

Navigating The Self: Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's Exploration of American Architecture

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LIFE AND WORK

The story of Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's life reads as a condensed version of the history and diaspora of the German avant-garde. She was born in 1903 in Loschwitz, near Dresden, as the daughter of the architect Martin Pietzsch. Her education clearly suffered from the First World War, but she didn't wait for the situation to improve and left home at the age of seventeen to pursue a career as an actress. She acted in many theatre pieces and films, and lived in several German cities. In 1929 she married Carl Dreyfuss, a wealthy man and a close friend of Theodor Adorno. The economic crisis however diminished his wealth and the marriage soon came to an end. She met Moholy-Nagy in the early thirties, while she was working as a scriptwriter. When she became pregnant, she refused to have an abortion and promised Moholy that she would, all on her own, take care of herself and their child. Their daughter, Hattula, was born in 1933, and Sibyl indeed managed to make a living for the two of them. Moholy however was quite unexpectedly enthusiastic about being a father and their relationship continued along a more conventional pattern. They married in London in 1935, where their second daughter, Claudia, was born there in 1936. Sibyl followed Moholy to Chicago, where he established the Institute for Design. She became closely involved in the organization of the school, all the while trying to launch herself on an independent career as a writer. She succeeded in publishing a first book, a novel, in 1945: *Children's Children*.

When Moholy-Nagy died in 1946, this was the cause for many grievances on her part, but also the starting point for her transformation into an architectural historian. She published his biography *Moholy-Nagy. Experiment in Totality* in 1950. Already during Moholy's life, she had been commissioned to take up teaching duties in his school. She now decided to make good use of this experience and to specialize in the history of architecture. Her first appointment was in San Francisco; in 1951 she came to Pratt Institute where she would remain a professor until 1969. During these years she published three more books. *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture* (1957) was based on extended fieldwork, which brought her across the continent. The book presents vernacular architecture in America, which, she claims, has been ignored by architectural culture out of a misplaced disdain for local traditions. It discusses the factors of site and climate, of form and function, and of materials and skills. Its final chapter assesses 'a sense of quality' which is present in this vernacular, but absent from the real estate developments that she sees booming all over the country. Her basic argument is: 'To provide *the home as an ideal standard* is still the architect's first cause, no matter how great and rewarding are his other contributions to monumental and technological building. (...) As those builders of old, the architect of today has to create *an anonymous architecture for the anonymous men* of the Industrial Age.' (Moholy-Nagy 1957: 23)



Figure 1: Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, photograph on the cover of *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture*.

After *Native Genius* she published another 'American' book: *Carlos Raul Villanueva and the Architecture of Venezuela* (1964). Four years later came *Matrix of Man* (1968), published from a manuscript she developed throughout the 60s during her teaching at Pratt, where she had a very successful course on the history of urban settlements. It was meant to be the first volume of a larger whole called *Canon of Architecture*, but her early death in 1971 prohibited the finishing of this larger project. Moholy-Nagy is in this book especially interested in the conceptual origins of cities, which she categorizes according to five configurations: geomorphic, concentric, orthogonal-connective, orthogonal-modular and clustered. Apart from these books she wrote the introduction for the book *Paul Rudolph* (1970) and published numerous articles, most of them in *Architectural Forum* and *Progressive Architecture*. As a critic and a historian she was sharp, witty and polemical.

THE EXPERIENCE OF EMIGRATION

The early years of Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's emigration coincided with the last decade of her marriage to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (he died in 1946). This decade was a very difficult period for her since she was not satisfied with the life she led (although her discontent doesn't transpire so much in the Moholy-biography, it does all the more in her diaries). As the wife of an important artist and teacher, she was expected by her husband to deal with all household affairs, but also to help with the school, and that on a more than occasional basis. She acted as an assistant

to him in many different circumstances, e.g. organizing the summer course the school held in Somonauk, a town at two hours distance from Chicago. For all this laborious work, she felt that she didn't get real recognition, whereas she had to back down on her own aspirations to become a writer. This ambition was also hampered by her originally insufficient knowledge of English. Although she came from a cultured family, she had, because of her rebellious youth and the war circumstances, never had a formal education. During the first years of her migration, her English was adequate but not very sophisticated, but she was dedicated to mastering it more and more. From 1939 onwards her diary entrances and personal notes are in English, witnessing of her desire to integrate in the States. Repeatedly she sent fiction manuscripts to publishers, hoping to get something published, but she only succeeded in this ambition in 1945, with *Children's Children* (published under the name of Sybil Peech).

