Building before we build

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Prologue: The world we build reflects the world we experience

In the beginning was the building, and the building was with God, and the building was God. That was our experience of architecture. While we ourselves found shelter in caves or tents, we built houses for our gods. The gods, after all, gave us meaning. They greeted us in our dreams and in thrice told tales. They brought our world to life. They taught us to build a world that reflected our life, our death, our violence, our joy. The gods taught us how to build before we built.

In the beginning was our life, and our life was our whole world. That was our original experience of life. We were everything: night and day, fear and joy, longing and satisfaction (Winnicott, 1971). It took years of hard play for us to discover the difference between you and me, between the dreams we received in our inner world and the dreams we created in our outer world. The more we learned to differentiate between the two worlds, the stronger our ego became. Our ego emerged from our inner world, the world of the gods (Neumann, 1993). The gods taught us how to live before we lived.

We discovered civilization through the myths and rituals the gods gave us (Girard, 2001, pgg. 82-94). Only recently in our history did we devise contracts and laws and doctrines. And when we did, we began to fancy our ego as the only god left alive in our world. We forgot that our conscious awareness depends on our relationship with the gods.

The world we build reflects the world we experience (Dawson, 2004). If we live together with the gods, with the images we don't consciously create, then we build a world that reflects our life in contact with sources of knowledge beyond our ego. If we refuse to listen to the gods, we build a world that shuts them out of our experience. We regard the world as a machine. But a machine simply doesn't reflect the human condition. After all, we needed the gods in order to forge our ego in the first place. We needed the gods in order to learn how not to kill each other. We needed the gods in order to see our own life, our own development, reflected in them.

Architectural design is building before we build. It's building on the experience we've already had. Part of that experience is what we've learned from building materials: How can we join

Fig 1.

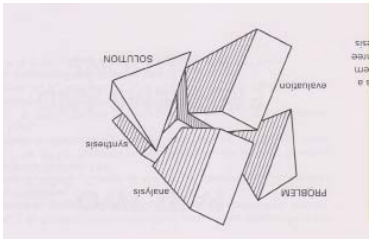

Fig 2.

Fig 3.

them together? How far they can span? What can we make them look like? But the major part of that experience is our discovery that our buildings and our towns can reflect the human soul.
Let's let three buildings tell us the story of how we build before we build. Let's let them disclose the architectural design attitude that led to their development. And since we're concerned with buildings that reflect the human condition, let's choose buildings we expressly designed to contain our experience of meaning. Let's choose three churches.

Act I: A space the gods bring into being

The church of St. Mary and St. Ursula in Delft, Holland, came to life in 1743, when Dutch masons and Italian plasterers built it in only five months (fig. 1). When I enter it, I feel immediately drawn to the apse. Without thinking about it, I can feel the size of the whole interior, thanks to the huge columns and the pilasters that flank them. Both the columns and the pilasters greet me as living bodies greet me (Rykwert, 1996, pg. 393). They don't look exactly like bodies. If they did, I wouldn't have the joy of discovering a body in them. But now that I recognize them as living bodies, I become aware of the spaces they create between them.
The spaces are rooms, just large enough for me to dwell in. And the rooms stand in a row, just as the columns do (fig. 2). Together they pull me forward, invite me to dance through them, lead me toward the end of my journey. I arrive at the tabernacle (fig. 3). The tabernacle is a house within the house the main columns form. The tabernacle presents God to me, gives God shelter, focuses my attention on the centre of my life, the centre of all life. The tabernacle greets me and moves me at a level far deeper than any theology or doctrine. It conjures up my own developmental history: the centre my ego grew out of, the centre that continues to feed it with images and energy and knowledge.
Can architecture do all this? It can do even more. I step back from the tabernacle and from my reflection. Now I can see the entire apse. I see niches with people in them. Or do I see caves carved in a cliff? Caves in a mountain wall: where have I met them before – if not in my own life, then in the life of humanity? Now I remember. I remember because I let myself fall asleep. In my dream a guide is with me in a cave. He knows there's only one way for me to conquer my fear of death, and that's to experience death before I die. I lie down for days in a cave. Dreams and visions visit me. I sacrifice the control my

Fig 1. The columns are living bodies that let us feel the size of the nave.
Fig 2. Rooms come to life between the pilasters.
Fig 3. The apse is a mountain wall with caves.

ego would have over my life. And life returns to me in abundance.

