

Life Stories — Life Building: Investigations at the Interface of Architecture and Biography

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INTRODUCTION

This paper marks the beginning of an investigation of the relationship between building and biography through the examination and discussion of several smaller projects. These projects are situated at the interface of architecture and biographical literature or the story of a life.

For these purposes, the definition of architecture is expanded to be understood not just as building, shelter or monument, but also as a setting for or mapping of the narrative of our lives (as individuals or as communities). Biography is understood not just as an objectified account of a person's life, but also as "life stories," a literary genre which selectively crafts the events which tell the story. As the etymology of the word suggests, a biography is a mapping of life. The making of architecture might also be interpreted as the mapping of life. Understood as such, architecture and biography can occupy the same realm as interpretations of the meaning to be wrought of and uncovered in our lives.

There is a tradition of buildings having been made famous because of their associations with famous characters. Temples which housed the oracles in the Classical world, the house of Paul Revere in Boston, John Soane's house in London and the home of Martin Luther King in Atlanta are well known examples. Sometimes the person associated with such famous buildings is fictional/literary and not historical (i.e., Anne's house with the Green Gables in Prince Edward Island). For the most part, these buildings are famous more because the person lived there than because the building is remarkable.

Another way of thinking about the interface of building with biography is to examine the physical marks which human lives have made on buildings; steps which are worn in the center from the passage of human feet, the toe on the sculpture of St. Peter in the Vatican which has been kissed away, etc.. The marks made by humans on objects and buildings have often become part of the valued patina.

Yet a different way of looking at the relationship between architecture and biography was explored in the book *The House as a Mirror of Self*¹ by Clare Cooper Marcus. Grounded in Jungian theory, her contention is that the home plays an

important role in the sub-consciousness, either resonating with or resisting certain subconscious needs or desires of the individual which may be grounded in seemingly remote or past events in the environmental history of the person. The subjects in Marcus' study were chosen because they were open to recognition that their environment affected them. With the exception of Carl Jung's house, Marcus did not examine the houses of anyone connected with a famous biography.

That which interests me, as well as those issues already mentioned, is an investigation of architecture which allows biography/literature to inform it in a way which probably would not have been possible without the literary piece (i.e., the art or craft of the story itself is recognized beyond its narrative). Similarly, I am interested in buildings which exert such a marked influence on a person's life that maybe the life would not have been possible without the building. Focusing on these issues opens new possibilities for the making of meaningful architecture.

In a profound way, my particular investigations are autobiographical themselves. They reflect the presence of the existential question in much of my own work, as a scholar, practitioner and educator in the field of architecture.

I would like to share with you in varying degrees of detail four projects which deal with the interface of architecture and biography in fairly diverse ways. I would also appreciate hearing from you about any information or "lifestories" which might add to our understanding.

1. HOW BIOGRAPHICAL STORY TELLING CAN BE USED TO PROVIDE CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ABOUT ARCHITECTURAL PROBLEMS

The use of the "life story" narrative has been crucial to several of my academic papers, as well as my teaching to enable a critical reading of a subject. In my work "Nightmares of Eminent Architects" the "re-crafting" of biographical information about a prominent figure in the form of a nightmare is a way of critically elucidating the problematic in a person's work making it engaging for the reader. This work, which has

been published elsewhere,² includes the nightmares of Baron Haussmann as he planned Paris in the nineteenth century, of James Stirling as he explored questions about technology while writing about Le Corbusier and generic architects whose “life stories” wrestle with difficult problems of gender and race.

2. HOW BIOGRAPHY CAN MAKE EXPLICIT A SHARED EXPERIENCE OF THE HUMAN CONDITION WHICH CAN THEN BE AMPLIFIED AND MADE MANIFEST THROUGH ARCHITECTURE

In a studio in Rome last summer students designed small churches or chapels which were dedicated to the saints whose biographies were told in de Voragine’s thirteenth century text *The Golden Legend*.³ Students were asked to identify compelling aspects of “the human condition” found in the stories and design the churches in ways which corresponded to, healed or amplified that particular condition.

