

Walker Art Center

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Daniel Libeskind

The Myth of Site

Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing has never happened, still it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never. Against the feeling of having triumphed over them by one's own strength, and the consequent exaltation that bears down everything before it, no earthly powers can resist.

And when Ulysses approached them the potent songstresses actually did not sing, whether because they thought that this enemy could be vanquished only by their silence, or because the look of bliss on the face of Ulysses, who was thinking of nothing but his wax and his chains, made them forget their singing.

But Ulysses, if one may so express it, did not hear their silence; he thought they were singing and that he alone did not hear them. For a fleeting moment he saw their throats rising and falling, their breasts lifting, their eyes filled with tears, their lips half-parted, but believed that these were accompaniments to the airs which died unheard around him. Soon, however, all this faded from his sight as he fixed his gaze on the distance, the Sirens literally vanished before his resolution, and at the very moment when they were nearest to him he knew of them no longer.

“The Silence of Sirens,” excerpt from *Parables and Paradoxes*, circa 1920, Franz Kafka.

The Idea of Site

The episode of the Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey* tells of the allurements of the past: the entanglement of the Myth of Enlightenment and the Myth of Domination. Our “modern” hero conquers the temptation to self-destruction through suffering. He proves his maturity and establishes his identity by enduring displacement from those who knew “everything that ever happened on this so fruitful earth,” and from himself. The Sirens' promise of the irresistible pleasure of their song can be bought only at the price of bondage: perpetual presence of self-consciousness and the deaf labor of those who can never hear the song they make possible.

Obedience, labor; a devitalized “being” for those who must ignore temptation of presence and look only forward—the practical ones. The dissociation of Practice and Theory, Site and Object, Location and the Located.

The capacity to represent meaning in Architecture is a measure of domination. Conversely, domination is the most powerful thing that can be made visible in it. Paradoxically, this capacity of representation is a means of enlightenment no less than a vehicle of regression.

When the power of System becomes the system of Power, its course is irresistibly that of negation. In Architecture this negation is manifested today in the inability of architects to hear what they never heard and to touch the untouched in their resistance to nonexistent reality. For all its nonexistence, however, this abysmal truth is no less a Reality.

Contemporary conditions compel conformism in the form of nihilism and cast the truth of Place and Being into a twilight. The non-presence and forgottenness which thus prevails is not merely a trick of history, the failure of fantasy or a ruse of Reason. It is rather a consequence of the acceptance of the technological-ideological “empire”—the last refuge of ancient and everpresent Fate.

100 Sites/100 Sights

The Last Laugh
Hindu fakir
Melancholia I
Aristotle & Phyllis
Artist and Reclining Woman
Theater of Automaton
Orangutan
Lamia
Medieval anatomy
Villa Sarego
Pendulum experiment
DeHumani corporis Fabrica
The City Coat of Arms
Perspective with strings
El sueño de la razón
Slaughtered ox
The Architect's dream
The Raft of Medusa
Severed limbs
Bouvard et Pecuchet
At the Brink of Chaos (Martin)
Glasgow Railway opening
Carceri, plate 7
Jonah
The Garden
Scholar in a room with stairs
De Ente et Essentia
Robinson Crusoe
The Opium-eater
Deformed tree
Prison lecture
Parmigianino with a Dog
Bearded woman (Ribera)
Dissection
Karlskirche
Eye diagrams
Fall of the Giants
Thesaurus Anatomicus
Deutschland über Alles
Patent clerks
Dream of the Professor
Buttermere Lake
Antique Fragments
Nature Morte, 1914
Virgin Mary
Banquet in the Thames Tunnel
Revival of Christian Architecture
The Nose
Missiles
The Burrow Laws
Leni Riefenstahl filming
A T & T demonstration (Peking)
Paris street
Alchemy & Philosopher's son
Letter to the Crocodiles
Blake: Vision of America
Zaum
Bellevue
Horus-Apollo
Carceri, plate 5
Evolution of the Mind of John Locke
Salto Mortale
Old Man of the Nile
A problem of Laws
Mickey Mouse
Bacon
The Bathroom
Four lines and knocking
Bollingen Tower
Victory at Samothrace
Hiroshima
Pier and Ocean
cage-cell
Orpheus
Maldoror's Equation
Goethe-Rousseau Complex
Autobahn gas
Ministry of Marine
Cartesian Solar System
Yellow quadrilateral
House within a House
Loos' tombstone project
Physiognomy
Conversation with a Priest
House for an Engineer
Cenotaph for Newton
Fall of Icarus
Eclipse of the Sun
Auschwitz plan
Progressive architecture
School at Fagano
Duchamp's fountain
13 Towers of Canareggio
5,837 couples with Rev. Moon
Laocoön
House X
Stock report-schema
Linear accelerator
Inside the Whale
Arctic Flowers

