

Building, Architecture and Myth

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Introduction

This paper is about returning to or continuing the consciousness of god – the absolute – the sacred – in all the enterprises of humans – even in our building and architecture. God was once the center of the community and the role of architecture was to house the god. Karsten Harries appeals for a return to that role for architecture to create community in this secular world, as it once did. The vital role and importance of god and religion in the defining and functioning of a society and in the enormous capacity of architecture to embody spirit in matter continues. However, accepting the absence of god and religion in the modern world as an accomplished fact, Harries understands and appreciates the enormity of the dilemma of the loss of the sacred – the absolute. He offers the modern artist/architect the only “absolute” that he finds available to him, the fatally abysmal void of absolute freedom. Suggesting a terra firma out of the abyss for building (if not for architecture) is the contribution of this paper.

Two Houses

The Palumbo House

Tony and Elena, children of Italian immigrants, met, fell in love, got married, and established their home, in a small town in Connecticut, close to New Haven, the city in which they were both born and raised. Their parents had come from Italy in their youth, found each other and married in America. It was at the movies that they first met and after courting for two years Elena and Tony were married in the early 1950's. As a young American couple they wanted a home of their own and ten years later they realized their dream of owning and moving into their own place. They found a Developer who would work with them to build their dream house. An affordable package deal was agreed upon. In due time a building, with roofs and walls, windows and doors, closed and open rooms, front, back and side yards, became a physical reality – a house – their house, built and grounded on their own land -- a dream realized. Elena and Tony are confident that they themselves designed and created this dream house, which became the safe and secure setting for the drama and rituals of their lives. This was the Palumbo home -- their homestead, the center of their world. It is difficult to ascertain clearly whether their pride and affection for the house is due to some intrinsic characteristics of the house or the memorable realities of domesticity associated with it -- the two are inextricably meshed.

John Steinbeck in *America and Americans* talks about the strong and imperishable dream the American carries even if that dream has little to do with reality in American life.¹ The dream of, and the hunger for, home is deep-rooted and persistent. This home dream, he asserts, is acted out throughout America -- including East 51st Street in New York City. "The dream home is either in a small town or in a suburban area where grass and trees simulate the country. This dream home is a permanent seat, not rented but owned. It is a center where a man and his wife grow graciously old, warmed by the radiance of well-washed children and grandchildren."² Steinbeck hastens to reiterate the paradox of dream and reality in that “permanence” is not

¹ John Steinbeck, "Paradox and Dream," in *The Contrapuntal Civilization*, ed. Michael Kammen, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1971), p. 61.

² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

realized. The fact that the American family rarely stays in one place does not in any way diminish the dream. Mobility and restlessness are aspects of the total American experience, of which the home dream is only a part. The ever-changing American experience challenges and questions the validity of particular interpretations of axiomatic notions such as the American Dream. Dolores Hayden, in *Redesigning the American Dream*, presents a litany of objections to the received interpretation of the home dream.³ As instructive and useful as her book might be, it falls considerably short of redesigning the American Dream; it is not about dreams at all, but rather about awakening from them. For the Palumbos, having their own home was, indeed, an important part of fulfilling the American Dream. It would have been difficult to convince them, as Hayden would have us believe, that they were victims of a sinister plot laid out for them by their greedy Developer who also defined for them their gender roles. If they were duped, they were willing and happy victims. They continued to believe that they designed and built their dream house, a building which has proved to be the source of a great deal of satisfaction and pride.

The Palumbo dream house is a fairly common, ordinary building – often recognized as a ranch-style, tract house. This kind of house is most commonly found in the suburbs of towns and cities and in hamlets throughout America. Its badly aging presence is derisively relegated, by architectural critics, to the “American wasteland.” What does this house have to do with architecture? Or what does architecture have to do with this house? In reality, this house, along with a vast majority of buildings built every day in America, are dismissively identified as ordinary or mere buildings, designating certain other buildings, in contradistinction, as architecture. In this sense of the word, the Palumbo house is not architecture.

The Glass House

In the middle of the twentieth century, a few years before the Palumbo house, another house was built in New Canaan, also in a small town in Connecticut. This house is indisputably “architecture” – indeed, an acclaimed and celebrated work of architecture. The building is the “Glass House” by the famed architect Philip Johnson. It, too, is a fulfillment or realization of a dream.

The Glass House was built in 1949, designed by Philip Johnson as his own residence. Johnson lived in what soon became a weekend retreat for 58 years and since 1960 shared with his longtime companion, David Whitney, an art critic and curator. The building is an exquisitely proportioned and detailed glass box -- 56 feet long, 32 feet wide, 10½ feet high. All the exterior walls are of large plates of glass held together in a minimally, yet meticulously, formatted and detailed, charcoal-painted steel frame. The views from within, of the gorgeous landscape of the carefully appointed grounds, provide the “very expensive” wall-paper for the house. The house is a single glass-enclosed room. The kitchen, dining, and sleeping areas are defined by low walnut cabinets; a floor-to-ceiling brick cylinder in the middle containing the bathroom is the only object not open to view from the outside. Notwithstanding the provisions for seclusion by screening off the site from public view, Johnson never really lived in the house; in due course it was used only for entertaining. Author Paul Heyer observes that Philip Johnson, one of the early advocates of the Modern Movement in the United States, designed in his own Glass House one of the world's most beautiful yet least functional houses; it was never envisioned as a 'home' (house) to live in but a life-style stage to live with -- ostensibly and entirely in *l'esprit nouveau* of the Modern Movement.⁴ This building does not and could not serve, except at the very minimum, the accepted purpose of “house” and “home”: understanding “home” as a sanctuary, a safe and

³ Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning The American Dream* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986).

