

Squaring the Circle

Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige
per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige,

tal era io a quella vista nova:
veder voleva come si convenne
l' imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova;

As the geometrician, who endeavours
To square the circle, and discovers not,
By taking thought, the principle he wants,

Even such was I at that new apparition;
I wished to see how the image to the circle
Conformed itself, and how it there finds place; (English translation)

Dante Alighieri

“As architects, all we can do is construct projects and material objects able to present themselves at such a high level of integrity, tension, subtlety, depth of connection, and invention that they are worthy of becoming, by means of history, monuments.”

Vittorio Gregotti

While one values impermanence, imperfection (Japan) the other values permanence, beauty, perfection (Greek)

Wabi-sabi is the most conspicuous and characteristic feature of traditional Japanese beauty and it occupies roughly the same position in the Japanese pantheon of aesthetic values as do the Greek ideals of beauty and perfection in the West. If an object or expression can bring about, within us, a sense of serene melancholy and a spiritual longing, then that object could be said to be wabi-sabi. Wabi-sabi nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect.

The Idea of Permanence and Monumentality:

Monuments are not made.

They arise
by the force of poetic events
to bear witness
“That beauty
to be found once more
when space and time
have passed.”*

Raimund Abraham, Monuments are not made, fragment.

“It is neither nature nor art – traditionally, ruins have not only collapsed, they have been overrun by a nature they no longer exclude. It is neither past nor present: it is a past that has never been present, a presence that is not of the present it inhabits. A ruin is a distemporing of times, that puts time out of joint. Ruins are persistence, insistence, survival. The word suggests more than a continuance of existence. Sur-vive- names a kind of ‘over-living’ – living on, living beyond one’s time – and thus is also a kind of anomaly or scandal. A ruin has always gone beyond or retreated from the death and decay to which it bears witness. Ruins in fact hold death at bay: having undergone a first, pseudo-death, the process of decay seems now to have been arrested in them. Ruins are a kind of annealing of the mutability to which they testify. There is nothing but mortality in ruins, but it is too late for them to die, they are too old, too ruinous. ...”

Steven Connor on Ruins

Utkin & Brodsky's Glass Tower

Glass is one of the drawings submitted for the Japan Architect competition of 1984. The dominating element of the roughly A1 size sheet composition is a rectangular frame that holds within it a figure, of an implied human form.

The tower is placed in the foreground of the plane with the city filling the background, and splits the layout in three parts. These parts form a sequence in the unifying basis of the page surface. The right bottom image consists of a series of pyramids that appear to be from another time and place to the rest of the frame. What separates them, a double line that runs halfway to the bottom of the frame and in human figure height, the entrance to the tower. In front of it a row of people are queuing to get in. There is a small sign over the first person that reads “Welcome to the Glass Tower”. The left image, in a square frame, shows the plan of the city with a huge magnifying glass in the centre. This is a sign that connects the narrative of the two frames. In a metaphorical manner, the pyramids refer to

the archetypical house of the dead or even perhaps the gateway to the afterlife. The queue then relates to a human desire for immortality.

A staircase (no lifts in this highrise) runs through the middle of the tower to disrupt and reconcile the two adjacent images. The occupier, at the end of the stairs, is a figure drawn as a man of the ages, warrior, urbanite perhaps by nature. His face presents itself as the lineaments of the landscape, a romantic vision of man being part of nature, or disintegrating to be part of it in the future. Death needs time for what it kills to grow in. He is pointing with his fingers to the sky. With no other, indication of religious nature, in the frame, (perhaps the pyramids as monuments to time rather than the gods) this gesture expresses the possession of knowledge through science or could it be science fiction. But the sky he is pointing towards consists of falling stars. Where do they come from and where do they go? These bizarre creatures of transition, and time. In the popular imagination, they are symbols for a wish to come true: a move to outer space where survival, curiosity and play are values to be cherished rather than instincts to be suppressed. In her singular moment of realisation that is given to her by technology, mankind points to the ephemeral nature of its belief. Change and uncertainty are the values.

Values, which collapse on the enduring nature of the creative process, but are nevertheless accurately depicted on the making of such a detailed engraving. Every scorch on the metal sheet is flooded with ink, which then sips into the paper, and is constrained by an invisible contour, that makes manifest the trace of a humans imagination. A controlled process that yet relies on the accidental conditions during its application. An illusion of depth is created by traditional means of reverse perspective, but there is also the depth of time achieved by means of condensation, closure between the frames and displacement, all vehicles of a sequential narration that escapes its criticality by avoiding remaining self-referential. This need to create a totality out of what appears to be snapshots of simultaneous reality from different angles and scales perhaps is the truth of this engravings confidence. Raw material for a praxinoscope the sequential character of the layout strives to imply motion and time in a way that should make us expect the next sheet. But there is not another sheet. There is text and it reads of a tower and its ontological justification. It starts with a question “ why does a man build a tower” a question relevant in 1984, still relevant now. The title (question) heading, is in larger typeface than the rest of the text, giving it perhaps the character of an account. The presence of the text is conspicuous. A rectangular block addresses the viewer directly. The content is not exactly an intellectual exercise, but through identifying one man with another by taking turns in equal terms to occupy the inner space of the tower it is almost political. By posing the question “why to built towers?” it is definitely political. Is there a reward for the imagination? One cannot help but to imagine what would happen in a conversation between buildings if towers had voices relative in volume to the size of their structure. The tower stands in the centre of the town. The common mans dream comes true. Is it some kind of Kafkaesque nightmare, where the wonderful nature of glass is attacked by mans desire to resolve its transparency with himself. Maybe issues of materiality and alienation are implied. A bit of great exhibition, with only one, perverted exhibit. The projection of a naked man in the centre of his city. *

“He taught that over time the movement of the yielding water will overcome the strongest stone. What’s hard —can you understand?— must always give way.”

—Bertolt Brecht [Poems, 315]

In my opinion no one . . . should close the road to free philosophizing about mundane and physical things, as if everything had already been discovered and revealed with certainty. Nor should it be considered rash not to be satisfied with those opinions which have become common. No one should be scorned in physical disputes for not holding to the opinions which happen to please other people best. . .

Galileo

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