Dying before you die is a well-documented, age-old practice (Kingsley, 2008). So is sacrifice – in a variety of forms and with a variety of meanings. Now that the architecture of this church has fairly flooded me with images of sacrifice, I try to take stock of them. I look at the columns and pilasters again. Because they've come alive for me, I can feel them straining under the weight of the heavy architraves they're compelled to bear. The columns are stand-ins for people who have been sacrificed, people we made into scapegoats (Hersey, 1988).

Making scapegoats may well be an archaic practice, but it's a lethal tendency half asleep in all of us. At an earlier stage in our development, we dealt with our violence not through laws but through rituals. We held other people responsible for our violence – enemies, people we feared, people we considered different from ourselves. We not only killed them: we brought them back to life in the architecture we built. We considered them divine: after all, they restored peace and order in a way we never could have done with our conscious awareness alone (Girard, 2001).

Surrounded by images and experiences of sacrifice, I'm now drawn to the altar, the obvious centre of sacrifice in a church. The ritual at the altar reminds us that making scapegoats of other people doesn't work any more, doesn't curb our violence. The ritual at the altar presents us with the awareness that the victim is innocent. And every time we sacrifice him, he comes back to life.

Are we aware of all these levels of experience and memories when we move through this church? We discover and rediscover them only gradually. But the physical fabric of the church is a psychological language: it brings the literal space to life in a way we can feel, and it brings our own inner space to life in a way we can know and recognize. Because the architecture makes space for our body, it makes space for our soul.

Act II: A space the ego alone brings into being

What happens when architects follow the iconoclastic design tradition that began to take root among professional architects in the twentieth century? The church of St. Andrew, St. Peter, and St. Paul in Maassluis, Holland, shows us. Designed by René Olivier and Mari Baauw, it was completed in 2007. Like the previous church, it's modest in its size and complexity.

I experience the church first from a distance. It stands on the outskirts of the town, with no other buildings surrounding it.


Fig 4.


Fig 5.


Fig 6.


Fig 7.

It stands as an object, as an eye-catcher. I can't help recognizing it as a tent (fig. 4). Is it supposed to convey to me that my life is nomadic? Does it help me recall that 'the Son of man hath not where to lay his head'? If so, then I don't react with my body or with my soul. At most I react with my cognition, with my thinking ego.

If I don't come too close to the church, it greets me as an appealingly designed object. But once I step inside, I lose my focus altogether. The various tents or segments of tents fail to set my body and soul at rest. I can't see – I can't feel – that they define and contain a space I can dwell in. I feel fairly overwhelmed by so many curves and spars: I feel as though I were in a forest where the trees followed their own paths but didn't succeed in making a space for me.

The pews are arranged in the manner of a priests' choir: people sit across from each other (fig. 5). The street between the two groups of people sets the stage for the liturgy. At one end I see the ambo; at the other end, the altar. If I look beyond the altar, I'm blinded by the expansive glass wall. But if I try hard, I can just discern the tabernacle, modestly reposing behind the chairs for the celebrants.

Next I notice the unhappy connections between the various tents (fig. 6). Now I'm looking at the space as an architect would look: let me return to my experience. Do images of life and death greet me? Am I led along a path from birth to death to rebirth? Can I discern anywhere in this architecture a body that might relate to my own body?

I leave the church unfulfilled. Neither the materials nor the spaces between them have instructed me, have invited me to dwell among them, have pierced my limited conscious awareness. I have dwelt in a physical space that remains a physical space. The architects may well have tried to make the space meaningful, but the language they used could bring them no further than the image of a tent. The space and the elements that form it do not come alive: at best they are signs consciously created, not symbols unexpectedly revealed.