Adopting a Saint

Having collectively read de Voragine’s work, each student “singled out” one story or example which was found to be particularly fertile as inspiration for an architectural project. The project was to be dedicated to the saint, and related to his or her story, but was also to ultimately provide a special place of gathering and spiritual communion for **all** who shared these particular concerns. The locations for the sacred and dedicated places in Rome were also often found in the biographies because of the presence of the saint’s remains; the occurrence of a miracle; a previous marking of the place as sacred (i.e. the presence of an Antique temple); the house where a saint lived, the presence of a relic, or an association with other related persons and activities (for example a church or chapel in a monastic complex or university).

Understanding that one of the roles of the saints in Catholicism is to act as an intercessor between God in heaven and humans in earth and that the saints are also models who inform us as to how to live our lives was important. As students read about the various saints in *The Golden Legend* they discovered that many of the themes presented in the text resonated with themes in their own lives, from dealing with death to helping the sick or even finding lost objects. For example, Saint Paula first turned to the Lord in mourning of her husband and spent the rest of her days comforting the sick at heart, and leading an ascetic life in abstention from earthly pleasures. (We are told by de Voragine that she refrained from eating oils of any kind; the first fat-free diet?) Sant’ Eustachio was proselytized when the Lord appeared to him between the antlers of a deer.

One can easily imagine that a widow could find comfort in making special prayers to Saint Paula or that a hunter could ask Sant’ Eustachio to communicate to God her prayers for a safe and successful hunt. We find in the lives of the saints a shared experience of many aspects of the human condition which transcends historical bounds. We are comforted that

our own dilemmas have been experienced by others, releasing us from our feelings of being alone in the world. Through this shared understanding, our own lives become more meaningful as we “connect with” the rest of humanity.

Our project was predicated on the belief that architecture has the capacity to amplify and make meaningful the condition of human existence. The churches of Rome are especially fine examples of this capacity. Whether located on a shady hill like Santa Sabina or on a raucous Roman street, they provide cool places of both refuge and celebration for the human soul. Regardless of one’s religious persuasion, regardless of whether one is alone or in a crowd, each church, in its own way, enables us to participate in spirituality, arguably the most important distinction of being human.

In the same manner that the saints’ stories transcend time and enable us to find comfort in our humanness, the experience of spirituality, connects us both with ourselves and with the world. The project of providing both a setting for meaningful human action and a place to enable spiritual experience was made possible through the study of de Voragine’s biographies.⁴

3. HOW A LITERARY “LIFE STORY” CAN INSPIRE AN ARCHITECTURAL PROJECT — “A HOUSE FOR THE IMMORALIST”

This issue was explored in detail in a studio I recently taught at the University of Oregon entitled “House for the Immoralist.” The work involved engaging the students in a close reading of the 1901 existential novel *The Immoralist*⁵ by Andre Gide. In it, Michel, the protagonist, writes to his friends to come and retrieve him from North Africa and take him back to Paris, his home.

My dear friends ... At my request you came at once ... if I summoned you abruptly and made you travel to the out-of-the-way place where I live, it was solely that I might see you, that you might hear me ... I am at a moment in my life past which I can no longer see my way ... The point is, I no longer understand .. The capacity to get free is nothing; the capacity to be free, that is the task ... Drag me away from here; I can’t leave of my own accord ... I want to make a fresh start.

-excerpts from
Michel’s letter to his friends in
The Immoralist by Andre Gide

Michel’s dilemma is that he has come to believe that the only truth (meaning or knowledge) is to be found in pleasures of the senses. Because his story is complete with psychoanalytical self evaluation, Michel is the ideal client. Because of Gide’s mastery of description, the house for Michel became the vehicle for highly particularized architectural investigations of materiality, sensuousness and asceticism, and architectural accommodation or healing of profound existential crisis. The following is the way in which the project was presented to students:

Architecture and Morality

The Immoralist is the story of a man who calls upon his friends to take him from North Africa, where he has been living for three years, back to Paris, his home. Michel, the protagonist, is in existential crisis. In response to his call, and upon arriving where he lives, Michel's friends are struck by the beauty of his seemingly ascetic life. Yet Michel believes himself to be immoral; the only true pleasures he can derive from existence are pleasures of the senses.

