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# The Threshold as Silence

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**An architectural exploration of the  
Krematorium Baumschulenweg,  
Berlin**

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Theory of Architecture I  
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**Krematorium Baumschulenweg**  
Treptow, Berlin, Germany (1996-1998)

**Schultes Frank Architekten**  
**Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank**

*"And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music"<sup>1</sup>)*

*"A box of rain will ease the pain, and love will help you through".<sup>2</sup>*

The changing light illuminates the boundaries of silence. At the threshold of change, shadows rain across time.

These are the aphorisms that embody the experiential hypostasis of the building.

We will leave the hypothesis to the scientist.

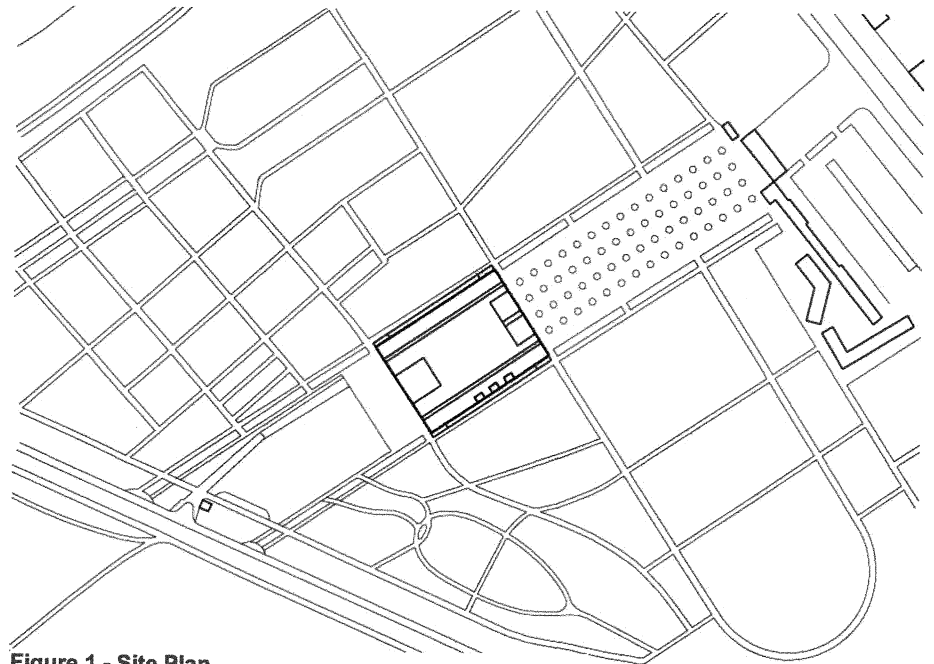


Figure 1 - Site Plan.

Silence is immutable, it is deafening, it is dense, and transparent in the darkness. Through this lens of silence, the silence of light and rain, and of time, the crematorium will be explored, and reciprocally, through the lens of *"gravity and light"*<sup>3</sup> the building will redirect our observations back onto silence. Through the use of metaphoric and enigmatic symbolism, the crematorium becomes a container of stories. It will have a

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Art Quotation, [http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth\\_search.php?authid=722](http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth_search.php?authid=722).

<sup>2</sup> *Box of Rain* Words by Robert Hunter; music by Phil Lesh on American Beauty, Ice Nine Publishing, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Frampton, p. 24.

different effect for everyone, as each individual participant experience and knowledge will be diverse. The building is in part, a threshold, a portal into alternate universes. Like a threshold, the building is an intermediary between “there” and here. Each threshold we pass over takes us into another space and sets up another set of expectations - a deceptive cadence, if you will – which continue to grow as our need for resolution develops. The threshold makes us intimate replications of our previous self.

