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The Architect as Shaman

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Some say artists are the spiritual leaders of American society. This notion today is different from a similar attitude of Modernism which posits that the artist (Avant-garde) will lead because they are ahead of their time. Specifically, the avant-garde of invention (Modernism) is distinct from today's avant-garde of consumption and production. Art, and Architecture as Art shun artistic integrity for artistic license.

I am not convinced that American culture is in a truly postmodern period. However, I am convinced that we are in a transitional period between Modernism exhausting itself and whatever is next. Modernity is propelling humanity towards a future composed of an instantaneous history of commodity time where the self becomes isolated and devoid of spirituality. Democratic consumerist society, with its imbedded violence ("it was only business"), is flattening humanity under a cycle of production and consumption. In fact, Modern Art and the Avant-garde, once belonging to Art's historic domain of sacred humanity, is now a product of consumption.

What does it mean when Modern Art is mutated from an elitist condition to a situation where the avant-garde is "currently a two-billion-dollar-a-year art market in New York City alone.."? It means that the consumption of Modern Art is its failure. Likewise, the consumption of Modern Architecture will be its failure. If consumption ironically bankrupts art's and architecture's artistic integrity, is there any optimistic proposal to be heard?

I understand Campbell to mean the following: (1) that it is the artist who, by the nature of his work is in touch (for his community), with the psychic or cosmic energy, and (2) the artist is only shamanic insofar as he is intentionally doing so. It is this mythic intentionality which separates Campbell's concept of an artist/shaman from Modernism's more general claim that artists sense the way, in advance of the rest of society. In Modernism's claim, transcendental sensitivity is simply a by-product of being an artist.

Marcel Duchamp (the quintessential Modern artist) also speaks of intentionality as fundamental to meaning in art. He claims the creative act goes from intention (of which at least part is subconscious) to realization. For Duchamp, the difference between what the artist realizes and what the artist intends is the artists personal "art coefficient". If it is inspiration which represents the difference between intention and realization, then the "art coefficient" is a measure of a work's spirituality. Inspiration is the subconscious or transcendental made manifest in a work.

One of my abilities is occasionally sensing the obvious. The notion of the artist as shaman is prevalent. For example, Joseph Campbell has been the most succinct in interpreting this notion. In The Power of Myth Campbell establishes a clear artist/shaman relationship:

MOYERS: Who interprets the divinity in nature for us today? Who are our shamans? Who interprets unseen things for us today?

CAMPBELL: It is the function of the artist to do this. The Artist is the one who communicates myth for today. But he has to be an artist who understands mythology and humanity and isn't simply a sociologist with a program for you.

According to Jung, the world is as it ever has been, but our consciousness undergoes peculiar changes. First, in remote times...the main body of psychical life was apparently in human and in nonhuman objects: it was projected, as we should say now. Human consciousness can scarcely exist in a state of total externalization. As humans become more self aware (the self of modernity) through "the withdraw of projection, [then] conscious knowledge slowly develops. Science, curiously
Modern man’s unconscious differed from ours. However, some of his psyche is embedded in our modern psyche. Certain aspects of our own subconscious desires have been inherited from a primitive self. These desires are manifest in our anxiety of dealing with a desacralized, modern society. Modern man subconsciously, if not by animal instinct, desires to be whole.

One aspect of a modern human condition then, is its suppression of the spiritual self. The problem goes beyond the individual’s health to include society at large. Modernism’s suppression of spirit, “is still the most vital and yet the most ticklish problem of a civilization that has forgotten why man’s life should be sacrificial, that is, offered up to an idea greater than man. Man can live amazing things if they make sense to him. It must be a conviction naturally; but you find that the most convincing things man can invent are cheap and ready made, and never able to convince him against his personal desires and fears.”

“Cheap and ready made” characterize a cycle of consumption and production which is unable to satisfy the totality of man.

Modern man’s suppression of the essential human need to be sacrificial is consistent with the consumerist gospel of the Madison Avenue advertising types. In fact, this social characteristic discloses itself in the “desire to consume”. Calinescu has observed that: “The fundamental trait of modern middle-class hedonism is perhaps that it stimulates the desire to consume to the point that consumption becomes a sort of regulating social ideal.” But, if this the unhealthy condition, what can Man do about his plight?

LATER.
See there! A man is born—and we pronounce him fit for peace. There’s a load lifted from his shoulders with the discovery of his disease. We’ll take the child from him put it to the test teach it to be a wise man how to feel the rest.

