

PLUMBERS IN THE WHITE HOUSE AND SPIDERS IN THE ROSE GARDEN: E-LIMINATION IN ORDER TO RENDER THE VEIL OF REPRESENTATION OBSOLETE

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SQUARE ONE

While researching and speculating on the origins of tectonics these two epithets caught my attention.

God lies in the detail. Aby Warburg
God is in the detail. Mies van der Rohe

These two simple statements are ascribed to two contemporary German thinkers of the early twentieth century, neither of whom is known to have directly uttered the phrase. Nevertheless, this figure of speech seems to truthfully describe not only a method and means of knowing a mystery through the meditation on clues left in the cognitive artifact, but also provides a clue to decode the work of the authors to which it has been ascribed.

Gertrud Bing wrote of Aby Warburg's teaching, that "It is possible to make human voices speak even from documents of seemingly small importance..." and that the problems which concerned Warburg were above all "the function of artistic creation in the history of civilization and the variable relation that exists between artistic expression and the spoken language." Warburg was seeking vestiges of the classical tradition that lay hidden in the treasury of western art. Between the lines of graphic and iconological images lie hidden the silent voices of past generations; stories that could be restored and interpreted. Reading between the lines of image and text required a method of interpretation, that assumed that an eternal poetic matrix provides a narrative framework for the continuation of primal stories and myths. The truth or "verum" that lay hidden in the artifact or "factum" was part of the mystery. Warburg's methodology has been adopted by scholars including Ernst Cassirer, Erwin Panofsky, and E. H. Gombrich as a basis for studies and "meditations" on cultural artifacts.

The enigmatic work of Mies van der Rohe is one of the most fascinating artifactual mysteries that architectural historians and theorists have attempted to solve. Mies' verbal silence about his work was as great in proportion as the absence in his architectural space. Mies left intentional proportional distances between the lines of his architectural and written text. These spaces are not barren, but in fact are themselves clues. Mies recorded bits of readings and thoughts in his notebooks. On one page written between 1927 and 1928, under the title, Lecture, Mies notes, "We are questioned by the Sphinx and life and death depends on whether we find the answer."¹ For both Warburg and Mies van der Rohe, finding solutions to life's mystery was not a past-time pleasure, but instead was the very essence of one's life work. This is the clue that both of these men left to us as well. Inherent in great works of art, is "the mystery to a solution."² As

in most mysteries, its nature has to "unfold" like a narrative, a game of chess, a forking path, a garden labyrinth or an organic blooming pattern.

But we want an order that gives to each thing its proper place, and we want to give each thing what is suitable to its nature. We would do this so perfectly that the world of our creations will bloom from within. More we do not want; more we cannot do. Nothing can unlock the aim and meaning of our work better than the profound words of St. Augustine: "Beauty is the radiance of Truth."
Mies van der Rohe, 1938

For both Warburg and Mies, works of art were extrinsic demonstrations of a fundamental intrinsic hidden nature. Warburg established principles and methods of "reading" and "hearing" these intrinsic voices, whereas, Mies established principles and methods to set this hidden order into place. With these two interactive methods in mind, this paper explores the intelligibility of cognitive artifacts. These past voices are reverberate in the crafted emblems and devices of the ancient and modern world. Forwarding them into the present/future post-industrial world entails weaving a tale between two capital cities and two houses that attempted to hold first families in a purified order. In the textured background of Washington, D.C., the figures of the White House and Rose Garden embody puritanical *New World* assemblies. Crossing over from the evolutionary Old World are the Utopian emblems and devices that are embodied in the reflective surfaces and tectonic details of Mies van der Rohe's appearing, dis-appearing and re-appearing Barcelona Pavilion.

ONE SQUARED

The process of occidental philosophical speculation was set into place with a Platonic geometrical progression that resembles a mechanism of splitting and doubling. In the *Symposium* Plato includes a story of human origins as a divinely dispensed splitting and doubling. The original bisection that Zeus inflicted on the first spherical beings was vertical and at right angles to each other, leaving the first individuals inherently two-fold beings.

our innate love for one another...is always trying to re-integrate our former nature, to make two into one, and to bridge the gulf between one human being and another...

The Neo-Platonic writings of St. Augustine to which Mies referred and subsequent neo-Platonic symbolists reverberate with this mono-mythological structure. The South Ameri-

can poet, Borges speculates on this geometric structure.