Expectation encourages movement across these thresholds, where each threshold is a nexus into change. It is at the threshold where silence is encountered. Silence as both a frame for experience, and that which is framed by experience, becomes the source and localization of experience. Time, the superimpositional sense of suspension or warping of time in silence, and the repetition of successive thresholds of experience - of expectation, silence, and reward – further augments our journey through the site and building. Each threshold is approached with anticipation and trepidation.

We approach the building through sadness, crossing deliriously into the land of myth and dreams personified in the images of history and time. This is the promise of the building, its “wordless metaphor,”<sup>4</sup> to “connect the structure of mental events to the form and workings of our bodies.”<sup>5</sup> We move through the building, while at the same time it moves us. It is a dance with the architecture.

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<sup>4</sup> Edelman, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p.4

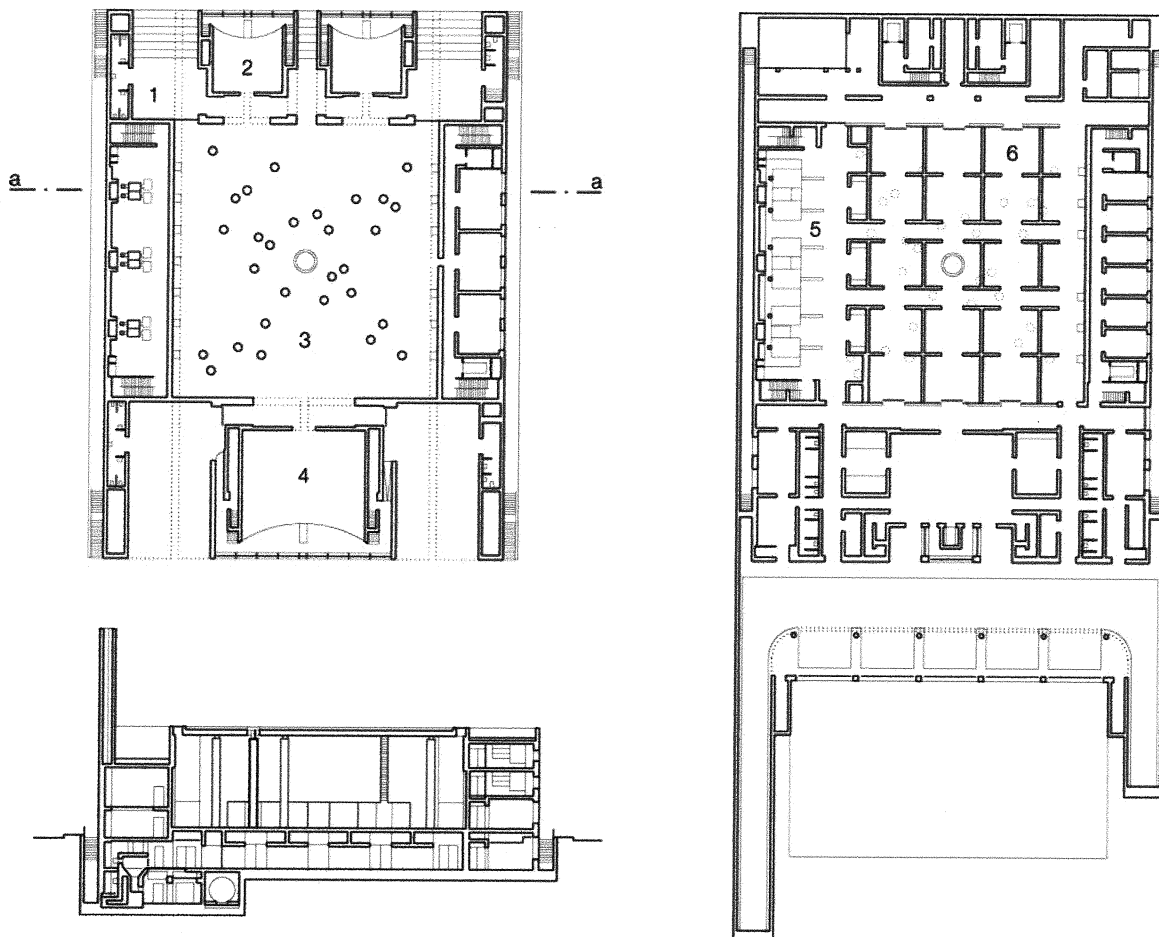


