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Beyond the Wall

It is a meaningful and exciting experience to be on this stage tonight to receive an award from a University which in the history of ideas, education and culture has few equals: a University where the voices of Hegel, Kierkegaard, and the pantheon of thinkers who made the world stand on its head, once resounded.

This University, centrally located on Unter den Linden between the Brandenburg Gate and Alexanderplatz, was well-positioned – to witness – the astonishing events of the 20th Century.

One could recall that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed his first glass-walled sky scraper within view from here; Yehudi Menuhin made his debut with Einstein in the audience to applaud him; Georg Grosz recorded his savage observations of Berlin on this Boulevard; and Vladimir Nabokov was here to observe „an elderly rosy-faced beggar woman, with legs cut off at the pelvis... set down like a bust at the foot of the wall... selling paradoxical shoe laces“.

But what is particularly fascinating to me is the unexpected encounter between an old refrigerator and atomic physics, on an operating table called Humboldt, an encounter whose fascinating history is perhaps not over yet.

At this very University, sometime before 1934 on a cold and gray day at the end of October, similar to this one, Leo Szilard, an aspiring student from Budapest and Albert Einstein, developed and applied for 29 joint patents in, unbelievable as it appears, Home Refrigeration!

A sad newspaper story caught the attention of Einstein and Szilard one morning. It was reported in a Berlin newspaper that an entire family, including a number of young children, had been

found asphyxiated in their apartment as a result of the inhalation of noxious fumes of the chemical refrigerant used in their primitive refrigerator; a chemical which had escaped in the night through a leaky pump valve.

Applying the sophisticated researches connected to relativity, the two physicists devised a method of pumping a metallicized refrigerant by electro-magnetism, a method that required no moving parts, and therefore no valves that might leak.

AEG signed Szilard as a paid consultant and actually built the Einstein/Szilard refrigerator – an astonishing Berlin object if there ever was one – but alas, these two inventors failed for musical reasons. The magnetic pump was so noisy, compared to even the noisy conventional compressors of the day, that it never left the engineering lab.*

The prophetic linkages which connect asphyxiation and the patenting of the modern refrigerator to a device for accelerating nuclear particles in a circular magnetic field produced a kind of nuclear pump which was instrumental in the construction of the atomic bomb.

The intertwining of gas, tragedy, inconceivable inventions and anti-semitism which finally exiled Einstein and Szilard as carriers of a theory, then deemed hostile to the „German spirit“, is emblematic of Berlin and of the Atomic Age it somehow represents.

As I was thinking about what to say today I realized how difficult it is for an architect to speak about his work without the usual paraphernalia of slide projectors and images. Architecture, which is evoked only by words, makes one almost feel ‘at home’ in language. By surrounding oneself with language one almost comes to believe that one has escaped from the opacity of space and that what remains ‘out there’ is only an empty stage set. That is perhaps why most intelligent people apply their intelligence and analytic powers to everything but architecture; why architecture

is given over to technicians and specialists, and why one is resigned to it as an inevitable and anonymous force which will shape the cities without one's personal participation.

The experience of alienation from architecture, as a dimension of culture, should be contrasted with the stark and astonished encounter with IT – crowned-out, spewed-out into night – resistant to theorization. For then, one might see that architecture – something static and unfeeling, as all that's turned into a coming – can be interpreted, but itself continues to remain oblivious to the interpretation. It continues to live its own existence whether we share it or not.

Perhaps language and its meaning is grounded in the spaces of architecture, and not vice-versa. Consider the functions of foundation, circumcision, territorialization, openness and closure. These are all experiences of space – and of a certain kind of architecture – which provide a symbolic model and understanding of life itself. Is architecture not the quintessential 'taken for granted', the unthinkable, the monstrous, the gender-less, the repressed, the other? Perhaps this is the point of its madness, perhaps it is your conscience: The knot of life in which what is recognized is untied. And what thinking person does not want a fire-place, a home, a Utopia, 'the way it is', 'the way it was'? What thoughtful person is not grateful for the beams of clear lines directed by this silent ray?

What ineffable – immeasurable power of building in the city! The epiphany of the constructible is the strange sucking of the earth's axis. In the realm of architecture, ideas having stared at Medusa turn to stone. Here it is matter which carries the aura of ideas – ideas which metastatize into crystalline sleep-shapes assumed in the language shadow. Wasps, buildings, antennae sting the air, driving the sting to pass through the world of dream and death in order to sense this axis: The Earth's Axis.