That she wasn't very content with her life at this point is clear from a diary entrance at the date of her fortieth birthday:

*'But the panic of failure is there. Ten more years to go —. I have not succeeded in becoming a writer, and if I don't succeed in these next ten years, I shall not make it. (...) Now at forty, I have the husband, the marriage, the children, the home, the occasional lover, the health, and tolerably good looks (although I am far from keeping up unusually well under the years). But the work, MYWORK, the contribution I was so deeply convinced I could and would make to the world of objective values, is far from being accomplished.'*¹

From May 13, 1945 dates a remarkable piece in her personal notes that witnesses of her ambivalent feelings at the time of Hitler's defeat.² The piece was written on the Sunday after the final victory of the allied forces. The central theme in this text is her sense of a torn identity on three levels at once: as a German citizen, as a member of a family and as a woman. Until 1933 her German identity was self-evident, if not unquestioned. Her education was one which stressed the ideal of *Bildung*, which made her part of the German youth movement, and which underlined her elite heritage. This rather conservative and traditional upbringing of course came into conflict with her sympathies for the avant-garde and with the circle of theatre people and film makers she moved in during the twenties. In her youth, however, this conflict was felt as one among generations and not as one that was tearing apart her own being. It was only after 1933, when Hitler came to power, that it really became a dividing line among people with different alliances. Sibyl supported Moholy's choice to go to the United States. Both of them were enthusiast about the possibilities this new country was offering them. After a couple of years, Sibyl sought to become an American citizen, something she succeeded in only in 1946, after the war.

In her 1945 text it is clear that she felt in an intermediate situation, not thoroughly German any more, not American yet. Her notes indicate that she didn't feel like the average American, who only reveled at Hitler's defeat. Her feelings were much more ambivalent, since she mourned about the German people, about the little people, whom, she thought, were falsely accused of being responsible for the wreckages brought about by the war. She also mourned about her family, about her elder brother that fell at Leningrad and whom she was deeply estranged from. Her brother was a model nazi, and the two of them had grown into straightforward enemies.³ She moreover indicated that she felt torn as a woman too. She felt obliged to show her children an harmonious and unbroken self, whereas this appearance did not coincide with her inner reality. She chose the image of a woman who killed herself as a symbol of what was haunting her:

'A woman had killed herself an hour before by jumping from a 12th floor fire escape in our alley. Her body was lying there, covered scantily with an old curtain, and I told myself without reason and without justification that I understood why she had done it. But I did not. I

lay on the couch, listening for a while to the celebrations roaring out of the radio. I was dazed and happy and ashamed. WHY WAS I NOT HAPPY?'

Her relation with Moholy apparently didn't leave any room for emotional exchanges either:

'Laci came home. There is an unwritten code among emigrants- even when you are married. One never touches on emotional complications. Every reference to Europe or to the past is guarded, casual, uttered only after the emotion behind it has been secured safely with an enforced dosis of self-control. There is an emigrant etiquette, and Laci has adhered to it the same as I. So the European victory, the defeat and death of the greatest objective enemy we had known in our lifetime, the end of twelve incredibly strenuous years, was mentioned between us only in passing.'

Therefore she turned to her writing to cope with her ambivalent feelings and her unhappiness, a strategy she would continue to adhere to in the years to come. Also after Moholy's death she took to writing as a productive way to deal with her sorrow. Not only his biography, but also her later writings can be seen as vehicles she used to come to terms with the difficulties of living the life of a female intellectual and an independent woman. That she did feel that she succeeded at least in some sense, can be deducted from a diary entrance from 1953, at her fiftieth birthday: 'I have made a success of sorts of my life, considering that I started a career from scratch six years ago.'