Figure 2 - First Floor and Basement Plans and Section

### The Building

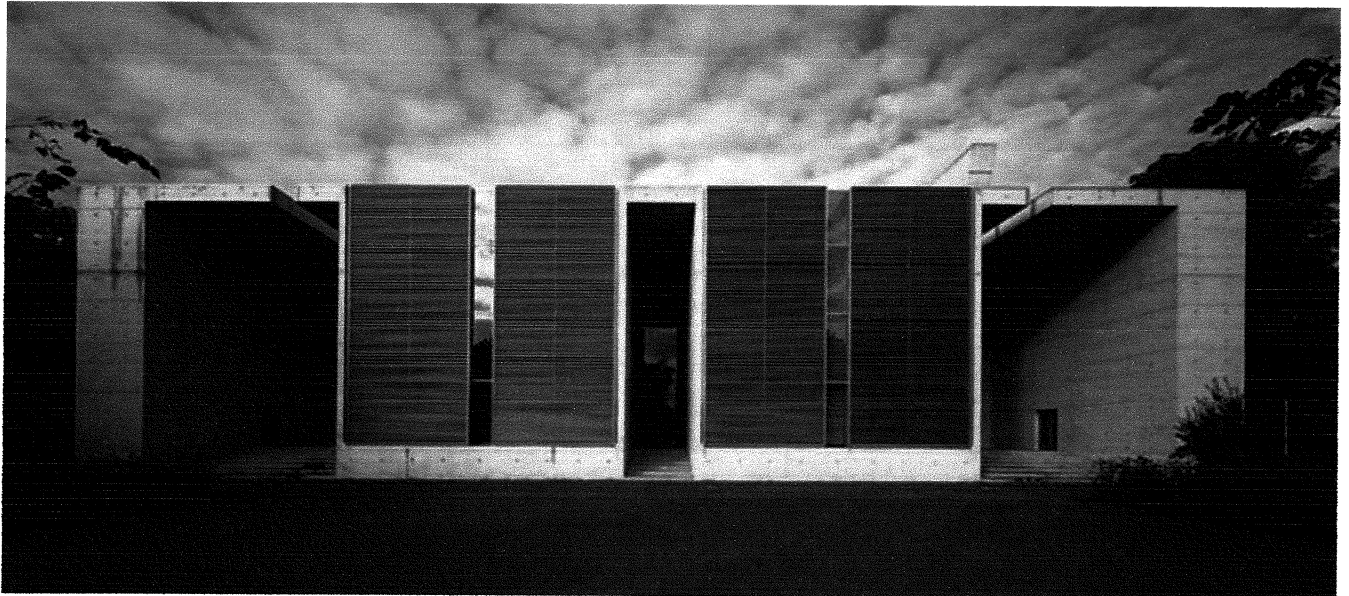
Beyond the arches of the old gatehouse, beyond the token marching trees lurking in the graveyards, a crucible sits heavily on its dire pedestal. So heavy, in fact, it has buried itself ten meters below the ground. The fires that consume our imagination will be secluded from the atrocities of man. By lowering the earth on either side of the building, it brings the world into the realm of death.

Ten meters above the ground, the perfunctory world of man persists.

actually, it seems!  
late 20th c.

The building appears absolute as if it had no origin, but its origins lie in its contextual relationship with the other. It relies on the imagination; at the threshold between revelry and anxiety, where “the poetic image” ruptures forth from the silence as a “sudden salience on the surface of the psyche.”<sup>6</sup> This creative idea is the limitless expression of universal truth. Here, materials and light are more than just materials and light, they become markers of a preternatural order of the senses, defining the limits of reality on the one hand, and opening the experience for imagination on the other.

