

Paper

Contemplation as Studio Practice

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Summary Statement

This Session offers two brief presentations and a drawing exercise on the theme of *Contemplation as Studio Practice*. We hope to foster discussion on contemplation as it relates to architectural drawing craft and engage Symposium participants in an exercise of contemplative artistic practice. The Session would begin with architect Mark Baechler presenting recent drawing from his Abrahamic Architecture project and discussing how architectural knowledge is developed through drawing combined with contemplation. The participants are provided with a floor plan and requested to write what they know, in 10 minutes, about the place from the visual information provided. Following the exercise, artist Mary Griep will present her Anastylis Project and discuss how observation combines with contemplation in the creation of large scale drawings. Participants would then have a second 10 minute period to draw what they know about the site and how the visual detail or pattern they have added reflects what they know, can speculate about, or can observe. During the remaining 5 - 10 minutes of the Session participants will look at what they have drawn and discuss how knowledge, observation and contemplation fuse in studio practice. The drawings of the presenters and the participants would illustrate the particular visual conventions used and involve the participants in conversation about the various ways contemplation is both implicitly and explicitly used in studio practice.



Figure 1. Mosque Floor, Great Mosque of Divrigi, Turkey (Griep, 2007).

Scope

Poetry, music and art have something in common with the contemplative experience. But contemplation is beyond aesthetic intuition, beyond art, beyond poetry. Indeed, it is also beyond philosophy, beyond speculative theology. It resumes, transcends and fulfills them all, and yet at the same time it seems, in a certain way, to supersede and to deny them all. Contemplation is always beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own light, beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self.
–Thomas Merton¹

In the *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the American mystic and Trappist monk Thomas Merton suggests that contemplation shares an intricate relationship with the arts but is ultimately beyond the arts. According to Merton, contemplation “supersedes” artistic intuition and experience as ones “highest expression of intellectual and spiritual life.”² Viewing the mystical landscape drawings of the French artist Charles Marie Dulac offers a different view on artistic contemplation. The Franciscan monk devoted the last three years of his life to contemplative drawing. The results of his practice were titled *Suite de Paysages* and *Le Cantique des Creatures* and published in 1893-94. The extraordinary drawings depict softly lit landscapes as sacred places. For Dulac, artistic practice was a form of contemplation.

It is in this context that the architectural drawings of the *Anastylosis* and *Abrahamic Architecture* projects may be understood as works of a contemplative practice. The drawings do not attempt to represent the monuments but rather to meditate upon them and reflect their long and numinous lives. The act of drawing is a contemplative act that mimics the role of the buildings as a way of concentrating attention. We would like the Session participants to reflect upon and discuss contemplation in connection to studio practice, addressing questions such as:

- What does it mean for something to be contemplative?
- What leads to contemplative ways of working? How does one prepare for contemplation?
- Does contemplation “belong” to religion or religious sites?
- Are there architectural features that favor contemplation?
- Is there a loss of personal ego in work with sites bigger than any one person, culture, nation or religion?

More specifically, we would argue that drawing is a particularly fruitful way of approaching contemplation for the following reasons:

- Drawing is slow and rewards careful attention.
- The sheer amount of time spent on a drawing honors the time and attention that has gone into any sacred site.
- These sites were not designed for efficiency and drawing is not efficient or practical in a utilitarian sense.
- Sacred sites invite attention to the repetition, while often being highly embellished – leading to a contemplative approach to drawing.

¹ Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. (New Haven: The Abbey of Gethsemani, Inc., 1961) p.2.

² *Ibid.*, p.1.

Case Studies

Anastylosis Project – Mary Griep

Our interest in contemplative studio practice will be discussed through a brief presentation of Griep's ongoing *Anastylosis Project*. The series of large scale drawings interpret 12th century sacred buildings from around the world and across cultures. Each drawing is part of a process of:

- research which includes; published information on the site, historical photos, & local experts, visiting the site, drawing, photography,
- preliminary drawings to discover the visual conventions of the site,
- planning of the drawing's format,
- executing the large drawing.

Each large drawing takes one-three years to complete, depending on the size of the monument and the complexity of the building.



Figure 2. *Installation, Great Mosque of Divrigi, Turkey (Griep, 2007).*

After 18 years and 12 large drawings Griep has realized that the drawings are her homage to the various sites, and the level of human attention that has been lavished upon them over the past 900 years. Conversations with Lindsay Jones, who came to discuss the drawings at the first showing of all drawings to date, was instrumental in her articulation of how the sites relate and compare. One of the strongest threads tying this work to the sites and to each other is that of contemplation. A large scale, detail oriented drawing requires a conceptual grasp of time that relates to the amount of time the monument has been used and reused. And it is this sense of time that leads to a contemplative way of working that sees each part/each mark as building up to a whole that cannot be seen until the drawing is complete.

Abrahamic Architecture – Mark Baechler

My presentation on the contemplative drawing process includes the recent works of my *Abrahamic Architecture* project.

Similar to the *Anastylosis Project*, Baechler's *Abrahamic Architecture* drawings unfold over an extended period and is the result of a contemplative process. The research/ drawing project investigates thresholds among the architectural traditions of the Abrahamic religions. The project focuses on the collaborative constructions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These unique co-authored monuments are explored through the creation of a series of large size graphite drawings. Recent drawings reflect on the architectural space of contemplation through a number of interpretive drawings of the *Christ of the Light Mosque/Church* in Toledo, Spain. The drawings illustrate a building used for contemplative prayer originally for Muslims and later for Christians. The large paper that houses the drawing is self-supporting and encloses a space in which the viewer may reflect on contemplative prayer, drawing and architecture.



Figure 3. *Christ of the Light Mosque/Church No.1* (Baechler, 2016) and *No.2* (Baechler, Burgsma, Dharmaraj, Dyck, Koutsoukis, Rosel, Warner-Smith, 2017)

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