In the Paramenides—which is undeniably Zenonian in tone—Plato invents a very similar argument to show that the one is really many. If the one exists, it partakes of being; therefore, there are two parts in it, one and being; but each of these parts also has in turn both one and being, so that it is made up of two parts, and every part has these two parts, for the same principle goes on forever.
Borges, *Avatars of the Tortoise*, 1939

It is in this specular doubling that tectonics receives its origin and meaning. And it is here that our story begins also. Two primary and balanced typological figures appear in reflecting upon the origins of craft and tectonics. One appears in the form of crafted metalworks as demonstrations of an emerging creative demi-urge. The other appears in the form of crafted textiles as demonstrations of an eternal poetic matrix. Each figure presents an embodied voice from the past and the future. In archaic and classical Greek poetry, significant devices of intricate and expensive craftsmanship that were assembled in a way to enchant or to cause the beholder to stop and wonder at its God-like appearance were spoken of as *daidala* and the chief maker of these marvels was given the name *Daidalos*.³ The most frequent occurrences in Homeric poetry referred to their manifestation in the form of armor, a protective barrier between the naked body and invading foreign bodies and projectiles. The most common qualities of these devices were, its' glowing and shining radiance, its' highly reflective characteristics, its' ability to strike wonder in the hearts and eyes of mankind in its' god-like appearance, its' trueness, and its' life-like characteristic of auto-kinetic movement. So life-like in fact, that many of these wondrous devices would run away unless bound or fastened by other well crafted devices such as chains, lines, or points. These fastening points, their tectonic joints, were many times fastened in the back of the body, like the greaves that guarded the shins of Achilles, which were fastened with silver ankle-points. The god double of *Daidalos* was *Hephaestus*, the smith, who lived in a house that was "indestructible, bright as the stars, shining among the gods, [and] built of bronze."⁴ Homer describes the making of Achilles' armor and shield in similar terms and when describing the shield, "across its vast expanse with all his craft and cunning, the god creates a world of gorgeous immortal work."⁵ The Greek poet sings the details of this world order as the smith forges the emblematic icons onto the shielding device attempting to ensure the remaking of this order in the future. This world ordering device, iconographically spelled out two scenarios, the first of an unbounded outside other, "Strife and Havoc plunged into fight, and violent Death," the second with a healthful bounded and bountiful order, where innocent youth danced and courted, where girls wearing "robes of linen light and flowing, [and] the boys wore fine spun tunics with a gloss of oil." The symmetrically counter-balanced figure to this perilously fleeting and winged inventiveness was *Minerva*[*Athena*]. *Minerva*[*Athena*] are figures of the poetic and sometimes fabulous craft of spinning yarns and knotting threads in the place holding frame work of the vertical loom. The winged figure of *Athena* was also the goddess of the city. Weavings and weavers are emblematic structures that provide two dimensional orthogonal frame work s that in turn provide a biased fabric to hold the wonders and wanderers linked and united in time and space. Each of these figures appear as purifying agents and devices when employed to embody a

perfected order. Do these figures still appear in our hyper-critical, self-conscious and self-referential orders?

WHITE SQUARE

Subject to aerial survey and suicidal plummets, object of political demonstrations and political intrigue, the most public of private households in our globally networked village is THE White House. This icon of New World democratic capitalism sits in the wings of Washington's power I formation where the people's house combined with the states' house, stands at the head, in its shining armor, wreathed and crowned like Hesiod's *Pandora*.⁶ The house of the First Family stands aligned with the crossing of the Washington Monument, the Mall, and the Jefferson Memorial. The silent voices of this capital house, set in stone, and wreathed by a garden arose amidst a neo-classical democratic Arcadian dream. One family, the First Family, held safely in one house standing in the center of a garden, in the image of the First Garden, each one figural and representative in nature, stood in the epi-center of the New World, embodying a utopian order of "Agrarian Equality."⁷ Central to the nature of this household was the First Lady, who was symbolically represented through the veiled figure of rose and gossamer tracery. The hard white stone of the mason was softened and cultivated by the stone artisan who ornamented the column capitals with a blossoming cabbage rose and elaborated the north portico with a semicircular rose tracery window and crowned the threshold with a garlands of roses. First Ladies from Abigail Adams to Eleanor Roosevelt appeared publicly in white gowns adorned with floral motifs and often carried a bouquet of roses.⁸ First Lady Anna Harrison's directives in renovating the White House in 1889, attempted to equalize the mechanically derived oval rooms and offices with conservatories, a public art gallery, by placing her private garden in the central courtyard. The garden with the first Lady as its figurative center would have effectively subordinated the oval drawing room. In the renovations of 1909 by McKim Mead and White, subsequent renovations in 1913 and finally the bureaucratic reorganization by the Roosevelts in 1930's and 40's, that the Oval Office and Rose Garden achieved iconic parity with the White House.⁹ Electronic media arriving at the same time focused on these three bounded spaces for public messages, conferences, and state receptions.