Figure 3 - Front Elevation



Time seems to unravel as we see the new building for the first time. Our expectations of a conventional funerary experience have been betrayed. In fact, the existing *Alte Friedhof* gatehouse becomes an intruder upon the space. The preexisting building, with the weeping statue in the front yard (the only iconic representation to be associated with the new building) gives us the false impression that we will have a traditional experience when in fact we are being set up for other more significant experiences. Even the outer

<sup>6</sup> Bachelard, p. xv

courtyard, the promenade with its grid of recurring trees and outer hedgerows, turns away from the gatehouse to conform to the new building. In that simple gesture of aligning itself with the geometry and the order of the cemetery, the new building claims itself as an original set down in time.

Managing to resist any association with any specific religious values, the crematorium has the two-fold purpose of both venerating as well as disposing of the dead. These functions are not dichotomous, as they may appear. Isomorphically, the building resembles a gravestone, but that does not explain why it is here. While the cremations are conducted in the basement and subbasement, below the public domain, in the bowels of the facility, funeral ceremonies occur on the ground level floor amidst the ghosts and dreams of another time and place. It both contextualizes us in the moment, as well as takes us mentally to other planes of being.

It sets heavy on its haunches. Its crisp broad elevation seems to have been carved out of a solid block of stone.<sup>7</sup> *no sense!* With the exception of the inverted triangular chimneys, a feature that the designers have conspicuously tried to keep separate from the public domain, the building is rigidly symmetrical. The concrete edge band at the façade is vaguely reminiscent of an ancient text written in some asemic script<sup>8</sup>, however, the building is not just a narrative, it is a documentary. Furthermore, the building is not a monument, nor a tomb. But it has those qualities.<sup>9</sup> Its sharp elevation reminds us of the scale and symmetry of a mausoleum. And it could be at that, placed here with all of the urns and

<sup>7</sup> Eshelman, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Asemic script has no apparent meaning, doodles and such that look like text but are not part of any formal written language. From the medical condition *asemia*, in which the patient is unable to create meaning from symbols. See [www.asemic.net](http://www.asemic.net).

<sup>9</sup> Loos, p.15 "Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else that fulfils a function is to be excluded from the domain of art."

funeral stones that were scattered in the potter's field when the creators dropped the building on to the site.

Figure 4 - Front Entry



The louvers on the front façade, the only “solid” wall surface on the front and rear elevations, are deceptively transparent. The wall appears to be solid, but behind the louvers, curtain walls of glass evanesce into a peculiar metamorphosis of space-time and light. They simulate enormous translucent shutters<sup>10</sup>.

Stretching and soaring up the stairs, the entry is impolite. The narrow corridor is compressive but the climb upwards makes us aware of the divine nature of the undertaking. We climb to our

destination; it does not come to meet us, we come to be embraced.

*(Egyptian*  
this scale is often used in funerary architecture

Through this threshold of rising, we enter into the Hall of the Dead. Not so peculiar in and of itself, this square concrete vault, the inner sanctum, can accommodate up to 1,000 people and is spatially articulated by 29 round concrete columns placed, seemingly randomly, within the room. There is no residual space to be occupied;<sup>11</sup> there is only space for grieving and observing. The placement of the columns allows individual introspection or group participation without forcing any singular arrangement. They are fully abstracted, except as objects they become symbolic representations, as they pierce the ceiling of the space and allow sunlight to flood in through a circular gap at the head of

Brett - this  
is the  
first  
straight forward  
observation  
described  
in  
straight-  
forward  
language!

<sup>10</sup> We can detect, perhaps, a Venturian scheme taken to its extreme – shutter-as-wall – as an attempt to embed abstract references to time into architectonic features.