Our task in this studio is to design a house for Michel in Paris to accommodate his return to "civilization" and to accepted values ... a return which the protagonist wishes to make but does not feel he can accomplish on his own. Michel is in existential crisis because since he left Paris as a newlywed, all of the "accepted values" which governed his life have been called into question. The design of a house for Michel as he returns from North Africa to Paris forces a primary investigation of issues of morality, of freedom, of sensuality, of sexuality, of race, of place, of cultural relativity, of choice. These are questions with which architecture traditionally deals, but issues which are rarely forefronted in this manner. Furthermore, they are issues which are often eclipsed in architectural design by issues of a more pragmatic nature. Should comfort be valued over discomfort in making life or architecture meaningful? What are the values of asceticism compared with those of sensual excess, in life and in architectural concerns? What is the value morality compared with sensuality in understanding human existence? What role does sexual orientation play? These issues must be confronted in designing a house for "The Immoralist." They are issues which are both architectural and existential.

Architecture and Literature

When reading about architecture, the words of the programmer, like those of the critic often pale against the words of the poet-philosopher. Critical writings and programs are often less poignant in their understanding of places (of architecture) than works of literature which aspire to do the same. We are drawn to the places described in literature because they tease, seduce and horrify the imagination with suggestions which call upon the reader's private response for their completion.

Recent reconsideration of poetics in architecture have attempted to layer an understanding of architecture which accommodates ideas about what architecture *might* be (ideas about narrative, subjectivity, place-making, existentialism and phenomenology) upon our more established ideas about what architecture *must* be (economical, structurally sound, morally responsible, environmentally responsive). Literature has often played a role in these reconsiderations. Students have recently been encouraged to creatively write fictions about places they wish to represent or clients they wish to accommodate. Literature which specifically describes architectural ideas is often called upon to as impetus

to solicit architecturally rendered versions of the same (I am thinking particularly about Borges' short stories or Calvino's *Invisible Cities* which often appear on architectural reading lists and as parts of student projects). Some architects have crossed disciplines into creative writing; Thomas Hardy was trained as an architect, as were some members of the Talking Heads and De La Soul. However, it is seldom that we have attempted to employ biographical literature and the themes it offers as inspiration for architectural design. *The Immoralist* offers many themes which will be selectively chosen as the bases for our architectural projects.

Architecture and Existential Philosophy

Existential philosophy is that branch of philosophy which questions the meaning of human existence ... a project familiar to everyone of our time. Architecture, unlike the other arts, is unique because it can both represent and provide the setting for the playing out of human existence. Gide was writing at the turn of the last century .. in the same time frame as Nietzsche and Freud, two thinkers among many whose works substantially demarcate the existential nature of twentieth century thought. In this studio, consideration will be given to the fact that existential philosophy emerged at the turn of the last century and that as the millennium turns, it is absolutely crucial that we again question the meaning of human existence. Yet, the words of Gide reiterate that the question is timeless. "I make no claim to have invented this "problem;" it existed before my book; whether Michel triumphs or succumbs, the "problem" continues to exist, and the author offers neither triumph nor defeat as a foregone conclusion." The intention of this studio is to encourage individual architectural explorations of the many existential questions which both horrify and enhance our lives. *The Immoralist* deepens our level of articulacy of the problem while, at the same time, offering many different avenues for exploration. For this studio, students must choose from the issues offered in the text, those aspects of existential questioning which they deem to be most important. Explorations into other philosophical works which help to articulate particular issues will be encouraged.

Architecture, Structure and Materiality

It is extremely important that the literary and philosophical issues which form the basis of this studio enhance and amplify but do not convolute our own medium. Philosophy and literature attempt to explain and explore the world through words, but, the language of architecture is always expressed in building ... the physical manifestations of ideas. Although we will spend a good deal of time and effort in constructing philosophical and poetic stances about our program and client, the result of our work as architects is always built form. It is absolutely imperative that *The House for the Immoralist* be an exercise in the constructability and legibility of built form. Because we will be involved in designing a very small building, it must be stated, at the

outset, that extreme consideration will be given to designing the building with great concern for both concept and detail. This studio will be obsessive about the potential of 'small things' to address the very large question of existential meaning. We will be most concerned with the architectural interface between ideas and their manifestations. Our medium is building, not words. The most important intention of this studio is to test whether or not the making of architecture can address, in depth, the complex issues of the meaning of existence; issues upon which the not just the meaning of our medium, but also, the meaning of our lives is based. These are issues of morality, of sensuality, of sexuality, of race, of place, of cultural relativity, of freedom, and of choice.

