sensed that the material he needed to philosophize was already there laid out before him.

Yet, despite the landscape's palpable tangibility, its simplicity belied the complex task of attempting to render its charge in words. Further indications of such a relationship between Heidegger and his hut appear in his published writing; notably his

correspondence with Elisabeth Blochmann (Saner, 1990) and his poem translated as 'The Thinker as Poet' (Heidegger, 1954). It is no over-statement to suggest that many aspects of Heidegger's written work, especially later in his career, are attributable in part to Todtnauberg's presence. If philosophical speculation involves a generic rendering of the individual philosopher's surrounding circumstances, then much of Heidegger's philosophy is, to some extent, a response to the hut and its landscape.

Significance through daily rituals

Heidegger's relationship with the hut at a small scale is especially important. Although there are few conventionally-defined sacred places within the hut, there were places that had significance to Heidegger through their configuration of repetitive rituals in his daily life. This relates directly to notions of 'dwelling' and 'place' that he wrote about, particularly in 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' and '... poetically, Man dwells ...' (Heidegger, 1950). For him, it was significant that places of daily occupation are intertwined with the lives of those who use them. By their very relationship to the mind's engagement with place, they could manifest the multiplicity of tangible forces underpinning everyday existence (Heidegger, 1951).

Heidegger seems to have felt deeply the immediate relationships between life and the small places, for different purposes, that it makes and occupies. For him such places were a part of human presence in the world. Their occurrence and countless recurrence was evidence of shared responses to the physical conditions of life. They amounted to philosophy – thought towards a cause of understanding in response to existence – made in physical form rather than words.

One could consider a number of places within Heidegger's hut which might thus be found 'sacred' in their approach to such embedded authority. The six beds, like other beds, were raised above the floor. Like a dais, they displayed their incumbents when sleeping, their emptiness at other times awaiting the absent sleeper. Eating took place at a corner table, presided over by a portrait of Friedrich von Schelling rather than an icon, set for particular – almost ritual – configurations of meals. The changing layout of the table traced those who met there and celebrated their meeting by sharing food. Towel hooks above the stove ensured that cloths were both dried by rising heat and kept handy [Fig. 11].

A bed unusually placed in the kitchen was the favourite choice for sleeping, as reported by Gertrud Heidegger, because it was closest to the warm stoves, reradiating masonry core and insulative mass of logs in the shed. Ledges and shelves were built-in to the walls, using planks arranged as vertical surfaces. Some provided seats or low work surfaces, like that around the stove. These ledges made places underneath too, for boots or boxes. Further vertical planks were made into tables for writing, dining and washing. From the intricacy of such places, it is reasonable to suggest that Heidegger's hut also sustained a relationship with his thought at a small scale.

Places can have a philosophical authority

The evidence collected here suggests an important interrelationship between Heidegger's hut and his writings about 'building', 'dwelling' and 'place'. The mythical paradigm of the Black Forest Farmhouse he established in concluding 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' appears to have many relationships with his experience at Todtnauberg. Heidegger's hut shares much with this generic house: construction; orientation; an ascetic quality; an interaction with landscape; a strong temporal and physical order; a sensitivity towards dimensions of 'presence' and 'absence'; a mutual inter-mediation of mind and place at small and large scales. Yet, there are also important discrepancies with this paradigm that appear to follow differences between Heidegger's life as a tenured university professor and his neighbours' life organized around necessities of subsistence. He was a part-time resident of the hut and, although he wrote of his preference of time spent there, he had the ability to choose; his neighbours had no option but to dwell by subsistence.

Relationships between Heidegger's hut and his writings about 'dwelling' and 'place' raise an important issue for architectural scholarship and practice. In 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', Heidegger wrote about how people relate with place. To him, one inevitably finds oneself enmeshed in an iterative engagement of mind and place. This involves



11 The kitchen from the dining area of the Vorraum

intellectual structuring of a complexity equal to other dimensions of human thought. For him, moments of common intellectual and physical approach are imbued with philosophical authority. Where recorded in building, resulting places become repositories of understanding, physically recorded. Heidegger thus proposed that, adequately heeded, places might be closer to words in their communicative potential than remains commonly assumed. This proposal is broadly supported by the hut.

There are many correlations between Heidegger's writing and traces of his mind's engagement with

the hut. It appears plausible to suggest that, in the intellectual alignments that the hut displays, particularly at small scale, it records physically many of the priorities that Heidegger wrote about. These strong relationships between the substance of Heidegger's words and his places are worthy of note. They reinforce the suggestion that places can have a philosophical authority of their own in the traces of human engagement that they report. This remains important for architecture, whose scholarship often derives from the methods of other academic disciplines.

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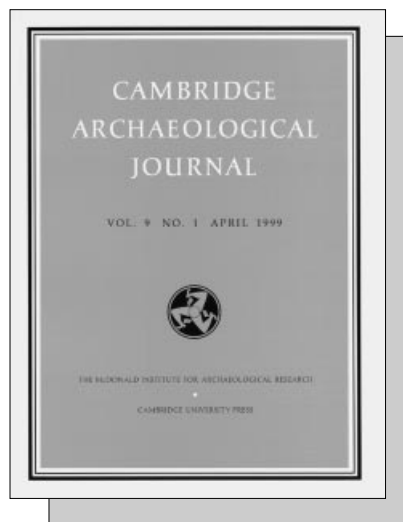
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