<sup>11</sup> Moneo, p. 60

the column. With these capitals of light, they express their columnness through the

manipulation of the image as metaphor - the columns appear to support the sky. - alternatively,  
*the plane of the roof reads as an intentional act of compression.*

Figure 5 - Hall of the Dead

*"I said that all material in nature, the mountains and the streams and the air and we, are made of Light which has been spent, and this crumpled mass called material casts a shadow, and the shadow belongs to the Light."<sup>12</sup>*



The shadow has a resonance of its own, a quality it gets from the slicing of the light through the blue louvers. The character of the light in the crematorium is intensified first by the outer shell of louvers and secondly, and most profoundly, by the Tyndall effect which uses color wavelengths to produce light at the blue end of the spectrum causing the space to have a fuzzy, hazy tint.<sup>13</sup> Circumstances require and engage a higher order of light. Shadows fall across the concrete walls. Walls that appear to be drenched in an abstract drizzling rain seem to vibrate and evanesce as the refracted sunlight is filtered through the louvered skylights hovering over the space like a "translucent canopy"<sup>14</sup>. This effect is most notable in the interior louvered walls of the adjoining ceremonial

<sup>12</sup> Lobell, p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> See Tyndall Effect and Raleigh's Scattering.

<sup>14</sup> Crematorium in Berlin, Detail.de, January 2001, p79-83



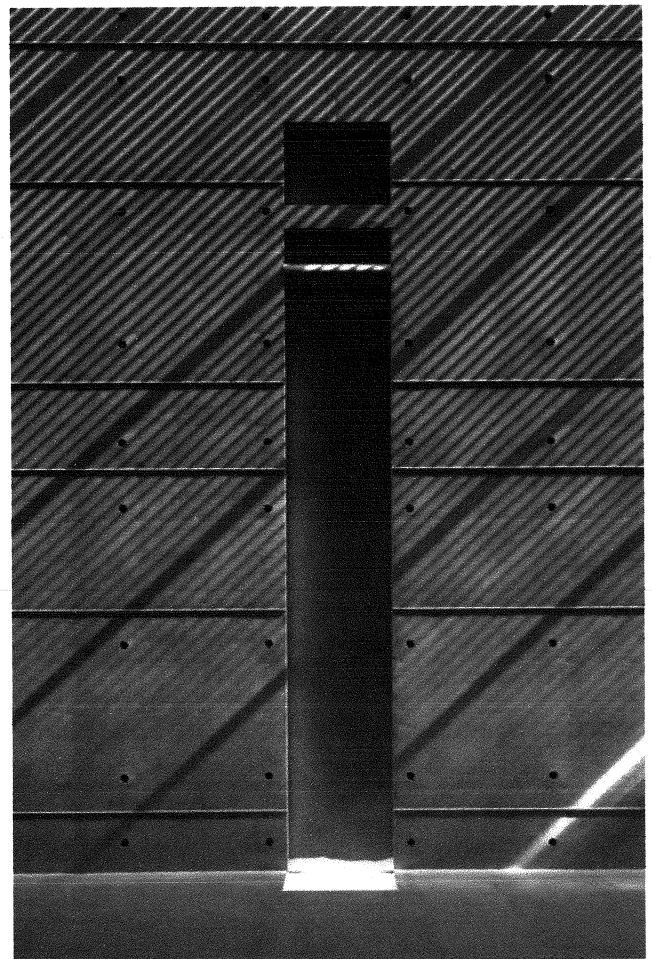
spaces, giving the impression of other-worldliness; obscure and symbolic, we are neither shut in nor allowed to fully leave. These walls are made to erode.

Furthermore, two parallel slots have been sliced out of the roof, cutting the building into distinct domains. These too are louvered, and allow the light to crease down the gigantic concrete walls. These slots travel the entire length of the building from front to back. We can see them manifested above the cavernous forecourts on the exterior. They too help arrange and define the progression of spaces in the building.