This puritanically ordered house now stands surrounded by armed guards and electronic surveillance devices, encased as one author has coined, under "Eighteen Acres Under Glass." To the south of the axial crossing of the Mall, a winged cut has been forged into the fabric of the white city. A winged figure has re-discovered the depth of dark polished stone, like water, that captures a kernel of truth, that e-liminates the past in its surface reflection and speaks from the depth of an inner, deeply hidden well spring while re-minding the participant whose face is caught in the reflective transition of the essential nature of one's own image.

FOUR SQUARE

*Hard it is on the one hand to become
A good man truly, hands and feet and mind
Foursquare, wrought without balance.*
Plato, *Protagoras*, 333

Across the reflective surface of the Atlantic Ocean, stood for a brief and shining moment, the paragon of an emerging modern German international industrial spirit and one of the most significant architectural accomplishments of the twentieth century. Mies van der Rohe's most enigmatic work of the building art stood in material form for less than a year, but its signification has eclipsed its materialization. The official request to design and build a German *Repräsentationsraum*, that is, a space for formal and ceremonial purpose had as its nationalist purpose, the presentation of post-war Germany as a peaceful, prosperous, culturally productive, and internationally minded society. The German Pavilion of the Barcelona International Exposition stood formally at the wing of the power axis formation of the fair grounds on the hill known as Montjuich. At the head of this axial formation stood the domed National Palace. Crossed at the half-way point, a transverse axis in the form of a grand central plaza, this capital formation was anchored at the west end with a horizontal German Pavilion arising out of a Roman Podium, standing upright and perpendicular to the plaza facing a field of formal garden elements terminating on the east with another pavilion (an Athenaeum) representing the city of Barcelona. To the south stood the walls of the palace of the king, Alfonso XIII. Balanced symmetrically on the main axis an almost identical counterpart stood the palace of the queen, Eugenia Victoria.

BLACK SQUARE, RED QUEEN

At the center of the German Pavilion in a gridded field of orthogonal lines, lay an absolutely black carpet, on which two chairs rested side by side. A red curtain was pulled across the slightly blue-green glass. A gold book lay on a table, waiting for the signature of the royal couple. Crafted in chromium plated steel, the armor-like mirrored finish of the cross axial frame reflected not only the political position of its intended royal occupants, the king and queen, but also its platonic geometric doubling progression. The Barcelona chair designed as a royal throne owes its extrinsic form to its hidden inner structure, physically and metaphysically. This chair's extrinsic resemblance to the curule chairs of classical antiquity as revived in early nineteenth-century neoclassicism has been noted by other interpreters seeking clues to its mystery.¹⁰ In 1809, Henri Latrobe designed a bench and chair that re-figures this royal setting for President Madison and First Lady Dolley Madison.¹¹ The curule chair form was also familiar to Spanish medieval castles and feudal estates of Spain. The similitude of these forms is not in its physiognomy, but rather in its typological structure that touches a resonant inner chord. If we return to Plato's story of human origins as a primordial splitting and doubling, the typological figure of a *labrys* found in ancient Greek hieroglyphics appears. The *labrys* is, a figure composed of two triangles joined at their apices, brings together in a single outline several images associated with a labyrinth. As an image of the sky god, the *labrys* suggests the form of his originating presence to the human race, for the axe's splitting edge is itself doubled. This double ax (x) appears split along its axis and joined at its point of intersection. This figure appears in the frame of the classical curule chair and the Barcelona chair. The inner physical structure of steel and its capacity to be welded into a unitary flow of forces provides the modern means and material basis of this marvelous framework. The X structural framework effectively

negates the oppositional forces within through a moment connection at the point of intersection. In the case of the Barcelona chair, the shining surface of the frame de-materializes the artifact through e-eliminating any apparent disorder by concealing its representational status.