The spirit of this studio, with its existential, philosophical and literary content, deliberately opens opportunities to question the meaning of existence and the role which architecture, as both representation of and setting for life, can and must play in that question. The dilemma of Michel, in *The Immoralist*, is that he prefers the physical/sensual over the moral/rational. By extension, one could argue that Michel would prefer architecture over philosophy. Our aim will be to explore the relationship between the two.

4. HOW BUILDING CAN BE A METAPHOR FOR HEALTHBUILDING AND COMFORT IN THE LIFE OF A SICK MAN AND ULTIMATELY BECOME AN INTEGRAL PART OF HIS "LIFESTORY"

The Reach House:

Architecture as a Metaphor and an Agent for Recovery

The construction of "The Reach House" is nearly complete. I designed it for and with Greg, a young man who, having been diagnosed with terminal leukemia, underwent a bone marrow transplant in another city weeks after the foundations were poured. The building of the house became a metaphor and an agent for Greg's recovery; the certain daily monitoring of its construction process replaced the day to day uncertainty about his health.

The Story:

Sited at Long Reach on the west facing bank of the Saint John River in one of the oldest settlements of Eastern Canada, the Reach House is a 1400-square-foot house on three levels. As its name would indicate, the Reach House overlooks a wide stretch of river where yachts cruise and race from early June until mid-October. In the winter, the river freezes and local inhabitants skate and ski on its wide expanse. I designed the Reach House in close collaboration with my client Greg, a young man who had purchased the land on the Kingston Peninsula in New Brunswick several years before.

The Kingston Peninsula is a piece of land which is bounded by two great rivers, the Kennebecasis and the Saint John. With its fertile soils, it is one of the older farming settlements in Eastern Canada. The gently rolling landscape is dotted with wood framed, cedar clad farm buildings and a several small churches, some of which date back to the

1830's. The river banks are fairly heavily treed, primarily with conifers. The peninsula can be reached by land, but it is primarily accessed year-round in three different locations by cable ferries. From the city of Saint John, it can be reached in approximately twenty minutes.

Greg grew up in Saint John. As a child, he had learned to swim and sail, ski and skate on the river. The landscape as well as the river are precious to him. He spent several years scouring the area searching for the right piece of land on which to build his house.

At the age of twenty-three, Greg had been diagnosed with a terminal form of leukemia. It could only be certainly cured if he were to undergo a bone marrow transplant with a donor whose bone marrow was a close match with his. Family members were tested. A matching donor was not to be found. When faced with the very high risk option of undergoing the operation with an unmatched donor, Greg chose quality over quantity. Because his drug treatment allowed him not to feel the affects of his illness, in his own words, he "decided that his life would be short but that it would be meaningful."

Because of the situation, the project began very slowly. The preliminary design was done in 1991. At the time, it was very much a dream. Although Greg owned the land, he was not really sure when or even whether, the Reach House would be built. Yet, the dream was important. Greg and I visited the site many times in different seasons. We noted the location of the sunrises and sunsets at different times of the year. We looked for natural clearings in the trees, animal tracks and the life and death cycles of various vegetation. One particularly strong memory was of being there in the middle of a very snowy winter day. We had to trudge in across the meadow because the roads were blocked by a recent snowstorm. On that day, we paced out the footprint of the building with our own footprints in the snow, but we didn't discuss when or whether the Reach House would really be built. Still, the dream was important. We proceeded to make more detailed design decisions.

Greg planned to build the house as a place where he could enjoy the land and the river which were so close to his heart and ingrained in his soul. In keeping with his desires to leave the site "untouched" and "natural," it was decided to remove as few trees as possible, just enough to excavate for the foundation and to enlarge the clearing to enhance the view. In the design, the house was carefully sited among the tall trees as close to the river bank edge as possible. Here the west-facing wide view to the river would be revealed through the trees over the cantilevered bowsprit shaped deck, which would taper around two sides of the house, like the deck on a sailboat.