⁴ Paul Heyer, *American Architecture: Ideas and Ideologies in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Wiley, 1993), p.12.

secure setting, providing for the very private rituals and drama of life. Nonetheless, it is, and will continue to be, a brilliant work of architecture, precisely because it is also a masterpiece of art.

The invocation of these two disparate yet recognizable Connecticut houses provides for a discussion of many important and vexing topics, such as the relevance of Modernity, Architecture, Art, Science/Technology, and Myth. And in passing, the Biblical names of their locations lead to consider two contrasting Biblical models of utopian visions of paradise, namely Eden (New Canaan) and New Jerusalem (New Haven) -- the New Canaan or Edenic vision of Arcadian domesticity and the New Haven or New Jerusalem model of crystalline urbanity. Switching locations with models (Palumbo house / New Canaan and Glass House / New Haven), neither of these two houses is an ideal representative of its mythic exemplar of paradisaical visions -- of garden and city. However, they individually and together provide an articulation of a hybrid vision of a garden city -- a fulfillment of a Steinbeckian American Dream.

One could argue that the Glass House is a clearer and essentially more articulate form of the vision. Perhaps that is what makes it Art. But does skillful, articulation of a vision (any vision) make it Architecture? Could the Palumbo house ever aspire to be Architecture? If the Palumbo house is not Architecture, what would it take to make it so? If the Palumbo house could and did become Architecture would it be Art? This essay is, in part, an attempt to sort out the implications of Art, Architecture, and Ordinary Building. It might be informative to consider what the Palumbos would have gotten if the Architect Philip Johnson had designed their house for them. Going beyond futile or fruitless speculations, a clearer and more useful understanding of a building's implications for art and architecture remain, and need to be sorted out. To that we now turn.

Harries and Kierkegaard on Art, Architecture, and Mere Building

We begin by stipulating that there are identifiable objects as points of location we call art, architecture and ordinary building. By general agreement we will acknowledge that the Johnson "Glass House" is architecture and the "Palumbo House" is mere building, just as Mondrian's "1929 Composition" is a work of art. From these identifiable locations we will define and expand the limits of these stipulations by understanding their makeup. This, of course, is a larger and more difficult task -- because precise definitions are difficult. However, definitions that include rather than separate, while also maintaining the useful function of identification without over generalizing, are edifying. There are also significant overlaps in the territory covered by these designated terms. Mondrian's "1929 Composition" as art, the Johnson "Glass House" as architecture and the "Palumbo House" as mere building are (starting) points of locations to be expanded. This task is undertaken by locating art, architecture, and ordinary building in the vast yet comprehensible regions of human existence.

Philosopher Karsten Harries considers the inclusion of all types of buildings -- even trailer-homes -- to find a proper place for "architecture" in the complex world of Art, Architecture, and the community of ordinary dwellings. He identifies and locates that place most persuasively and eloquently in his (1997) book, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*.⁵ Given Harries' considerable interest and involvement in architecture, having published numerous books and articles on art and architecture, this important book constitutes his magnum opus. Along with his distinguished position and career as a philosophy professor at Yale, Harries has, for decades, also been an eminent member of the theory faculty in the Yale's School of Architecture. His meticulously argued and comprehensively thorough contribution to architectural thinking is inimitable. In *Ethical Function* Harries questions and critically assesses the role of architecture today in helping us find our way and place in a chaotic and complicated world. Acknowledging architecture's

⁵ Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000).

current identity crisis and marginalization, he questions the premises long relied upon by architects and theorists in a systematic sequence of compelling arguments.

Harries begins with the widely held premise he terms the “aesthetic approach” which, in part, distinguishes architecture from ordinary buildings. The observation by the architectural historian Nicklaus Pevsner succinctly encapsulates the viewpoint of the aesthetic approach: “A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture.” Accepting the obvious fact that the cathedral is also a building, its distinction then as architecture is in that it is also “designed with a view to aesthetic appeal.” Architecture is then essentially building plus decoration. Harries expands and defines an element of the aesthetic approach as a *decorated shed*, borrowing a descriptive term introduced by the architect and theorist Robert Venturi and his associates in their provocatively important book (1972) *Learning from Las Vegas*.⁶ A work of architecture is a functional building, as it must be, which is aestheticized by the ‘artistic’ hands of the architect. Then again, a work of art such as Mondrian’s “1929 *Composition*” is a self-sufficient whole. The painting is what it is -- its self-justifying idea is all there, as a whole, and without confusion. As a world unto itself it expects and receives our experience of it at an aesthetic distance. However, if we accept philosopher Immanuel Kant’s observation that, “the suitability of a product for a certain use is the essential thing in an architectural work,” then architecture has difficulty rising to the purity of suitability and intent found in art.