**Commonplaces
or non-existent topography**

The dread and terror of Architecture, the fear of destruction and death which it immortalizes is intimately associated in our minds with a promise of happiness which threatens civilization at every moment. Order and Disorder continually collaborate, and in a pincer movement seek to eliminate the consciousness of reality. This reality, whose site is not a piece of real estate, and whose ground can never be more than an absence, makes reparation and takes retribution for the injustice done in its name: There is no answer to the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

The old symbolism of Presence and Participation has almost evaporated from the occidental mind, condensing in its aftermath the salt of historical existence—a residue of reality now gone from the intellect.

*The fathers have eaten a sour grape,
and the children's teeth are set on edge.*
Jeremiah 31:29

*Architects, all idiots—they always
forget to put in the stairs.*
Flaubert

Sand falling silently into towers.

Ever since the decisive events of the Reformation and Protest which resulted in the reinterpretation of the soul, Architecture has been doomed. In this devolution, its form as well as meaning has been gradually hollowed out; it has lost substantial participation in the reality which it symbolizes. We are witness to the events in which the Architecture of presence turns into the Architecture of absence.

The reactions to the disappearance of Architecture are varied. For some it is still piously present. Some lament its passing. Some note its passing but do not lament.

The winds are dry and melancholy fills the void of anatomy.

Literature, Theater, Spiritual Text, Vision, the Vision of Vision. (Also included are cryptograms, cyphers and any form of illegible script.)

The struggle to maintain communion with what is really other has become more desperate: time is of no consequence and forgotten Being cannot be invoked to help.

Paramyths, Pataphysics, and Onto-theo-logy. Sudden departures into the Alps.

What remains of Architecture cannot be resurrected. The site of participation is conscious existence and the intellect is a sensorium of the nonexistent *reality* whose disappearance is fatal for the human.

A. Plan of Geneva
B. Portrait of an African Chief with a weapon

Commemorative plaque testifying that trains come on time
Gray, palpitating masses, hardly recognizable
Letter K and W

Sprechstimme

"Materials" of Architecture?

Causes, analogies, substances, continuities? Visualization lost but regained with a difference? Consequently the mirrors of Velasquez: the "father of Abraham, Jacob, Isaac . . ." Poor Pascal with his calculator playing a dirge for infinite space. Happy Cain on his dreadful flight into the abyss, in the company of the light carrier: Lucifer and the Problem of the two Altars. (see Byron's *Cain*)

What we *see* around us is what *we put there*. Where do we contact reality (which has never been ours)? Bouquets, which are the absence of flowers, imply that in coming into the desolation of Reality the props of orthodoxy and demythologization are insufficient.

There must be more than seven types of ambiguity; more than sixteen ways of looking at a blackbird; more than circular and linear patterns of history . . .

In conclusion: how can there be meaning which is not a differentiation of the process of someone's consciousness? How can there be meaning "already there," when the *site* of differentiation is itself inserted into the compass of disclosure?

Architecture as an original issue finds itself—through its experience of the history of metaphysics—dissociated from self-understanding. In placing its Truth at a distance from consciousness, architecture reveals a separation between its originality and that which withdraws in the process. In opening itself resolutely to the radical concealment of its own origin, architecture lets itself be drawn along in this withdrawal. Should we not follow where it beckons?

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Daniel Libeskind
Four Ages of Space 1982
One of a series of lithographs

p 25
Daniel Libeskind
Anatomy's Melancholy 1981
One of a series of pencil drawings