Intermezzo: Taking stock

The design attitude that led to the church in Act I is clear: the builders trusted an existing language of forms and spaces and meanings. In building they discovered the specific composition the gods helped them build. The design attitude that led to the church in Act II is equally clear: the designers chose building materials and spaces that don't encourage us to see the human body and soul in them. They built a concept, a thing,

Fig 4. The church is literally a tent.
Fig 5. Neither space nor materials direct our focus.
Fig 6. The tents meet each other awkwardly.
Fig 7. The nave is a path through a tunnel.

an embodied statement. Is it possible to play together with the gods without using a trusted and familiar language?

Act III: A space well-trained walls bring into being

The church of Jesu Moder Marias near Tomelilla, Sweden, completed in 1995, may give us a clue. This church is the last built work of Dom Hans van der Laan, a monk and architect who spent his life trying to discover how we experience architecture.
When I enter the church, I fall still (fig. 7). The stillness embraces me. It's not the absence of sound, this stillness: it's the absence of all the noises within me that clamour for my attention, that distract me from simply living. How can a spatial arrangement of pedestrian concrete blocks bring a space to life, present me with a space I can feel with my body, help me encounter the space as though it were a living character?
It's all about simple human perception, Van der Laan tells us (van der Laan, 1983). We can feel the size of a space if the space between two massive walls, at least one of them perforated, is roughly seven times the wall thickness, on centre. It's not a question of belief at all: it's simple empirical experience. My body agrees. The width of the side aisles is exactly right. The piers that bound them make spatial building blocks whose size relates to the material building blocks of the piers. And the piers and aisle spaces together form a spatial cell. That spatial cell enables me to feel the width of the nave without thinking about it, without reducing my experience of the church to something cognitive alone (fig. 8).
The space feels uncannily alive. The aliveness is no mean metaphor: it's a fact. What is normally invisible has become present and tactile. What more could you ask of a church?
But there's more. The whole church is a tunnel. The tunnel leads literally from the narthex to the nave to the transept to the space that houses the tabernacle. The progression of spaces seems to follow a recipe that's familiar in churches. But this tunnel grips me at a level far deeper than my spatial awareness as an architect. I know this tunnel. Where have I seen it before – either directly or in the experiences of other people? I've seen it in the visions of people who have nearly died, of people who have looked death in the face.
This tunnel presents me with boundaries, with thresholds, that separate one space along its path from the next (fig. 9). The separations are like rites of passage: rituals that mark our transition from birth to youth, from youth to puberty, from puberty to adulthood, from adulthood to old age. And they lead me on, just as inevitably as life leads me on to death.


Fig 8.

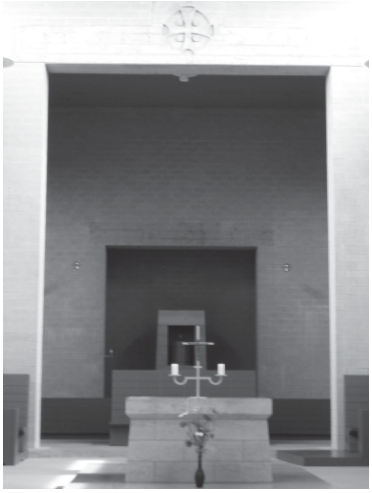
Fig 9.


Fig 10.

The first focal point is the altar: the centre of the nave. It's not at the geometrical centre, but all the space of the nave revolves around it, as well it should. Beyond the altar I see the first clear threshold – the next room in the church, the next station along my path, the next step closer to my goal. If I cross this threshold, if I enter this space, then I see and feel the next boundary, the next lock. And there, in the jaws of the opening, stands the tabernacle (fig. 10).

Cognitively we know that the tabernacle houses the presence of God. But cognition is not what invigorates me. I need to lay my cognition aside in order to experience this tabernacle and its place in the spatial arrangement of the church. It's easy. It's compelling. The tabernacle is the light at the end of the near-death tunnel. The tabernacle is erotic in the genuine sense: look at the opening in her body, and what's inside the opening.

The architecture of this church leads me along the path my life takes, the path all our lives take. It presents me not with abstract space but with space I can feel and know and greet.