Adolf Loos, a founding voice in the Modern Movement in architecture, makes a resolute and unequivocal distinction between architecture from ordinary building. He posits that in the world of “peasant dwellings” there is beauty and peace, yes, even god and harmony. If left alone, this world grows naturally as the rose, the thistle, the horse, or the cow.⁷ Mere building is primarily concerned with the nurturing and peaceful dwelling of ordinary people. For Loos, the discordant element that shatters this beauty and peace is architecture. How is it, he asks, “that every architect, whether bad or good, disfigures the lake?”⁸ The lake, here, represents the peaceful and natural world which includes peasant dwellings. Harries explains that it is “precisely because he (architect) insists on being more than mere builder: he wants to be an artist. As an art, architecture has always already fallen out of the quasi-natural order of building.”⁹ Harries develops the argument that architecture as art, as he believes it must be, is violently in confrontation with nature, which includes mere buildings. Nature is understood as that which is not artifice. This confrontation is not a destructive one, but rather one of mutual illumination. A figure and field relationship of architecture and landscape is proposed. The architecture stands in contradistinction from the landscape of mere buildings as the Greek temple (the Parthenon for example) stands above the rocky ground. If the architecture chooses to serve a public function, as the temple does in enclosing and presenting the god, then it will serve to edify, unite, and perhaps even inspire the whole community. The ethical service of the public function of presenting a deity, architecture, as divine art, as supreme artifice, awesomely distinguishes itself from mere buildings where there is, naturally, peace and harmony, even beauty and god.

In the absence of “the God”, which presides over a community giving it unity and cohesion, there is no longer a single temple that houses that god, and stands alone. Are there new gods today to take the place of the old gods? If there are no gods and no temples, is there no architecture? Are we left with a landscape of mere buildings? Are there no gods in these peasant dwellings? If there are, are they not presented? If they are presented, would these humble dwellings be architecture? In any event, as much as I am ennobled by architecture, in the exclusive, awesome

⁶ Robert Venturi, et al, *Learning from Las Vegas*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1978).

⁷ Adolf Loos, “Architektur” (1909), *Trotzdem, 1909-1930* (Innsbruck: Brenner-Verlag, 1931), pp. 93, 94.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Karsten Harries, “Context, Confrontation, Folly,” *Perspecta* 27, 1992, p. 10.

sense that it is used here, which must comprise of only a very few structures, I am also concerned with the vast landscape of mere buildings that make up the field upon which “architecture” stands. This, surely, cannot be an undifferentiated field of even, ideally beautiful and useful buildings, whose sole purpose, collectively, is to illuminate architecture.

The discourse about and the production of architecture today is as all embracing as it has ever been. There is not a single area of human endeavor or serious thinking that is outside the interest of architecture. Locating and positioning architecture in this vast landscape of human concern and activity is very near impossible. Every point of view and every position held is, for the most part, valid and necessary. Each contributes to the diversity of views and positions -- often extreme and passionately held. Yet, instead of an expected richness there appears to be an impoverishment of the whole enterprise resulting in a cacophony of voices and styles.

One important view is from the very powerful and academically popular position that for architecture to be considered architecture (as opposed to mere building) it *must* be art and, therefore, located where art is. When the philosophical and other implications of art are appropriated to architecture there is an ennobling and transcending import to architecture that would be difficult to achieve without it. I cannot and will not question the position that architecture could be art. The extremely limited and privileged definition of architecture as only that which produces a Greek temple or a Lincoln Cathedral is enormously useful in producing those works that are often cited as examples of “good” architecture in history books. A proper role of the academy is, in part, to inspire such noble and exalted aspirations -- to encourage the production of the very best a civilization can produce. Nevertheless, the attitude of architecture as the figure on the ground of mere buildings, as the ‘temple sits on the rocky plain’ in counter distinction from and in conflict with its surroundings, is far too limiting and problematic. When the intentions, motivations, fluidity, and limits of art are also uncritically appropriated, there is a reduction of the potentialities of architecture. The vast majority of buildings in America -- residential, commercial, and even many of the public buildings -- cannot be included in this exclusive positioning of architecture as primarily art. Harries makes the challengingly difficult effort to help us find our place and way in today’s complex world. He promotes a return of individuals to a whole, to a world, to a community. Developing the noted architectural historian Sigfried Giedion’s claim that contemporary architecture’s main task is to interpret a way of life valid for our time, Harries proposes that architecture should serve a common ethos, an ethos once provided by god.

The ethical function of architecture as an interpretation and preservation of an ethos – a reclamation of the loss of god -- as opposed to an *aesthetic approach*, as architecture’s task, sets up as high a claim for the potential and capabilities of architecture as ever before – perhaps even more than Giedion envisioned. An apparently modest and different approach to architecture is taken by Robert Venturi when he remarked that, “it is only architecture, it is not religion.”¹⁰ The statement is clearly an indictment of the arrogant, and now obviously naive, ambitions of earlier claims about the capabilities of architecture. Notwithstanding such a conspicuously noble admission, the statement is worthy of a second look. The phrase “it is not religion” implies that architecture should not be taken as seriously as religion. The passion and force that religion entails should never be applied to the theory and practice of architecture. The question arises as to where architecture should be located in the spectrum of human experiences. The invocation of god along with the entire range of human experience is part of Harries’ arguments on architecture.