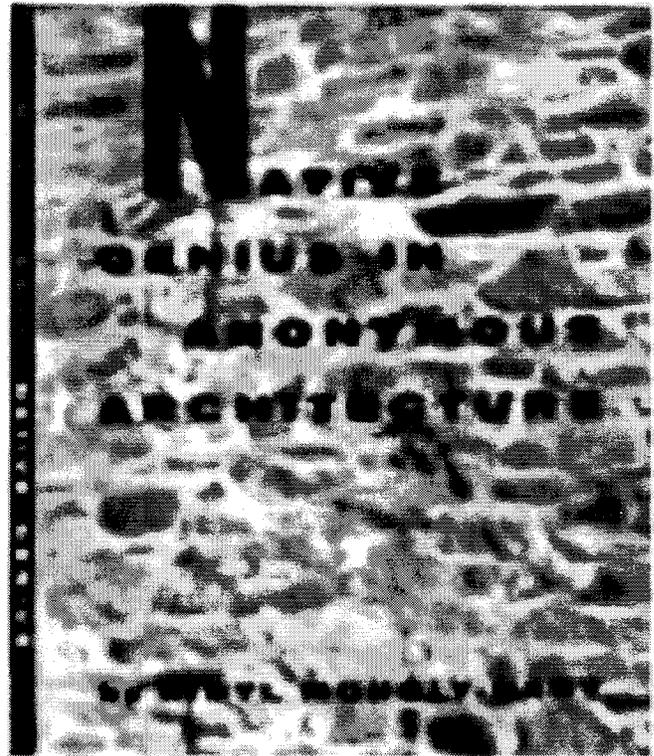


Figure 2. Cover of *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture*.

TRAVELING THE CONTINENT

When Sibyl Moholy-Nagy sent the manuscript of *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture* out to a publisher, she added a note on the 'Genesis of the manuscript'. This note suggests that there is a certain parallelism

between her search for anonymous architecture, and her personal history: 'In search for an organic architecture for the living organism, I started to focus my attention on the basic houses and work buildings that had been constructed out of an intuitive comprehension of a specific need without the benefit of architectural theory. I discovered an astonishing number of examples in the Americas which combined my father's classical ideal of form harmony and site response with the contemporary demand for functionality and adequate materials.'⁴ Knowing how she felt about her lack of a formal education, it is not difficult to see that her scholarly search for 'buildings that had been constructed (...) without the benefit of architectural theory' is echoing her personal search to establish a teaching career as an architectural historian without the benefit of a strong university education.

Elsewhere she recollects, at a much later date (December 30, 1956 – a day before New Year's Eve, indeed a day to look back), some memories about her trip to Latin America in 1953:

'As I thought back over the enormous effort of this trip and the work preceding it, I felt no pride and little enthusiasm for the building specimens I had collected like butterflies in labeled kodachrome tins / All I remembered at that moment in the dark were the women I had seen – women in straw jakals of Vera Cruz, in mountain Cailles and shoddy brothels in Haiti; women in the ruined haciendas of the Mexican highland, and in the graceless stone fermes of the Isle de Orleans in the St. Lawrence. That night I felt an overwhelming compassion with the young and hopeful girls, the work harassed mothers, the wrenched-dry hags who were part of an eternal cycle that defined womankind. I wanted to be part of it – be rid of the exception – bow low and be woman and nothing else.

*'But somewhere in back of me across the beach stood my jeep which I had learnt to drive like a man. I handled it like a trainer handles a horse for maximum performance. And back in the same darkness stood the Mexican man who was my guide. Him too I had learnt to handle like a tool. (...) In these weeks I was all man because I had chosen an idea. I was after the truth, but I was also after the gratifications of recognition. Was I old – beyond being a woman?'*⁵

It is clear from these passages that her traveling meant a lot for her identity as an independent woman. This identity was not an obvious one. Throughout her years with Moholy, she had to accept a secondary position, and immediately after his death she did one of the most obvious 'widow's thing' by writing his biography. She really had to struggle to become a woman of her own. This struggle was apparent in her diaries already before Moholy's death, but probably did not very strongly transpire into her public persona as his wife and assistant. After his death and even more so after writing the biography, she gradually developed into a strikingly strong and self-conscious individual. At this point in the notes, she seemed to doubt whether this self-sufficiency was compatible with womanhood, as she was likening herself to a man because she had 'chosen an idea' and because she was 'after the gratifications of recognition'. Nevertheless this doubt doesn't last long, since the same text continues a further like this:

'As my tension and my bewilderment grew less and my nerves calmed down, I saw in a flash all I had ever been: child and daughter, student and teacher, servant and master. I had been matriarch and mistress, wife and adulteress, renegade and moralist – all innocent and all Sibyl. And through it all I had been different far beyond physical characteristics from every man alive. In all the transformations, in the breathless kaleidoscope of becoming, being, and becoming, there had been a common denominator, real as granite and unchallengeable as revealed truth. As I strained against the

heavy air closing in again with impenetrable sheets of hot rain I knew that what had redeemed me was an infallible instinct that had taught me how to remain a woman.'