Symmetrically arranged on either side of the inner courtyard, regular rows of recessed pilasters – 13 niches with piles of lighted sand at their base - are carved out of the walls. The sand, representing the dissolution of matter into dust, is another allusion to the passage of time.<sup>15</sup> We imagine the light is coming from the furnaces below.

Like Siza, *“who accepts reality, the limits within which he must work, and yet adopts an attitude we could well call ‘possibilist,’ because he simultaneously proceeds to transform reality, in such a way that the conditions that seemed to limit the possibilities of the job actually become the origin of the work”*<sup>16</sup>

Figure 6 - Inverted Column of Light



<sup>15</sup> Eshelman, p. 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 214

These limits of reality, whether by nature or man, are restructured in the memories of the participants. On the nature of originality, speaking in terms of the first cause, it is the original that the symbol points to. The origin points to itself. The symbol is a replication; its meanings stretches out recursively into time-space *ad infinitum*, always clichéd, it never becomes what it desires to be: the original. We would have Krauss question if there ever can be an original.<sup>17</sup> Even the symbols have a need for fulfillment. They demand attention here; they require that we engage them, to bear their meaning into being. We are asked to be performers in this story too. Our memories bring us closer to ourselves and allow us to forget. Rossi states that *“In order to be significant, architecture must be forgotten, or must present only an image for reverence which subsequently comes confounded with memories.”*<sup>18</sup> Dematerialization and forgetfulness are addressed simultaneously in the Treptow building as expressions of impermanence.

At the center of the forest of columns, a saucer shaped pool of water arranges the room around itself. We get a literal glimpse of this other reflected world, the dimension of symbols and legend, where we see ourselves gazing back at us. We appreciate the comfort of knowing there are others with whom we grieve. This threshold is where one leaves the world of man and nature, arriving in the world of symbolism. Strange as it is, the reflecting pool is not the most peculiar object in the building. Suspended above the glassy reflection, an egg - a symbol of fertility, rebirth and the cycle of life - a normal everyday thing raised to the level of sublimation. The egg is hypnotic. It focuses. It is the metaphysical force that “represents” symbolically the realm of transcendence.

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<sup>17</sup> Krauss (1985)

<sup>18</sup> Moneo, 126.