An inclusion of the entirety of the human experience along with an intimate and intensely personal relationship with God as the ultimate and possibly the only escape from inevitable

¹⁰ This remark is attributed to Robert Venturi by Professor Vincent Scully.

despair – *The Sickness Unto Death* -- elicits the work of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard.¹¹ He proposes three stages in his "stages on life's way;" *the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage*, which together include all human experiences. Briefly, *the Aesthetic Stage* is the level of satisfying one's own impulses and emotions for pleasure and satisfaction, *the Ethical Stage* is the level of moral responsibility, universal standards and community, and *the Religious Stage* is the stage of an absolute relation with the absolute – with God. These stages not only represent potential for movement but also existential locations. He arrives at his conclusions after a learned assessment of and in response to the rational idealism of Hegel.

The Religious Stage

In the *Religious Stage*, declares Kierkegaard, "the individual as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute."¹² For Kierkegaard there is nothing beyond faith -- faith in God, the absolute highest a man can reach. The religious for him is this passionate, individual, and particular experience. The movement to the ultimate stage, the "Religious Stage," is achieved by a 'leap of faith' from the *Ethical Stage*. The existential individual moves from the stage of the universal and community, which is the *Ethical Stage*, to the stage of the particular and the individual, the *Religious Stage*. He is definitely not talking about the communal experience of organized religion. For those who would travel up this stage there are two problems -- one could be mistaken for being crazy and unable to make oneself intelligible to anyone.

He knows that it is beautiful to be born as the individual who has the universal as his home, his friendly abiding-place, which at once welcomes him with open arms when he would tarry in it. But he knows also that higher than this there winds a solitary path, narrow and steep; he knows that it is terrible to be born outside the universal, to walk without meeting a single traveler. He knows very well where he is and how he is related to men. Humanly speaking, he is crazy and cannot make himself intelligible to anyone. And it is the mildest expression, to say that he is crazy. If he is not supposed to be that, then he is a hypocrite, and the higher he climbs on this path, the more dreadful a hypocrite he is.¹³

A high and separate position -- that not too many will reach! For Kierkegaard the *Religious Stage* is where the "knight of faith" "acts by virtue of the absurd." And, "because faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off," the Biblical patriarch Abraham, he argues, was either a murderer or a believer. Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac is justified and indeed glorified as a supreme act of faith by 'virtue of the absurd'. Kierkegaard is attempting to make intelligible that which is unintelligible, to describe the indescribable mystical relationship with God that can only be experienced and cannot be articulated.

The Aesthetic Stage

The cult and praxis of the individual and individuality, without an absolute relation to the absolute, characterizes the experience of the "aesthete". The Aesthetic Stage for Kierkegaard is the position of personal gratification. Individuality, without an absolute relation to the absolute, places the person involved in the experience of the aesthete. Harries describes Kierkegaard's aesthete as one who instead of accepting the world as it presents itself or surrendering to the infinite,

¹¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

attempts to become self-sufficient by replacing the world with make-believe worlds of his own construction.¹⁴ He puts freedom in place of God. It is up to him alone to make an otherwise boring and absurd life meaningful. Kierkegaard warned that the attempt to defeat boredom by means of the interesting must in the end fail.

The Ethical Stage

Between the extremes of Kierkegaard's religious stage where the individual is in an absolute relation with the Absolute, and the aesthetic stage where the individual exists in a state of hedonistic self-gratification, is the ethical stage which is the stage of the community and universal standards; of purpose and meaning.

This is where people exist in a society -- committed to one another and to common values, dreams and hopes. This is the stage of organized religion, and it is not without God or the divine. Kierkegaard writes:

The ethical is the universal, and as such it is again the divine. One has therefore a right to say that fundamentally every duty is a duty toward God . . . Duty becomes duty by being referred to God, but in duty itself I do not come into relation with God. Thus it is a duty to love one's neighbor, but in performing this duty I do not come into relation with God but with the neighbor whom I love . . . So the whole existence of the human race is rounded off completely like a sphere, and the ethical is at once its limit and its content.¹⁵

The three stages are not permanent locations, distinctly differentiated or delineated. Movement between and within these stages is fluid and frequent. Kierkegaard's existential man often finds himself in situations where these stages overlap. Abraham, "the knight of faith" makes the lonely journey up Mount Moriah with his son Isaac to his epic, tragic encounter with the absolute as a particular individual. This journey (into the *Religious Stage*) is made as an individual and as a particular, from the comfortable confines of his home in the universal (and the *Ethical Stage*).

He knows that it is beautiful to be born as the individual who has the universal as his home, his friendly abiding-place, which at once welcomes him with open arms when he would tarry in it. But he knows also that higher than this there winds a solitary path, narrow and steep; he knows that it is terrible to be born outside the universal, to walk without meeting a single traveler. He knows very well where he is and how he is related to men. Humanly speaking, he is crazy and cannot make himself intelligible to anyone. And it is the mildest expression, to say that he is crazy. If he is not supposed to be that, then he is a hypocrite, and the higher he climbs on this path, the more dreadful a hypocrite he is.¹⁶

The story of Abraham makes sense only if it is acknowledged that ethically speaking Abraham loved his son and that he was a good father. Kierkegaard argues that "*the story of Abraham contains therefore a teleological suspension of the ethical. As the individual he became higher than the universal.*"¹⁷

The title of Harries' book, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, would suggest that his location of architecture is in Kierkegaard's *Ethical Stage*. His conclusion, in concurrence with Heidegger,

¹⁴ Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), p. 53.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 78.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

that a genuinely human community is the foundation of any genuinely human dwelling, a place in a genuinely human order, is not in any way removed from the *Ethical stage*.¹⁸ Nevertheless, he positions Architecture (as Art) on a hill even as the temple sits above the mere buildings of the rocky ground. The lofty and imposing presence of architecture, Harries persists will (or should) serve a public function, as the temple does in enclosing and presenting the god. It will serve to edify, unite, and inspire the whole community. God is invoked into or (more correctly), returned to the architectural enterprise. Heretofore, god has been the meaningful and purposeful beginning and the end of all, including art and architecture. However, in a more and more secular world with the avowed absence of god, what is left to architecture. Loos facetiously lists all of two tasks for the architect, the sepulcher and the monument.