Together with her growing confidence as a woman and as a scholar, there is also the certainty that she has transformed herself into an American at heart. The same text recalls that

'(...) Less than 3 years before that night on the Gulf of Campeche I had been back to Europe, back to Germany where I had come from, back among my old friends, lovers, and among my own family. (...) And I had felt a tenderness and a nostalgia for America which I would never have thought possible. The word 'home' – completely alien to me since I left my father's house at 17, had suddenly acquired meaning. I belonged in America.'

SEARCHING FOR AN AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE

In *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture* Moholy-Nagy claims that both Americas – or 'the Western hemisphere' as she says in her book – dispose of an enormous wealth of valuable anonymous constructions. Most American people, however, are blind to this rich heritage, because they tend to look for architectural significance elsewhere, in Asia or in Europe rather than close to home. Nevertheless the American vernacular has, according to her, a series of qualities which often are absent from its European equivalent. Whereas folk architecture in Europe is rarely without the influence of the omnipresent stylized forms of high culture, the American vernacular often reaches a purity of expression that has to do with four aspects:

'One: The unsupplemented use of native building materials and local construction skills.

Two: Planning and massing as the result of specific unduplicable functional requirements and site conditions, regardless of symmetry or generally accepted taste canons.

Three: Absence of any ornamentation that is not part of the structure. Four: Identity of enclosing form and enclosed space.' (Moholy-Nagy 1957: 44-45)

American vernacular at its best reaches a unity between structure and appearance, that is very much sought after by contemporary modern architecture, but that has been achieved much earlier (and much better, she seems to imply) by e.g. the adobe builders of New Mexico. (Moholy-Nagy 1957: 124) In that sense, this vernacular prefigured certain qualities which also characterized the promising American architecture that was coming into its own in the early 20th century. In a later article, Moholy-Nagy speaks about the 'unbroken evolutionary continuity' that links the 1890 Wainwright Building in St. Louis with later examples of high office buildings in Philadelphia and New York. (Moholy-Nagy 1968b: 42) The skyscraper designers, she thinks, provided the centers of urban progress with a uniquely American profile, thus opening the way for the country's architectural self-image. This image spoke of a delight in articulation, ornamental detail and terminating form, but remained firmly based on the technological prerequisites conditioned by the use of steel and concrete. Thus there emerged an 'American functionalism', that was well apt to testimony to the era of free enterprise and architectural urbanity. This functionalism, however, was contaminated and spoiled by the arrival in the thirties of the German refugees, who imported a German functionalism which was ideological rather than structural. They thus terminated 'the most important era in American public architecture'. (Moholy-Nagy 1968b: 42)

For Moholy-Nagy it was Frank Lloyd Wright who stood out as the best American architect, because he 'raised regionalism to a new level, far above the sentimentality of Voysey or McKim'. (Moholy-Nagy 1959: 136) His mature work shows no trace of European influence, but rather responds to the local conditions of site, climate and context, witnessing of his love for the land and his sensitivity to the pleasures of dwelling. Thus he 'took an entire continent and proposed to express its innermost character'. (Moholy-Nagy 1959: 321)