Figure 7 - The Mirror and Egg

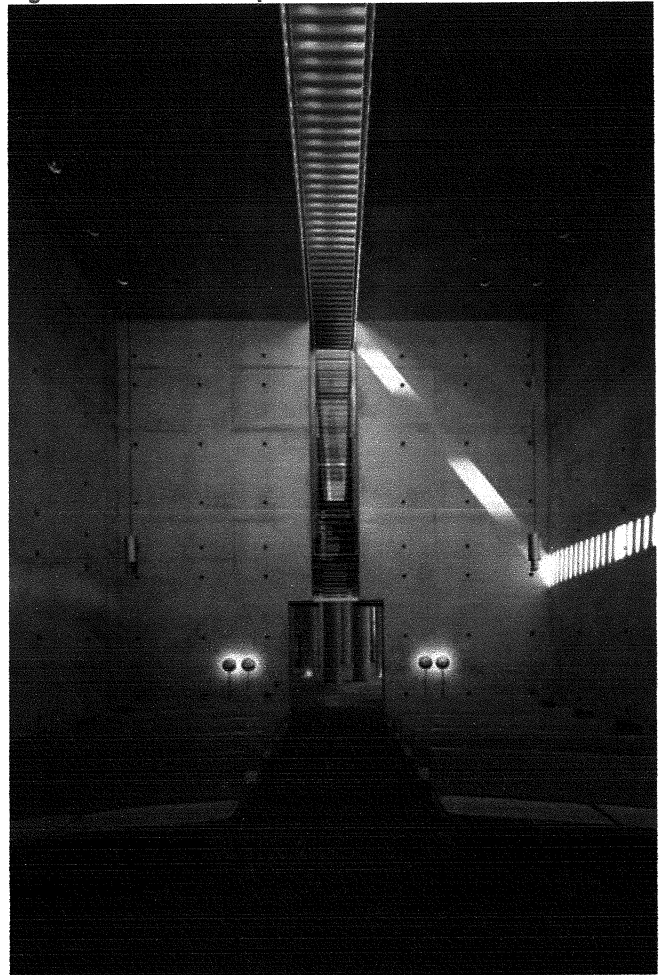


### Conclusion

Within each thing, and in this case the building is a thing, an infinite regression of memories and allusions to a historic past can be stored. These “things” carry the weight of their purpose but yet expand outwards into nothingness. The aoristic columns, the peculiar casket-like niches, the egg; each “thing” represents more than what it is while staying what it fundamentally is. The column supporting heaven remains a column even though it reminds us of a tree. This is the nature of abstraction. It attempts to resolve the dilemma between man and nature by making nature something that can be reduced. Only the abstracted inference remains embedded in the form.

The architects of the crematorium may disagree with Gehry, who states that “*architecture never falls into the trap of fiction, and it never indulges in simulacra*”.<sup>19</sup> The crematorium breaks both these rules but does well to resolve both of these endlessly recursive states using metaphoric schemes to embody psycho-historical meaning. Meaning that is re-captured and re-contextualized in metaphor, and expressed as light and embodied in silence. Silence, that quality of experience where the eternal moment lingers, is the source of inspiration. Metaphors are by their nature replications of themselves. Phenomenologically, they mean nothing. It is the weight of the building and the light that address the desires of the body, it is the metaphor that address the desires of the mind.

Figure 8 - Ceremonial Space



After all, there is no vault, no mausoleum, no precocious painting of the afterlife - no glorified angels and cherubs to escort the Soul - to visually and semantically connect us with the significance of death. In the crematorium we don't see any traces of an apologetic or shameful architecture. It is not overly sentimental in how it addresses the concerns of life and death, nor does it trivialize these concerns, but instead creates a richly expressive dialogue with the past in honor of the dead, and for those who grieve for them. The building is as much *about* something as it *is* something. It is “about”

<sup>19</sup> Moneo, 260

through  
the  
metaphor  
above

though it does “New Age” them

silence and light as abstract participants in our collective imagination. It calls forth tales of the past; from the ray of light slicing its frame, the grove of heavenly pillars, rain swept and daunting, to the sand dunes of Saqqara, and our rebirth, the building touches us.

There are sensual aspects of touch, visual aspects of touch - how a material looks leads us to an impression of how it might feel to our touch - that manifest in the building. We long to touch the light. As Goethe pointed out, "the hands want to see, the eyes want to caress."<sup>20</sup> The concrete, stone and sand ask to be touched. The light, on the other hand, asks to be breathed.

"To achieve 'beauty with this beautiful vocation' space must be contained, distinguished by precise boundaries from the heaviness and depth of the material which encases it, into which light breathes life"<sup>21</sup>

END

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Notes

All photographs and drawings are courtesy of the architect: Schultes Frank Architekten Berlin ©2010, except Figure 3 and 4 by Josh Mings.

<sup>20</sup> As quoted in *Touching the World - architecture, hapticity and the emancipation of the eye*, Juhani Pallasmaa as quoted in *Not Architecture But Evidence That it Exists*. Lauretta Vinciarelli: Watercolors, Brooke Hodge, editor. Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 1998, 130.

<sup>21</sup> From the architect's website: <http://www.schultesfrankarchitekten.de/>

Whats here: Part 2, Arrangement, I will really help first  
gap in context: form

B+ / A-

HEY BENETT - this is a tough read. You're missing a big part of the paper, which is literally the simple description of the facts. Think of this as a legal presentation: you have to make the case in evidence - but this is mostly conclusions. Because the ~~fact~~ lack of evidence, the conclusions need to generally true (i.e., could be applied to another building). I really appreciate your desire to bring deep meaning out of

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