Acknowledging the loss of the temple, as a paradigmatic task of architecture today, Harries adds another to take its place. In this age of reason and technology, Harries asks, "is it not folly to keep trying to reoccupy the place that the death of god has left empty?"¹⁹ In the absence of "the god" that presides over a community giving it unity and cohesion, the temple no longer needs to provide the ethical function of architecture. His admittedly foolish, but deadly serious, suggestion for a way out of the dilemma is "that we learn from the architectural folly, a suggestion that fits in well with an understanding of the modern artist as the jester of modern culture."²⁰ Harries accepts the failure of and departure from Loos' vision of a moral high ground of efficiently natural and scrupulously ethical architecture borne of engineered functionality and civilized rationality universally applicable to all buildings. Harries acknowledges the nihilism, inherent in the flawed convictions of early Modernists such as Loos, that proved to be fatal as it developed. He confronts his assessment of the present condition as standing "in profound affinity with death," and in acceptance of "our mortal finitude" celebrates and salvages it with jest and folly. To his credit and honest courage, Harries, a distinguished philosopher (and not an architect), confronts the dilemma that architecture and art find themselves in today. He understands and appreciates the enormity of the dilemma.

This dire and critical situation is inevitable as the artist, Kierkegaard's knight of faith, inescapably and absolutely confronts the absolute. The inevitable confrontation and the fatal predicament is inherent in the necessary ascendance of the artist on to the lofty and lonely regions of art, even on to the Religious Stage. In other words, it is in the Religious Stage that there is the necessity of an awesome confrontation with the absolute and the awesome consequences of an "absolute relationship with the absolute." It is in implicitly accepting the location of art at Kierkegaard's *Religious Stage* and in expressly accepting the absence of god as an accomplished fact, that Harries offers the modern artist the only "absolute" that he finds available to him, the fatally abysmal void of absolute freedom.

Harries describes Kierkegaard's Aesthete as one who

no longer tries to draw away the veil hiding the infinite . . . He finds himself alone and bored in a world which is indifferent to his demand for meaning. Yet the demand for meaning persists. Despairing of discovering meaning, he attempts to invent it and thus to escape from the absurdity of his situation. . . . Instead of accepting the world as it presents itself or surrendering to the infinite, he attempts to become self sufficient by replacing the world with make-believe worlds of his own construction.²¹

¹⁸ Harries, *Ethical Function*, p. 365.

¹⁹ Harries, *Perspecta*, pp. 17, 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²¹ Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art*, p. 53.

It is up to him alone to make an otherwise boring and absurd life interesting. It is to be esteemed not for what it is in itself but for what it gives rise to; its worth depends on the artist's inclination.

In identifying architecture with art and confronting the predicament of the modern artist as having to deal with the fatal futility akin to the forbidden "drawing away of the veil of Isis," Harries concludes that the modern artist accepts the finality and irreversibility of lost innocence and leaving the artist and architect with the insanity of the inability to reveal anything except the freedom of the individual. He is further forced to wonder "if only in insanity man could save his freedom or return to the ground of his being."²² This is where Harries finds and leaves the modern artist, and by implication the modern architect; in a position of fatal impotency in the void of the abyss.

A Way Out of the Abyss

As he is wont to do, Karsten Harries often ends his lectures with a question. At the end of yet another of his brilliant lectures, at Yale, on the philosophy of architecture, he asked this question: "Where do moderns find security?" He was talking particularly about modern architects, but his query could have been about modern people in general. Answering his own question in a published work, he states:

To feel at home in the world we not only require shelter, but need to illuminate that world with myths, be they of gods or God, be they of shared rights and virtues. If it is to meet the requirements of dwelling building has to assume a mythopoeic, and that means, inevitably, also a public and political function. . . . And even if our understanding of reality makes it difficult to take myth seriously, even if it may have become hard to separate the mythmaker from the fool, the mythopoeic function of art remains indispensable. . . . Temple and cathedral lie behind us. Not only has the kind of community their building presupposed and reaffirmed been lost, but few of us would wish it to return, for it is incompatible with one of our own ruling myths: the myth of the value of personal freedom.²³

Assigning to architecture the task to gather scattered individuals into a genuine community, Harries is distinguishing architecture with its essentially public function from mere building, which serves as private shelter. Architecture is, to him, mythopoeic creation, presenting to the community the powers that preside over its life. "Architecture is a presentation of the divine."²⁴ This original function of the Greek temple is presented as the function of architecture today. Without the old gods that at one time were a unifying force within a community, new gods that unify the modern community are housed and presented in its architecture. Architecture retains its sacred role. This sacred role of providing the dwelling place and the presentation of gods is also one of the functions of myth. The philosopher Ernst Cassirer observes (in accordance with highly influential German thinkers of his time such as F.W. Schelling), that all mythology was essentially the theory and history of the gods -- the concept of god and the knowledge of god constituted the beginning of all mythological thinking.²⁵ "Myth is the odyssey of the pure consciousness of god," according to Cassirer.²⁶ We may then conceive of architecture as essentially a project to create the mythical. Architecture is a mythopoeic creation that presents the sacred.