The typological structure of the Barcelona chair is analogous to the linguistic structure of American symbolist writings of the nineteenth centuries, in which textural self-inclusion is a function of the coincidence of the text's title and the name of the central symbolic object the tale presents. The Barcelona chair like *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, or more importantly Poe's "Purloined Letter," is a self-included linguistic representation of the text's own representational status, in effect a symbol of the conditions and limitations of representationality.¹² The aspect of the *chair*, like the *letter*, is made clear by concealing the symbolic object in the open. The Purloined Letter was first concealed by the queen in her royal boudoir by setting the letter in plain sight on the surface of the table and secondly by the minister at the minister's residence "full in view of every visitor" after refolding the letter "in a reversed direction," turning it like "a glove, inside out." In the case of Poe's "Purloined Letter" the e-verting of the symbolic object evokes the principal mystery of writing—"that letters (written characters) on the surface of a sheet of paper somehow physically "contain" or "conceal" something metaphysical (thought)."¹³ Mies' chair as Poe's letter polishes the outer surface of the container, e-eliminating the scratches on the surface (the physical visibility) that can incriminate the subject in favor of a deeper significance of the contents which is protected by its surface reflective radiance. The intelligible "kernel of truth" which is protected from unknowing and insensitive physical inquisition. The penetration into the absolute depth of the significant artifact is in fact metaphysical.

Mies presents what seems to be an obvious example of the alignment of the container/contained (signifier/signified) distinction with the physical difference between outer and inner.

...on 26 May 1929...King Alfonso XIII and Queen Eugenia Victoria of Spain entered the newly completed German Pavilion of the Barcelona International Exposition and affixed their signatures to a golden book.¹⁴

The exposition closed eight months later in the shadow of the world financial plummet of October 1929. The construction materials from the pavilion were disassembled, packaged on a freight train, bound for Germany and were reported lost in transit. The Barcelona chairs were also lost, but later reproduced and manufactured in quantity. Removed from their royal setting, the constructional aspects of the chair lay exposed, analyzed, and physically reproduced. Hundreds of these elegant chairs grace some of the finest buildings and museums of the world, not unlike the many types of curule chairs. However, these chairs contain a message hidden in the open like the "Purloined Letter."

SQUARE ONE

The god it [the detail] points to is within ourselves, not outside us in some celestial yonder, but imaginary this makes little difference ..le "Livre" de Mallarme, Jean-Paul Richard

In an interview with Mies at the end of his life, in reference to his earlier thoughts on building, he stated,

In Gothic architecture, for example, all details help to illuminate the theme. Construction follows basic laws, and cannot be representational. To express meaning we used to talk about structure. Construction is about facts and structure gives the facts meaning.

NOTES

1. Neumeyer, Fritz. *The Artless Word, Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, The MIT Press, (Cambridge MA, 1991), p.279
2. The phrase "mystery to a solution" is taken from the title and premise of John T. Irwin's book by the same name, *The Mystery to a Solution, Poe, Borges, and the Analytical Detective Story*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (Baltimore, 1994).
3. Sarah P. Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art*, Princeton University Press, (Princeton, 1992)
4. Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 18: 432, trans. Robert Fagles, (1990)
5. *Ibid*, 18: 560-564
6. *And around her head she placed a crown which he himself had made, the famous all-clever-one [Daidalos] working it with his hands, pleasing Zeus the father and he placed on it many daidela, a wonder to behold...and much grace shone forth-wondrous creatures, like unto living voices.* Hesiod, *Theogony* 578-84
7. This order is described by James Edward Oglethorpe, *Some Account of the Design of the Trustees for Establishing Colonies in America*, ed. Rodney Baine and Phinizy Spalding, University of Georgia Press, (Athens, Georgia, 1990)
8. William Seale, *The President's House, A History*, White House Historical Association, (Washington D.C., 1986)
9. Natalie Fizer and Glenn Forley, "Opening the Oval: A Study of the Oval Rooms of the White House, Washington, D.C.," paper delivered at the 1992 ACSA Southeast Region Annual Conference and printed in the Conference Proceedings.
10. Ludwig Glaeser, *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe: Furniture and Furniture Drawings from the Collection and Mies van der Rohe Archive*, (New York, 1979), p.10
11. William Seale, *The President's House, A History*, White House Historical Association, (Washington D.C., 1986)
12. John T. Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution, Poe, Borges, and the Analytical Detective Story*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (Baltimore, 1994) p.22-42
13. John T. Irwin's book by the same name, *The Mystery to a Solution, Poe, Borges, and the Analytical Detective Story*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (Baltimore, 1994) p.22
14. Neumeyer, Fritz. *The Artless Word, Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, The MIT Press, (Cambridge MA, 1991), p.160