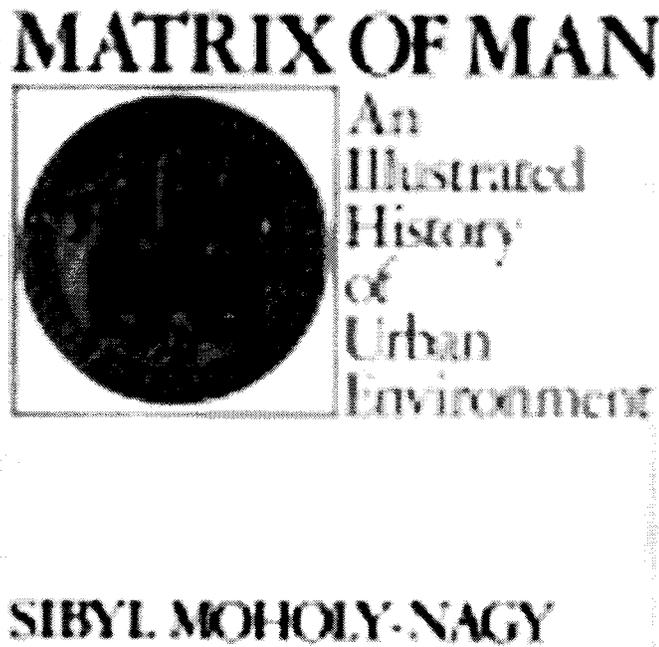


Figure 3. Cover of Matrix of Man.

Matrix of Man can be considered Moholy-Nagy's most elaborated theoretical work. In it she processes her knowledge of American cities, weaving this narrative into a larger one discussing the history of urban origins. Her choice of a title is a very telling one. Matrix, the dictionary says, means several things, among others 'something that constitutes the place or point from which something else originates', 'a formative tissue', 'a mold for casting type faces'. It also means womb or parent stem. By using the term *matrix* Sibyl Moholy-Nagy clearly genders the city, qualifying it as a maternal body, giving life and nurturing man, while at the same time molding his form. The title is well-chosen indeed, for it is her prime argument that the city is source and origin of civilization, and while it contains everything that is worthwhile in human culture it nurtures and gives form to the intellectual and emotional life of the individuals that live in it.

Throughout the book, Moholy-Nagy stresses the importance of factors such as landscape, regional climate, tradition, culture and form. She repeatedly refers to the city as a symbol, a symbol not only of power, but also of human aspiration and participation. The city for her is a generative force, capable of molding people and civilizations, bringing forth creative energies and interconnectedness. She illustrates these arguments in discussing examples from all over the world, but her

experience in Latin America is often coming to the fore. As the most impressive example of geomorphic planning e.g. she names Machu Picchu, which 'achieves a total accord with the given environment because the sun worshipers conceived the city as a crown of nature, and nature as the crown of the city' (p. 28). Elsewhere she discusses Caracas, Mexico or Brasilia, to name just a few examples.



Figure 4. Machu Picchu, holy city of the Peruvian Incas.

In her criticisms of these cities, their planning and their architecture, it becomes clear that a certain 'clash of modernisms' is at stake. On the one hand, the whole set-up of her intellectual convictions is immersed by her being part of the avant-garde in Weimar Germany and by the legacy of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's teachings. She subscribes to the ideal of a universal, cosmopolitan humanity that would be liberated by the forces of intellectual freedom, democratic openness and aesthetic experimentations, while at the same time stressing the importance of not losing the connection with the past, with tradition, with culture, with landscape and climate. Her travels throughout the American continent have taught her that these are the factors identity is relying upon, and that it is a wrong strategy for planners and architects to sever the connections with them. On the other hand she thinks that certain tendencies within modernist architecture and urbanism go against the grain of this ideal of a modernist culture which hooks up with the past, because these tendencies embody a will to power from the part of their architects which is not compatible with the democratic desire of citizens to collectively give form to their cities and which does not take into account the values of tradition, landscape and climate. The bottom line of her discourse on the city seems to be that really great cities do come forth from a collective desire for the city, a desire that is recognizable as well in a series of specific and well-considered design decisions as in the long-term historical process in which the inhabitants themselves can take part in the making of their city, without being coerced in a pre-conceived model that wouldn't allow for any variation or new input. It might be because she discerns a parallelism between the city's desire to come into its own and her own desire to be her own woman, that her discourse sounds so convincing.

NOTES

- ¹Dairy entrance from October 29, 1943 (Archives of American Art – microfilm roll 946, 0461-0464)
- ²Dairy entrance from May 13, 1945 (Archives of American Art – microfilm roll 946, 0465-0468)
- ³'Last Letter' to 'Brother Enemy', dated Chicago, February 3, 1942 (Archives of American Art – microfilm roll 947)
- ⁴Genesis of the manuscript 'Anonymous Architecture in the Western hemisphere'; submitting the book manuscript to Horizon Press (Sept. 1956) (Archives of American Art – microfilm roll 948, 0162-0165)
- ⁵Notes from December 30, 1956 (0573-0575 - roll 946)

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