²² *Ibid.*, 118.

²³ Harries, *Perspecta*, 17, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (Vol. 2), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

I believe Harries is correct, that it is myth that must continue to save architecture. Humans find security where they always found it -- in myth. The popular meaning and usage of the word myth is, however, not close to the lofty veneration accorded the word by Cassirer. The Apostle Paul in his pastoral epistle to his young protégé, Timothy, admonishes him to "have nothing to do with godless and silly myths."²⁷ The New Testament understanding is that myth is to be rejected as a form of dangerous or foreign teaching, even a form of heresy.²⁸ What the Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates as myths (from the Greek word *muthos*) the King James Version calls "old wives tales." As far back as the word can be traced, myth has been associated with false stories, fables, tales and legends. Bultmann and other theologians as late as the 1950's, speak of "demythologizing" the Christian religious experience. They understand and use the term "myth" in the sense of "fable" or "fiction."²⁹ Myth is contrasted with *Logos* or truth and later with *historia*. Myth generally came to denote "what cannot really exist."

Cassirer assertively queries: "How are we to explain the persistence of the mythical consciousness even in highly developed civilization and culture? Myth may perhaps have a permanent use and value."³⁰ Geddes MacGregor in his *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy* posits that, understood as it should be, myth is a channel of the deepest perception of reality -- a useful definition. This relatively new understanding of myth is found in the definition of *mythos* in the *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*: "The complex of attitudes, beliefs, etc. most characteristic of a particular group or society." Taken in this sense, myth needs no validation, it is its own validation. Whether good or bad, myth exists; it cannot not exist. Arguably, even science, once seen as the chief invalidator of myth, is no longer its enemy. Myth and modern science are more and more frequently considered compatible.

It is necessary that a deeper and comprehensive definition of myth needs to be arrived at by an overview of the term's various modern usages and meanings. But for now it is noteworthy that anthropology and sociology, in arriving at the above definition, declare that myth is a vital and active force in human civilization. Myth may be ultimately defined as a religious system -- a sacred story that is lived in. Sociologist Emile Durkheim and anthropologist Clifford Geertz have argued for the centrality of religion to society. For Durkheim society is a religious system; for Geertz, religion is a cultural system. Taken together and accepting the assertion that myth is a religious system we could repeat the definition of myth as it is used here. Myth is the complex of attitudes, beliefs, etc. characteristic of a group or society. Here is Durkheim's definition of religion: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them."³¹ Beliefs are systematic positions about representations of the ideal, while rites are determined modes of action being defined by belief. The sacred, for Durkheim, is not necessarily about gods or spirits; anything can be sacred. A group whose members are united by the fact that they think in the same way in regard to the sacred, and by the fact that they translate these common ideas into common practices, he calls a "church." "Church" is broadly interpreted by Durkheim as any identifiable group, such as clan, cult, culture, society, and nation. The relevance of religion in this secular age and the use of the term religion as myth as defined above is thoughtfully envisioned by contemporary philosophers and sociologists such as Charles Taylor and Robert Bellah.

²⁷ I Timothy 4: 7 (Revised Standard Version).

²⁸ See I Timothy 1:4, 4:7; II Timothy 4:4; Titus 1:14; II Peter 1:16.

²⁹ Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

³⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (Vol. 1), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 44.

³¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of The Religious Life*, (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 62.

Myth as a religious system belongs squarely in Kierkegaard's *Ethical Stage*. Kierkegaard's *Ethical Stage* is all about a system of beliefs and practices that unite into a moral community called a church – albeit for Kierkegaard, it is also of and from God. Myth, I submit, is now the religious system of the secular age. In invoking Kierkegaard and his three stages into the discussion, we are also invoking myth as the quintessence of the *Ethical Stage*. Kierkegaard's *Religious Stage*, as it is in relation to the Ethical Stage, is beyond myth. The “knight of faith” makes a lonely journey into the *Religious Stage* as an individual and as a particular, from the comfortable confines of his home in the universal – in the *Ethical Stage* in myth. He knows that it is beautiful to be born as the individual who has the universal as his home, his friendly abiding-place, which at once welcomes him with open arms when he returns to tarry in it. The *Aesthetic Stage*, on the other hand, is devoid of myth; indeed, the denial of myth -- the assumption that myth is the ethical and the ethical is myth. Harries, argues correctly and consistently for an ethical function for architecture and characterizes architecture as a mythopoeic creation. This characterization insists on architecture being essentially mythic – or fulfilling its ethical function. Architecture must have mythical content. It follows that the symbolic substance of architecture is myth.