All this is accomplished through technique such as drawing wherein an exiled line falls to the ground. Two parallel lines signify a

wall; precisely the wall which is between the lines and is not a line. Whether this wall imprisons and releases depends on whether one is a saint or a prisoner. It is doubly illegible; twice over. In attempting to surmount the inner poles of this contradiction, architecture becomes like the plow, turning time up, revealing its invisible layers on the surface.

The power of building is certainly more than meets the eye. It is the non-thematized, the twilight, the marginal, event. But architecture forming this background is a surplus beyond obvious need: that which itself has no legitimacy in a proper foundation. This has led some to ask whether the true and the real need to be embodied at all. Whether one needs architecture or just a simulation mechanism. Whether architecture can flutter nearby like a spirit, the bell or the Internet. It cannot.

In its opacity and resistance, architecture rebels and communicates that only the superfluous, the transcendent, the ineffable is allied to us: the sky, the stars, the gods. I would like to confess my fascination for this strange activity, quite distant from the obsessive technologism, globalized marketing and withered modernism progressively eradicating spiritual life.

I would like to share with you something about the nature of the approach to architecture which I am following, through buildings which not only house exhibitions within them but as architectural works ‘exhibit’ the world; are indeed the ‘production’ of the earth. Together they delineate a trajectory which musters the letters, mortal-immortal; show the Aleph as coming after the Beit; the alphabet after the House.

Henry Adams considered the Virgin as the mobilizing form of medieval times and compared her to the dynamo, the mechanism of industrialization. Were he to write today, he would perhaps add to the Virgin and the dynamo – the Museum – as the catalyst and conveyor of reality, since this institution is seen today as a force able to regenerate areas of experience, revive histories, transform images and create a new identity.

Throughout my projects I have followed a certain path which one could name as the search for the Irreplaceable, that which was known by the pagans as the *genius loci*. I am interested in the unique portrayal of architecture and space of provinces, mountains, maps, ships, horoscopes, fish, instruments, rooms, stars, horses, texts, people. In this labyrinth of places, one can discover the uniqueness of a human face and of a particular hand as a figure of architecture and of the city.

Lines of history and of events; lines of experience and of the look; lines of drawing and of construction. These vectors form a patterned course towards 'the unsubsidied' which paradoxically grows more heavy as it becomes more light. I think of it as that which cannot be buried: that which cannot be extinguished: Call it Architecture if you want.

Berlin Museum and the Jewish Museum: addresses; matrix of light; names; echoes of the Void; intermarriage; assimilation; integration; exile; erasure; hope. What is lost in the sky, slender images as blue as shadows, vernal ice, divine ice, spring ice: They are leading a storm cloud by a leash. The music and light of Schoenberg's inaudible space, soundless bridges which illuminate the darker corners of thought.

Nussbaum Haus, Osnabruck: three arches of the Rolandstrasse synagogue, reincarnated in three excavated arches of an ancient Swedish bridge; Osnabruck; Rome; Brussels; Auschwitz; and Osnabruck again. The Nussbaum Haus, the Nussbaum Brücke, the Nussbaumgang, Ohne Ausgang; a triple dislocation in the atmosphere of a quiet town. Read it: It is only a beam; it is only light; it has the power of murmured words.

Victoria & Albert Museum, London: spiralling through William Morris' lightning rod; 'Knowledge' and 'Inspiration' inscribed on the portals; Owen Jones' Grammar of Dreams; Aston Webb's screen; the oblique connection between Constable and Cast Courts. Victorian light fractalized in an endlessly generated aperiodic pattern, de-centering the spiral and relea-

sing innumerable directions. Passages of the spiral through the interlocking continuity of swimming light. CIPHERING and decrypting English heritage lodged in the honeycomb cells of the gigantic, brick clock called London.

Imperial War Museum of the North, Manchester: conflict shattered earth; shards reassembled to trace the end of nations, but not of conflict which has never taken place on an abstract plane but in the awful trenches, in salty waters, in air suffocating with smoke. Projection; introjection; suspension; air, earth, water surrounded by Fire; where the earth curves more sharply than anywhere else; the slope becomes unexpectedly extensive, rolls down for as long as the last slave on earth is breathing.

Architecture's reality is as old as the substance of the things hoped for. It is the proof of things invisible. Contrary to public opinion the flesh of architecture is not cladding, insulation and structure, but the substance of the individual in society and history; a figuration of the inorganic and organic, the body and the soul, and that which is visible beyond.