As well as finding inspiration from the tall conifers along the river bank, and the ever-changing view of the river with its sailboats, the design for the Reach House was informed by the vernacular architecture of the peninsula. This inspiration took form in the choice of materials as well as details. For example, the upper level of the Reach House would be a lofted space similar to those found in local barns, with

master bedroom overlooking the living room to the view and spanning the diagonal at right angles to the ridge beam. Access to the loft was designed as a narrow pine staircase off the kitchen, reminiscent of those found in the local farmhouses. In keeping with local tradition, and to provide security, the ground floor walls adjacent to the glazed river-facing facades would be kept free of fenestration to accommodate two surface mounted sliding barn doors, which could be rolled into place and locked from the outside to secure the glazed area from the deck when the house was not in use. Its cladding would be of Eastern cedar shingles, locally milled and typical to the area. All of the millwork including kitchen and bathroom cabinets, closets in the foyer and built in bookshelves and sleeping benches in the living room were designed to be hand-crafted from pine by a local cabinet-maker. They were designed down to the last detail. They represented joy and promise. Yet, they were still a dream.

In the fall of 1993, plans for the Reach House took an entirely different turn. Greg had fallen in love with Susan and knew that they were destined to be together. He also knew that unless he decided to have the extremely high risk bone marrow transplant with an unrelated donor, this would never be. In October of that year, on Canadian Thanksgiving, Greg and Susan went together to the Kingston Peninsula and began to clear the land for the building of the Reach House. They went to the site every day and grew to know it intimately. I worked on the construction drawings. Late in the fall, a contract was negotiated with a local contractor. The Reach House would be built.

In the last weeks of December the foundations were poured. In the first week of January, Greg and Susan left Long Reach for Ottawa, where Greg was to undergo the bone marrow transplant.

A bone marrow transplant firstly involves the patient being administered high doses of chemotherapy intended to completely kill the entire immune system. The marrow of the donor is then injected and the patient is placed in isolation. Everything after that point is uncertain. When a donor is unrelated, like in Greg's case, the recovery situation is even more ambiguous. Months of uncertainty have to be patiently endured before the results of the operation can be known. During these months, answers to the question "How is your health?" or "How are you doing?" are not to be found.

Although they visited Ottawa often, Greg's parents remained in New Brunswick. They and I monitored the building of the Reach House and kept Greg and Susan informed of every stage of the construction process through telephone conversations, letters and photographs. In this way, the certain daily monitoring of its construction process replaced the day to day uncertainty surrounding Greg's health. In a recent speech to the Canadian Red Cross, Greg referred to the building of the Reach House as "a metaphor for his recovery." I believe that it was also an agent both for

his recovery and for his parents' endurance during the long and painful time of uncertainty.

When Greg was finally allowed to leave Ottawa and the watchful eyes of his doctors, he and Susan returned to the Kingston Peninsula. It was Canadian Thanksgiving, 1994. Although there were still complications, Greg's state of health was more certain than it had been since the time of his diagnosis. Greg proposed marriage to Susan at the Reach House.

The Reach House still awaits the finishing of the built-in cabinetry. It is currently being used as a weekend and vacation retreat in all seasons by the owner and various family members who in winter hike through the snowy meadows when the road is closed to enjoy its serene setting and in summer often arrive by boat to wade in, scale the bank, and enjoy sunny days on the deck among the treetops or on the beach while the sailboats drift dreamlike by.

CONCLUSION

As I mentioned in my introduction, this paper is only the first attempt to bring order and clarity to some of my ideas about the relationship between architecture and biography. It marks only the beginning of a larger investigation. Many of the implications of this work remain a mystery to me. I know that the building of the Reach House profoundly affected Greg's biography. I know that the examination of the lives of the Saints through reading *The Golden Legend* afforded my students in Rome a new opportunity. Through the reading they were able to address the question of whether architecture could profoundly resound with aspects of the human condition which transcended time and made it possible to face the prospect of building in the Eternal City. I know that the help of a carefully chosen and well written novel by Andre Gide (which itself is speculated to have been autobiographical) enabled students to expand and deepen their understanding of architectural issues in the design of "A House for the Immoralist."

I was inspired to read about Clare Cooper Marcus' request for more information in writing her book. Please share with me any thoughts or work which address these issues.

NOTES

- ¹ Marcus, Clare Cooper; *House as a Mirror of Self - Exploring the Deeper Meaning of the Home*, Conari Press, Berkeley, CA, 1995.
- ² Bambury, Jill; "Nightmares of Eminent Architects" in *Architecture of the In-Between*, ACSA Press, Washington, DC, 1990.
- ³ de Voragine; *The Golden Legend*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993.
- ⁴ I would like here to acknowledge the work of Prof. Lily Chi, who co-taught the studio with me.
- ⁵ Gide, Andre; *The Immoralist*, New York, Knopf, 1970.