Mythopoeic is a word defined in the *Oxford English dictionary* as “Myth making; productive of myths; pertaining to the creation of myths.” Having invoked and established “myth” and “mythopoeic” as central to Kierkegaard's *Ethical Stage*, an attempt to similarly determine the center of the *Religious stage* and the *Aesthetic stage* might be useful. Here is an embryonic go at it: Epiphany and *epiphanoepoeic creations* and hedonic and *hedonopoeic creations* for the *Religious stage* and the *Aesthetic stage* respectively. If Architecture as *mythopoeic creation* is relegated to the *Ethical Stage*, it is tantalizing to assign Art to the *Religious Stage*. To restrict Art exclusively to the *Religious Stage* would be an indefensible oversimplification as Kierkegaard himself has demonstrated in voluminous dramatizations. No stage is completely free of the others and no human endeavor located solely in any one of these stages. In dealing with myth in this discussion, however, it is possible to require the presence of myth in architecture as in the *Ethical Stage* but not necessarily in Art. To limit Art to the restricted and rarified precincts of the *Religious Stage* or deny the *mythopoeic* creations of architecture and the creations of the *Aesthetic Stage* to aspire to Art is untenable. A generous and expanded meaning of Art could be achieved by the addition of a single letter to the suffix *poeic*. Applying the indistinguishability of the two words in their Greek origins, and making *poeic* into *poetic* would help define or distinguish Art. Art as *poetic* is in all of Kierkegaard's three stages and may be generously identified as *epiphanoepoetic*, *mythopoetic* and *hedonopoetic* creations. Although it does little to define Art, it does make the artist a poet. Kierkegaard would not object. He considered himself an artist and a poet. His own work of so beautifully portraying the entirety of human experience – from the sublime to the sordid -- was an artistic and poetic creation. Reflecting on his own anguished and painstaking process of writing he asks and answers: “*What is a poet? An unhappy man who conceals profound anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so fashioned that when sighs and groans pass over them they sound like beautiful music.*”³² His work is a testament to the distinction between the *prosaic* and the *poetic* – prose and poetry. Albeit, his artistic creation was the portrayal of the Christian ideal -- not unlike the creations of other artists who also portrayed a religious ideal. There has been from antiquity an intimate relationship between religion and Art.

Harries in his recognition of the realities of today's artistic and religious life outlines a progression of Art from the *archaic* to the present “*Modern Art.*” “The history of Western art could be written as a history of the progressive emancipation of art from everything foreign to its essence. The first part of such a history might discuss the emancipation of art from religion; the second the emancipation of art from representation; the third the emancipation of art from the demand for

³² Kierkegaard, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. xxvi.

all external meaning and content. A remark by Frank Stella made in a discussion broadcast in 1964 as "New Nihilism or New Art?" helps mark this last stage:

All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all that I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without confusion... What you see is what you see... I don't know what else there is. It's really something if you can get a visual sensation that is pleasurable, or worth looking at, or enjoyable, if you can make something worth looking at.³³

Within the framework of our Kierkegaardian three stages it would be tempting to assign Stella's Art to the creation of the *Aesthetic Stage* -- as merely interesting -- as *hedonopoeic* or more correctly as *hedenopoetic*. Granting that Art is an overly elusive and profound thing, ranging all three of Kierkegaard's stages and that it is beyond the scope of this essay, we will be content with the assertion that Art must be poetic. Kierkegaard observes that a "poet is not an apostle, he casts out devils by the power of the devil."³⁴ This essay acknowledges the vast territorial ground of art -- all of its diverse and assorted topography -- from the sublime to the sordid limits of depravity. Art, as it has become, and as Alfred Neumeyer has posited, "*closely related to the experiences and sufferings of the modern age. . . For better or for worse, art is what we are.*"³⁵ Art is the poetic expression of our reality. As such, Art is the terrain of all that concerns us, culture, sociology, history, religion and politics. Art is much too broad and complex to be precisely defined here. Art could very well be a poetic creation of an encounter with the absolute or merely a gesture or, as Oscar Wilde has declared, perfectly meaningless.

Neumeyer in his book *The Search for Meaning in Modern Art*, begins his search with architecture followed by sculpture and painting. He consciously chooses this order because he believes that architecture gives the clearest and the most perceptible demonstration of the modern experience. Claiming that contemporary buildings do not repeat what we already know, he asserts that

the architect not only expresses the present sense of existence, but he may also anticipate. In conceiving a new view of space and statics, he creates, so to speak, the stage on which future generations will play their part. While we are laboriously spelling the story of human experience, art turns the page and confronts us with a new chapter. But precisely because the text is new, it will be full of disjointed utterances, rash assertions, and fashionable exaggerations.³⁶

It is a rather heady and awesome responsibility for the architect, rejecting the past to be able to ascertain and spell out the constitution of the present existence, and in sequence express that present existence in art to presciently set a stage for future generations. In this extraordinary claim Neumeyer is setting up a validation and rationalization of "Modern Architecture." This essay is a challenge to and an assessment of this claim for architecture in general and "Modern Architecture" in particular. In making these assertions at about the same time our Two Houses were built, Neumeyer also invited a judgment by future generations. That is precisely what we have attempted to explore in this essay. By extricating ourselves from the abyss of art and landing on the terra firma of myth we are able to begin to ascertain the task of architecture as mythopoetic.

³³ Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 158

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 72.

³⁵ Alfred Neumeyer, *The Search for Meaning in Modern Art*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964) p.4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 6.

