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Fictional Constructs

J. William Carswell

This is the story ... of facing the drawing board.

Blank vellum stares mercilessly back; hand superscribes some lines above the vellum. Sketches, notes, drawn elements on a pinboard ... but a hesitancy to commit. The design is dead ahead (do it!). But off to the side, in the wings, is a distraction. Was it the last word in an argument; the frozen memory of a parting glance; the rustling sound of children in fallen leaves? It lingers eccentrically and builds itself into a fiction (extrapolating forward and backward in time). The story embellishes itself, grows intricate, reflective and crowds out the design task. The story satisfies (let's hear it again). The distraction is now the attraction. The design has drifted, still in the mind's eye, to the blind spot. It is there but featureless. It cannot compete with the germ that has now woven into a story. If the design comes to paper it will be through the shadow of this story.

This is the story of design by distraction.

How can the story be so compelling? The child listens to the same story repeatedly (tell me that story again). There is recognition ... folk stories, ghost stories, love stories, sad stories, fairy stories, a deep human tradition and need.

My theory is that the purpose of art is to transmit universal truths of a sort, but of a particular sort, that in

art, whether it's poetry, fiction or painting, you are telling the reader or the listener or the viewer something he already knows but which he doesn't quite know that he knows, so that in the action of communication he experiences a recognition, a feeling that he has been there before, a shock of recognition. And so what the artist does, or tries to do, is simply to validate the human experience and to tell people the deep human truths which they already unconsciously know.¹

The story absorbs. This weak story which enters the mind at the drawing board (weak because we are not conscious storytellers and, anyway, we are only telling ourselves the story) draws attention from the design task at hand. The first lines drawn (the superscription terminated because of panic or impatience?) vie with the story for attention. At first the design is merely a tentative stroke, not recognizable as form. This way; then maybe across; now densing up here; the pencil makes a graphite web at the crossover. Sign Language. Patterns.

But all the while the words whispered or the child seen in the rain or the faint smell of jasmine from that summer is where the mind lingers. What was the conversation before or what could come after ... here is the fiction grip. The design drawing emerges through these thoughts,

hieroglyphics without a Rosetta stone ... unaware of this distracted rational dialog. A book read in a waiting room.

Words are trains for moving past what really has no name.²

Every building tells a story. Sure, there are stories in the buildings; angles in the architecture. Peel back layers upon layers of wallpaper, see the room change, filled with people and events. Here, the wedding day; there the headline read of war; over there, at the door stile, pencil markings of a child's growth. In the sweat and toil of redecoration, full blown fictions are available. Our grimy hands stroke freshly-sanded old floorboards and touch the souls of dead carpenters and the soles of past dwellers. Building is such effort, such endeavor, such pain and pleasure; stories become hauntings. People are reduced to mere ghosts in the story of the building; they take their elemental place in its history, its story.

The story soothes. The building's stories offer solace and grace, the gift that is unselfconsciously given, unbeknownst as a gift by the giver. Architecture is not real estate (did John confuse this, a tragic story); subject to, not simply making, a settlement, validating human will:

In some way, the mesa transcended all place and frontier; it had the haunting and mysterious personal familiarity I mentioned just now,

but a simpler human familiarity as well, belonging not just to some obscure and forgotten Indian tribe, but to all similar moments of supreme harmony in human culture; to certain buildings, paintings, musics, passages of great poetry. It validated, that was it; it was enough to explain all the rest, the blindness of evolution, its appalling wastage, indifference, cruelty, futility. There was a sense in which it was a secret place, a literal retreat, an analogue of what had always obsessed my mind; but it also stood in triumphant opposition, and this was what finally, for me, distinguished Tsankawi from the other sites; in them there was a sadness, the vanished past, the cultural loss; but Tsankawi defeated time, all deaths. Its deserted silence was like a sustained high note, unconquerable.³

At the blank drawing board, this distracted story embodying human will, if allowed to can become part of the design. If the building is more than mere rational stimulus-response, if it has to have currency, robustness, a sense of presence, it must draw on something greater than cold argument, habitualized patterns or commercial logic. If the building will contain a story, it may be obtained from a story. Gather round.

The story is an analogue. The story is try-

ing to deal with living in the culture. The story is at least pragmatically functional to needs. If the story and design can be linked, the act of design becomes story telling — a means for the exploration of reality, a diagnostic procedure; design to examine and find a fit for the culture.