It conjures up my journey toward an inevitable death. But it presents me with a divine presence at the end of that journey.

And that divine presence combines everything we know of the complementary differences between male and female in life as a whole.

Was the architect aware of the depth of experience his composition could give me? I don't know. I do know he was aware of demarcating outside from inside in order to put us in touch with our own inner worlds. I know too that he respected our bodies in his experiments and in his designs. And I know he longed for us to participate actively in spaces that, according to him, reflected our inner nature (van der Laan, 2008).

Van der Laan's wishes and conscious intentions formed the generator for his design. They were his recipe, his experience of building before he built. But during his designing – during his cooking – he listened to the voices and images that led him forth through the spatial and experiential tunnel he built.

And the attitude of listening, of learning to see, of allowing ourselves to be led: that attitude connects us with our inner worlds. It allows us to make our inner worlds present in the outer world we build.

Epilogue: Building before we build and building as we build

Through the ages we've made our inner worlds present in the world we've built – not only in churches or temples, but in the rest of our buildings as well. We could see a body in them – in

Fig 8. A spatial building block comes to life between piers and wall.
Fig 9. Thresholds punctuate the tunnel's path.
Fig 10. The tabernacle is the light at the end of the tunnel.

their walls, in their measures, in their spaces. And because we could see a body in them, we could discern a soul in them. Our architecture spoke to us, touched us, and taught us in the language of images, the language of analogies.

Then came the belief we've come to call the Enlightenment. First philosophers, then architects, proclaimed we could no longer build with the architectural language we'd inherited (Rykwert, 1996, pgg. 373-391; Gropius, 1966). They called for a new language. They did their best to ridicule the language they now called old. With astonishing success they persuaded educators to adopt their new faith. Generations of architects and students let themselves be converted: after all, they wanted to keep up with the times.

If you want to see the result of the new belief, look about you. You see buildings we can never experience as anything more than things. You see an array of abstract forms that tell us nothing of who we are as people who live and die, who struggle with our propensity to violence. You move through rooms that have no boundaries. You see machines that purport to keep us physically comfortable while they deny our psychic needs. Could you ever imagine willing them to your grandchildren?

If we come to believe the world we build can't remind us who we are and where we've come from, have we taken a step forward? Psychologically we've taken a step backward: we've lost touch with the world of the gods, the world our ego emerged from in the first place. We've taught ourselves not to trust analogies and symbols as ways of knowing. We've become true believers in decisions and creations we call rational. We've identified our whole life with the life of our ego – an ego that builds a world full of things it can control.

How can we combat an architectural design religion that reduces us and the world we build to things? How can we break the domination of an ego that's lost contact with its source? Simply by acknowledging who we are. Simply by realizing we are more than ego alone. Simply by building.

If we build, preferably with our own hands, the gods will speak to us. They will give us measures our bodies can dwell in. They will give us tectonic details. If we design, preferably with pencil on paper, the gods will speak to us. They will give us spaces that reflect our own inner space – the space we really dwell in. If we return, again and again, to the buildings and spaces that remind us who we are, the gods will tell us and teach us how to build them.

Should we build with the architectural language we encounter in the church of St. Mary and St. Ursula? Why not, as long as the language speaks to us, moves us, challenges us.

Should we build with the architectural language we meet in the church of Jesu Moder Marias? Why not, as long as that language can put us in touch with the inner and outer worlds we share with each other.

When we design well, our work is play. The work is play because it's only in playing that we're able to hear the voices of the gods, to see the images they give us. Only when we play do we remember how to build a world that reflects who we are, how we're built, whom and what we wrestle with. Only when we play do we allow both body and soul to take part in the game.

Architectural design is building before we build. We build before we build when we let our vision of life, our experience of meaning, guide us as we build. Does our vision of life correspond to the facts our psyche gives us? That is the key question. If it doesn't, then our architectural design will be sorely lacking. But architectural design is also building as we build. Then we let the materials teach us. Then we mould them into the images and the configurations they give us. Then we have a dialogue with our materials and with our spaces. They destroy our rigidity. They demand we build a world that comes alive for us. And in that world, it's not our ego that has the last word.

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