



ASEMIC ARCHITECTURE AND POETICS

The Sacred and the Forgotten

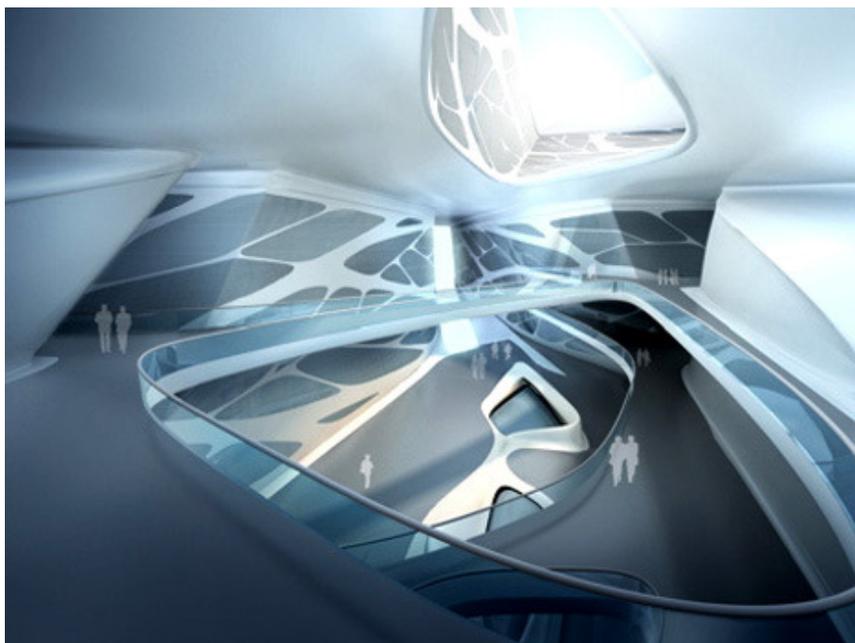
Brett M. Wilbur CSI, CCS, AIA
Cypress, Texas

© Brett M. Wilbur 2008

ASEMIC ARCHITECTURE AND POETICS The Sacred and the Forgotten



Numerous civilizations have used Architecture to embody its culture, economy, and political and religious beliefs, so, because of their historically embedded meaning, buildings can be perceived as a sign or symbol of a style, class, generation, or society. Sacredness is embedded in these facets of our existence. However, contemporary architectural styles are capricious and typically follow modern cultural trends. Thus, the discernment of meaning in general, and sacredness in particular, is difficult at best. There are contemporary architects, however, who have abandoned these architectural roots and are developing new ways to shape concrete, twist steel, and bend glass. These daring architects aspire to “liberate space”, to break our historical associations and challenge us to see architecture, and ultimately ourselves, without the filters of past convention. They confront traditional building types by transforming buildings into unusual artifacts for living. These strange forms beguile and fascinate us, essentially stripping us of these conventional judgments and biases towards our historical associations and their ontology. They reinvent our relationships with ourselves and the mysteries of architecture, proving that form does not have to correlate to building type and that form does not have to follow function. Ultimately, they hope to neutralize the relationship between meaning and form, and to add something that did not previously exist.



Abu Dhabi Performing Arts Centre, by Zaha Hadid. <http://www.dezeen.com/2007/02/02/zaha-hadid-in-abu-dhabi-update/>

The forgotten memories revealed by these juxtaposed shapes loiter in our unconscious; ancestral tales told by the intertwining of textures, forms, light and shadow choreograph our lives, and yet we live through them mostly unaware. We seek, but fail, to justify and hence define meanings for these forms. They are a stammer on the tip of our tongue; incomprehensibly illusive. Though they are not new forms, they lie dormant in the obscurity of genetic and cultural Asemia; a concept taken from the medical condition meaning “loss of power to express or to understand symbols or signs of thought”¹. *Asemic poetry* is writing “having no semantic content”. It formally represents the condition of fascination experienced when confronted with unfamiliar images and forms. Illegible, invented, or primal scripts (cave paintings, doodles, children’s drawings, etc.) are all influences upon asemic writing. But instead of being thought of as mimicry of preliterate expression, asemic writing can be considered as a post-literate style of writing that uses all forms of creativity for inspiration. We see calligraphic strokes but find no meaning or context in which to supply interpretation. Educators talk about children going through distinct stages of “mock lettering”, “pseudo-writing” and so on when

they're learning to write. Many of us made asemic writing before we were able to write words imitating our parents. Looking at asemic writing does something to us, it transforms us into a state of bewilderment; a state not unlike the Buddhist Big Sky Mind where clarity is a corollary of formlessness and each are mutually inclusive. Some examples have pictograms or ideograms, which suggest a meaning through their shape. Others take us meandering along their curves and sinuous slopes. Other forms are shapeless and exist as pure conception within the "garden of imagination and experience".² We like some, we dislike others. They tend to have no fixed meaning outside our projected interpretation. Every viewer can arrive at a personal, absolutely correct interpretation.