... the primary business of literature and art is cognitive, a kind of finding out and knowing and telling, both in good times and in bad; a celebration of the way things are when they are right, and a diagnostic enterprise when they are wrong.⁴

Back on the blank drawing board a bedroom needs form (a bedroom of stories ... the client tells, a child's birth room; a parent's death room). A short story, it is driven by this fleeting thought, this glancing view, this raw momentary need.

... the short story emanates from the earth, from reality, from the transient. It attempts to capture a given moment without passing judgment ... It reveals the flaw in beauty and where the shoe pinches.⁵

The oblique thought, the articulated icon of the bedroom story, caught out of the web of classification, is the germ of intuition. The story derived from this thought promises to provide an understanding, a deeper truth. It is, as



“peel back ... full blown fictions ... stories become hauntings ... story and history ... second-narrative characters.”

John Gardner said, that "all understanding is an articulation of intuitions."⁶ The snagged thought purports to contain an understanding which the building should reflect. It is the redundancy of the male at the child's birth; it is the irretrievability of another's life at death. The storyteller fictionalizes, logically but also emotionally because, as Gardner continues, "a logical system falls the moment any element of its logic is proved to be either wrong or arbitrary. An emotional system remains valid as long as people continue to feel it is valid."⁷ It is the Amish raised barn, the dimly-lit Eve's bar or the voluptuous heart-beat in San Carlo.

So, to design, figure it out first. There's a story in the pencil lead, about the design task. It came from a piece of life and literature (half forgotten, phrase prompted). It contains the figures, the reference points (the woman, the man, the baby, the bed, the window, the view ...). See them as figures. These are the characters of this story. Figure them out as drawings, sketches, annotations, paragraphs, storyboards (there they are on the once empty drawing board). They have clarity and distinction.

The story has such authority! The author, the narrator, the designer, the central intelligence, as Caroline Gordon says, "...registers and evaluates everything that happens, including what happens to and in himself."⁸ (The designer is part of any design, in addition to making it.) The

story unfolds here too. "... the (narrator's) psyche is the stage for the drama. The other characters are important only for the impact their words and deeds have on his consciousness."⁹

The relationship that encompasses the figures is the story, the narration, that binds them together. The scene has been set. Now, tell it. The narrative starts (a given story, one from life) with the events that articulate the figures around the germ. The characters have not come without their script; "the trick is to find the heart."¹⁰

Here is the bedroom in which the woman is giving birth, the man standing, unnecessary, in the way, in the light from that window. And years later the child born that day stands, unnecessary, in the same light from the same window, as the parent lies on his death bed. An old story. Asymmetry.

The poetic image attains its highest vibrational intensity as it were, when it strikes archetypal chords — when eternity looks through the window of time.¹¹

Return to find a configuration of the architectonic elements, the flats, scrims, travellers, teasers and drops of the story. They are second level figures but as potent to the story and as precise as the original cast. Extras. They exist in the dim backstage. See them. Draw them. There, the window that lets in the northwestern

bedroom light, its asymmetric tripartite balance, its connection to the old thick stone wall of the existing house.

Draw them as figures. Supporting passive characters. Virtual forms.

Its all fabrication, even the inspiration. Short-story writers see Venus within the block of marble. They'll chip away until they're down to the precious form. They'll retain but a motion, a curve, a triangle, and the surrounding air which is known as grace.¹²

These are the architectonic figures; Eliot's gestures without movement.

The window, if it could speak, might say that the world emanates from it. This gives us a visual image which does not extend beyond the boundaries of the room, but embodies the consciousness of an orientation in what is called 'the world'.

A 'gesture' is a significant movement of the body, its object being to articulate the awareness of things outside and to identify them, to give them identity. A gesture can therefore give a corporal reality to the world depicted on the window. It is an enactment of the world. Its product is to communicate the comprehension of the situation.¹³

The architectonic gestures express a second narrative. The forms have their own, quiet voice and speak collectively with due deference to the main theme. Find them. Cast them. There, the window, tripartite, but with the left sill broad for a man to sit, out of the way, as a baby is born, present but absent; for the grown child to sit, withdrawn, while a parent dies, absent but present, a venerable place of wait, a fenestrated seat, a detached world view. No instructions required; understandable. The design reveals itself. The narrative holds.