Some would deny this substance and as a result might themselves vanish into the emptiness of „facts“ which as indices of power are only the illusory ghosts of a virtual world. One must reject the emptiness of ideologies, the nihilistic obsession with the return of the same, the vacuity of systems which base the whole on its part. The road to authentic construction, just like a smile, cannot be faked for it remains insubordinate, not slave.

Architecture is undergoing an anamnesis: the struggle to remember. Let me share with you one of the most difficult personal decisions I have had to make recently, which was the decision to enter the competition for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe to be erected in Berlin. An unprecedented task: a Memorial for the world's biggest crime: the murder of 3% German Jews and 97% European Jews. A monument of shame, not honouring anyone; a monument not celebrating anything.

How can such a memorial be built? Would it only reinforce the act of forgetting? What makes it difficult for a foreigner and a Jew living in Berlin to participate in such a project?

Some will say that a memorial of the German people should not be advocated by others. Some persons in the Jewish community say, it is not our memorial, it is Theirs – but we insist that they should do it. Would such a memorial make any difference? No images, no symbols can represent the inconceivable. Only an imageless presentation with a deepening substantial presence might do it. No names of victims are appropriate here; and names of perpetrators are wholly inadequate when speaking of a crime which has a national dimension.

I thought of myself not as someone doing it for the Germans, or instead of the Germans; nor as an architect of just another nationality doing a German project, but rather as someone who has no single identity; himself a product of the Holocaust era.

What does it mean to be German today, after all? The monument is part of the process of finding out. The past that won't pass is not there only for Germans but for everyone else, and it is growing. Does the monument come too late? No. The generations involved in these horrific events could not accomplish it, and even had they been able to, it would not have been credible. The fifty years past are nothing compared to the history of Berlin which is not concluding a period, but opening a new one.

The peculiar site which is the seam between East and West is an emblem of a common ground and a confession – killing fields of a kind – framing the Brandenburg Gate which for fifty years, or one quarter of its two hundred year existence, has been deprived of significance. Such a monument cannot be left to the politicians, to ideologues, those who would try to tell a story with an ending. The innocent idea of the identity of state and society has long gone, destroyed by the behaviour of the German people during the Nazi time, and by the mockery of the GDR version of identity of government and its people.

The Monument is capable of enduring perhaps not because of its force and Name but because of its vulnerability; the weakness of the nameless; what was etched away by the ray-shot wind of language. For a monument is made to endure, but not as the full presence of those whose memory it bears. If there are no more masters, no sand book, and no more sand art, then this very absence not only remains, but expands. Not the full presence of the one whose memory it bears... but on the contrary what remains is a growing memory. Aren't we living in times when even being itself is a recollection? Perhaps the stratagems of architecture are already institutionalized on the principles of the transformation of Being and recollection. The monument should emphatically transform the work into a remnant, residue, or that which remains when the process is over. This monument is capable of enduring because from the outset it is produced in the form of that which is no longer; the trace of the unborn; the exterminated human being.

The world of Berlin has been stuttered by space in which the guest, a name sweated down from the wall, a wound up in the air, stands in the time-void. Such a place is a body open for air, silence, stars: solidifies the time-void into those image gaps harbored in the slit-arteries of awareness. We travel largely the last of the sonic booms...receives us: the boosted heart pace, outside, in space, brought home to the axis of Earth.

The Spiritual in architecture is urgent, though it seems to have become an embarrassment, a rumor on the street. The spiritual, appropriated by the fundamentalist right, has been expropriated from culture and history, eliminated from discourse through which it should be reclaimed. One should attempt to retrieve the spirit of architecture, to recall its Humanity, even within a situation in which the goal and the way have been eclipsed. The erasure of history and its carriers, the obliviousness of the market economy to the degradation and ongoing genocide of human beings must be countered with a deeper awareness and action.

Architecture is and remains the ethical, the true, the good and the beautiful, no matter what those who know the price of everything and the value of nothing may say.

Contemporary architecture is split bitterness/sweetness, strictly, the ends of its smile go off into the anarchy of life, opening a paradoxical freedom.

Notes

Based on:

Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, Simon and Schuster
Wolf von Eckardt and Sander Gilman, *Bertolt Brecht's Berlin*, Abelard Press
Kaes, Jay, Dimendberg, *Weimar Reader*, Yale University Press