Cornelis Vleeskens, Cape Paterson, Australia, from Asemic Magazine, Vol. 2.



tk
Tom Kemp, Oxford England from Asemic Magazine, Vol. 2.

Each person experiences these objects differently based on a range of genetic endowments, cultural exposure, and previous experiences. At the point that the mind is saturated with futility, without finding significance in the images, this relationship between the observer and the observed dissolves and the mind and spirit is released to enjoy the thing purely for what it is and how it affects us. So it is with poetics and asemic architecture. We see these objects differently than others do, as we see ourselves different *from* others. This sense of self is developed in childhood as a matter of learning to distinguish oneself from others and the environment. During this stage of our development, we learn to make meanings through these interactions with our environment.⁹ Furthermore, our developing neural pathways are etched in our brains and we develop the habitual perceptions of ourselves and our environment. Spatial recognition, temporal consistency, a sense of scale and proportion, and depth and aural perception are all developed at this stage.

Contemporary neuroscience has determined that perceptual experience can not occur without correlating neurological impulses of the brain. Habitual as these impulses may appear, the brain is plastic in terms of acquisition of new experience and modification of our ability to think and reason. How and why these brain impulses manifest in consciousness remains hidden in the mysterious gap between mind and body. This gap, this Mariana Trench of the psyche, conceals the origins of consciousness, and perhaps, illusion or not, the seat of the soul. The old brain, sometimes referred to as the paleomammalian or reptilian brain may hold primeval memories genetically hardwired to our sense of a sacred self. Thus, these limbic responses may invoke recollections of nature or primitive culture; recollections of forgotten creative urges. Anthropomorphic, perhaps even mythological shapes invoke subconscious memories – sentiments that exist independent of our previous experience. Here new forms share old meanings; columns and walls may remind us of bones, insects, or dragons. We can separate these elements and examine their structural and architectural significance, but they are still only clues, components, and do not provide meaning to the totality of the space. Their meta-meanings textually layer our understanding of their phenomenological

existence. The sum becomes greater than the parts, as it would seem with poetics, and with our ability to describe the absolute.



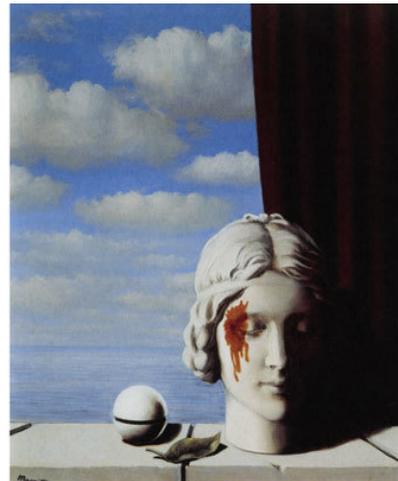
The City of Arts and Sciences by Santiago Calatrava, Valencia, Spain, 1996-2002



Price Residence by Bart Prince, Corona Del Mar, California, USA, 1984-1989

This phenomenon affects us neurologically, and we feel it intuitively as prerequisite to our understanding; whispers from our subconscious which occur prior to conscious recognition and interpretation, by which time, our predilections have filtered out the memories of our former selves. Thoughts and memories percolate from the subconscious untouched by the pointy finger of self-awareness. This dialogue occurs spontaneously between the phantom observer and the experienced world of symbols. It is this aberration that provides the commentary on ourselves and the world, talking to us from unknown recesses and caverns in our minds. Our experiences, echoes from our past, coincide and co-reside with our belief in the reality of these images.

Bachelard felt that these images, which he called “poetic images”, seem to appear out of nowhere - often strange and without language, “placing us at the origin of the speaking being.”⁴ He states that this poetic image has no recent past “in which its preparation and appearance could be followed”⁵ and exists without any specific reference to culture. He also surmises that this process necessarily occurs outside the normal intellect and emphasizes that while poetic image is the root of the creative process, the image is not in and of itself the poem. That process comes later and involves a much more intellectual process on the part of the artist. . “The image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface”.⁶ It is these images in the poem that are communicated to readers, becoming a catalyst for their own revelry, much in the vein of the symbolism within the collective consciousness of Jung, opening “hearts” to each other.



Rene Magritte, La Memoire, 1948

END

End Notes

1. The Free Dictionary; Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, published 1913 by C. & G. Merriam Co., <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Asemia>

2. "Asemic writing." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 24 Sep 2007, 12:40 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 27 Sep 2007.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Asemic_writing&oldid=160000762>.
3. Brett Wilbur, *The Paradox of the Shadow: Constructivism and the Hidden Order*, 2009.
4. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press 1994, p. xxiii.
5. Bachelard, 1994, p. xv.
6. Bachelard, 1994, p. xxiii.

Cover Art: Asemic module by Mi Jin Ming No 13, building 31, Villages Sichuan Chemical Works, Chen Gou, Sichuan 610300, China