Architecture is not life. Architecture is background. Everything else is not architecture.¹⁴

This is the story of how the inevitable form came from a distracted, unavoidable, found fiction drawn from the figures in the originator's mind. A quiet articulate voice has directed. A sensed, short story, its roots in a distracting shadow, out of the sunshine (where most look for design light and inspiration) has been told amidst the outcoming forms. It is a homeplace tale of cycles, riverrun, comings and goings, births and deaths. Bedroom stories.

This is the story, by design. How to make an authentic design act in a self-conscious age? How to recover the essences that existed in the vernacular? How to go beyond the taste judgement, to offer a deep truth, an understanding? How to share ex-

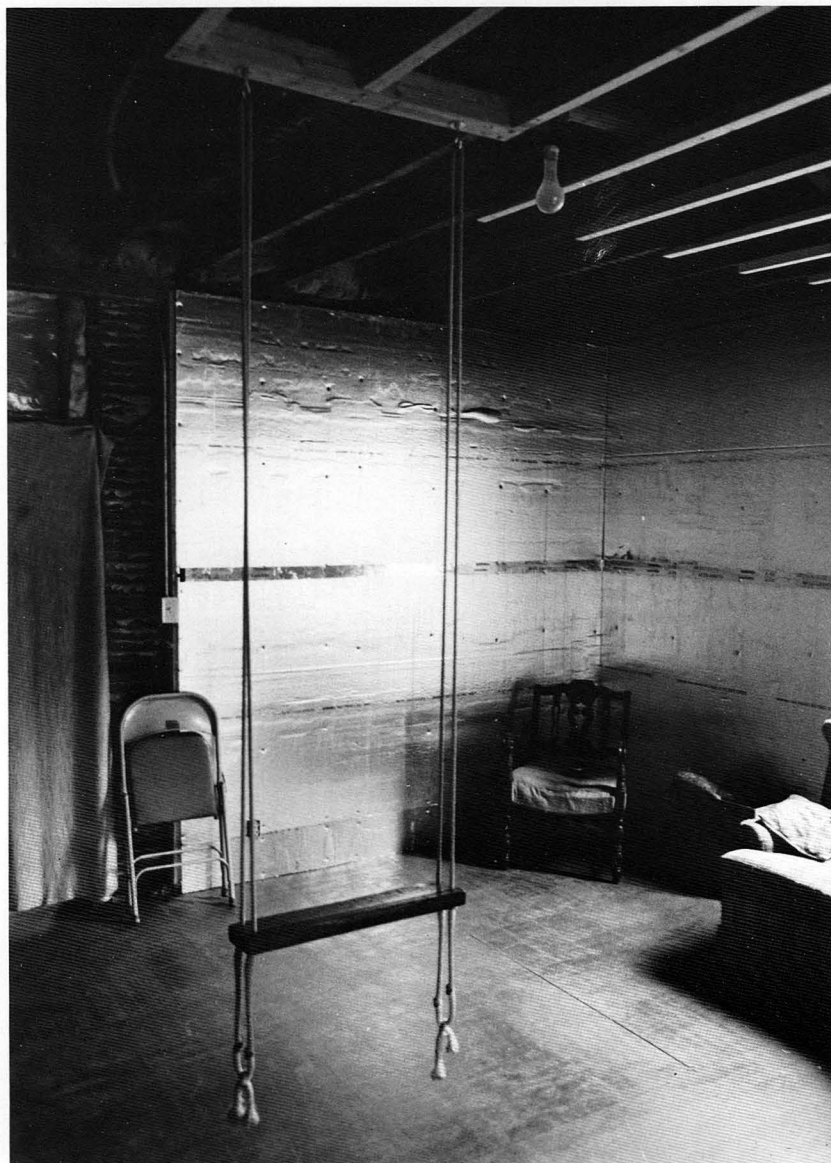
perience without subjugating to a trite and sentimental notion of community? How to make buildings that affirm the way it is, to be human in one's time? How to communicate in architecture?

... narrative is determined not by a desire to narrate but by a desire to exchange: it is a mechanism of exchange, an agent, a currency, a gold standard.¹⁵

In the building's form is a secret, never to be told, but shared.

Fictional constructs; story lines.

"Mood swings ... stories in the buildings, angles in the architecture ... phrase prompted, half forgotten."



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