Conclusion

Art is what it is – a poetic utterance. Mondrian’s “1929 *Composition*” could be an utterance of an encounter with the absolute, a profound articulation of Modernity, or merely interesting. There is a voluminous amount of material on edifying us on the merits of this piece of art and other works of art. It is sufficient for the purposes of this essay to grant that this particular work of art is worthy of our sustained contemplation and that it moves us.

Philip Johnson’s Glass House is also an acclaimed work of art. It, too, could be considered a poetic creation from an encounter with the absolute. It is also a profound articulation of Modernism. The Glass House is beautiful and indeed worthy of our sustained contemplation and it moves us – it is poetic. It is a quintessential exemplar of architecture as art.³⁷ Johnson’s Glass House is also an acclaimed work of architecture. But is it mythopoetic? An assertion could be made and sustained that it is blatantly and profoundly anti-myth – certainly in the sense myth is used here; “the complex of attitudes, beliefs, etc. most characteristic of a particular group or society.” Ubiquitous and commonly shared though it is, myth is also an inescapable and vital ingredient of that group or society. The Glass House, as the archetype, brilliantly establishes the claim that “Modernity was a project of demythification.” Rudimentary mythical notions of, such as, inside and outside, up and down, walls and windows, roof and foundation are decisively and deliberately destroyed. Both Myth and Modernity as opposing notions and Modernity as a new myth and other degrees of interrelation between myth and modernity are necessary and important subjects for study in this “House.” Taken in the anthropological sense, The Glass House is mythopoetic primarily as a project of demythification. However, the Glass House as the paragon of ‘Modernity as Myth’ invites further consideration. In doing so we will accept Neumeyer’s invitation to judge and challenge his incredible conclusion – “For architecture is a programmatic declaration of the will to live and of the purpose of life.”³⁸ “Will to live” and “the purpose of life” are matters of myth. The Glass House enables us in the determination of the validity and fulfillment of Neumeyer’s prophecy about and the realization of Modernism as myth.

The Palumbo house, on the other hand, is very much an object of myth. It is all about life and living. And the purpose of life is a myth. Myth as understood and used here is at its grandest and essential meaning. Myth is about the purpose of life. Myth as an all encompassing narrative provides purpose and meaning to all the rituals of life. As it has ever been, architecture retains its sacred role. This sacred role of providing the dwelling place and the presentation of gods, of myth, is the essential function of architecture. Does this make the Palumbo house Architecture? How well does the house fulfill this sacred role is a rudimentary question. Is it a Loos’ peasant dwelling – all together a natural, unselfconscious and unpretentious accommodation of the myth of dwelling? To the possibility of Architecture, an artifice, the Palumbo house, over and beyond its sacred and mythical role, it must also be poetic. Architecture is a mythopoetic creation that presents and embodies the sacred.

³⁷ Vincent Scully, the much-revered Sterling Professor of Art History at Yale University perfectly encapsulates Johnson’s brazen intention with this anecdote: “It [1949] is the date when Philip Johnson began to give his splendid talks which those of us who first heard them regarded almost as the pronouncements of the Devil. He stood up on the platform at Yale University, and he said to a shocked hush across the room, ‘I would rather sleep in the nave of Chartres Cathedral with the nearest John two blocks down the street than I would in a Harvard House with back to back bathrooms.’ This terrible and even rather frightening pronouncement was the one after which for the first time I remember students saying to me, ‘He’s talking about architecture as an art.’ And suddenly I realized that that is what it was all the time.” Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture*, (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973) p.189.

³⁸ Neumeyer, *Search for Meaning*, p.6.

As much as this essay is about architecture it also leads us to an even more beneficial investigation of the meaning and importance of myth – a separate and related project too big to be covered here. A non-judgmental, anthropological-sociological definition of myth, applied in this essay, might appear to side-step the horrendous evils myth has created and continues to create all around the world. A large measure of the rejection of myth is an escape from the evils that myth has wrought. Almost all of the devastating outrages of the early twentieth century in Europe resulted from myth. Postmodernism's undertheorized denunciation of mega-narratives is in part a denunciation of myth because myth is a mega-narrative.

Myth is a story – a story we live in. Myth expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Precisely because myth is essential and vital, it is vigorously and aggressively subject to manipulation, and exploitation. Politicization is that what makes myth a dangerous and powerful evil. For this and other obvious understandings, I have searched for a different word for myth but I had to stick with it because too many great thinkers have written about it. To cite just a few, the anthropologist Malinowski declares that myth is a vital ingredient of human civilization. Philosopher/sociologist Leszek Kolakowski proposes that there are two different sources of energy active in man's conscious relation to the world; the technological and the mythical.³⁹ Asserting that the two are parallel and equal means of relating and accessing reality, he declares that Value is a myth – the universe of values is a mythical reality. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of myth is in Ricoeur's assuring affirmation that it is a means of coping with the evil and chaos in the world. Mythos is a way of making sense in a senseless world; a way of finding meaning in apparent meaninglessness.

I agree with Neumeyer that architecture gives the clearest and most perceptible demonstration, spelling the story of modern human experience. Careful studies and analyses of our two houses would help answer the fulfillment of Neumeyer's prophecies and challenges of modern architecture and more importantly the appreciation of building and architecture as embodiment of myth. The vital role and importance of comprehending and appreciating the values – sacred values – that define and enable the functioning of a society and in embodying those sacred values, even god, in built form continues to be the enormous capacity and task of architecture.

³⁹ Leszek Kolakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 2.

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