Modernism wants to separate humanity from the wholeness of spirit and material in a natural combination. As Jung points out from this attack on wholeness comes a modern psychosis. However, out of this collective social psychoneurosis comes a traditional proposal.

If you imagine someone who is brave enough to withdraw these projections, all and sundry, then you get individual conscious of a pretty thick shadow. Such a man has saddled himself with new problems and conflicts. He has become a serious problem to himself; as he is now unable to say that they do this or that, they are wrong and they must be fought against. He lives in the ‘house of selfcollection’. Such a man knows that whatever is wrong in the world is in himself, and if he only learns to deal with his own shadow then he has done something real for the world. He has succeeded in removing an infinitesimal part at least of the unsolved gigantic, social problems of our day.

Here, Jung alludes to the definition of a contemporary shaman. He is the one who senses his own psychosis and in curing himself becomes shamanic. If creating Art is his self cure, then he has been shamanic in a specific way. We will call such a person the artist/shaman.

Let me define a shaman in the particular context of the artist/shaman or equally, the architect/shaman. For the purposes of this essay, the architect is equal to artist insofar as the architect is an artist. Mircea Eliade in *Shamanism* proposes that “the shaman, and he alone, is the great master of ecstasy. A first definition of this complex phenomenon, and perhaps the least hazardous, will be shamanism = technique of ecstasy.” Ecstasy here must be understood in all its poetic inferences. As Eliade states, “shamanic ecstasy can be regarded as a recovery of the human condition before the ‘fall’.” In other words, “The shaman is the great specialist in the human soul; he alone ‘sees’ it, for he knows its ‘form’ and its destiny.” A characteristic of the shaman is his being in touch with our deepest of human emotions. In fact, so in touch that poetic inspiration, meditative concentration, transcendental experience, etc. are at his command. The shaman has emotional access to the source of collective unconsciousness or psychic energy.

What is the shaman’s place in society? Historically, the shaman is the person (male or female), who experiences, absorbs, and proclaims a special technique of sustaining, healing power. For tribal peoples the living rhythms of the world are manifestations of a mysterious, all pervasive power presence. “This power presence is evoked by a shaman in a ritual prayer and sacrifice to guide tribal hunts, perpetuate sacred crafts, and sustain human life in its confrontation with the destructive forces of the surrounding world.”

Shamans through a transcendental expertise practice as spiritual leaders within a community. Sacred crafts means art, including architecture. As sacred crafts, Art and Architecture manifest cultural healing power by their inherent humanity. Shamans are not the exclusive source of spiritual guidance but, “coexist with other forms of magic and religion.”

Apparently shamans have specific roles which vary from group to group. Likewise, there are hierarchical rankings of individual shamans within their community based on their relative influence. The shaman’s role as spiritual intermediary and maker of spiritual artifacts is based in a general (collective) experience. Therefore shamans, “are the product of the general religious experience and not of a particular class of a privileged being, the ecstatics.

Our discussion of shamanism requires a glimpse at the archetypal formation of a shaman. “The stages of shamanic formation can be succinctly expressed as the call from the spirits, the sickness or withdrawal from previous activities, and the emergence of the formed shaman. Although the stages do not constitute an exhaustive model of shamanic formation, they are suggestive of the overarching phases of shamanic development.” There are two points to make regarding the stages of shamanic formation which are: (1) that shamanic development mimes Campbell’s definition of the “monomyth”, and (2) the psychological makeup and psychoneurosis of some artists parallel the shamanic archetype.

The monomyth is a way of expressing mythic commonalities as a singular general myth. Campbell defines his monomyth in three phases: (1) “separation or departure”, (2) “the trials and victories of initiation”, and (3) “the return and reintegration with society.” The shamanic formation and the monomyth are almost the same. This duplication indicates the intimacy of the shaman as myth maker or hero. For an artist or architect to usurp the shaman’s role, that is to answer the call, they must act with mythical intent. The aspiring artist/shaman is one who will (heroically) live the shamanic formation or be the monomyth. “The composite hero of the monomyth [that we might also refer to as a shaman in formation] is a personage of exceptional gifts. Frequently he is honored by his society, frequently unrecognized or disdained. He and/or the world in which he finds himself suffer from a symbolic deficiency.”

It is to this symbolic deficiency the artist/shaman addresses his own specialty of art, craft, and/or building. The artist, by being heroic (in a monomyth sense) is at work living and creating the myth symbols for his com-
munity. In most instances the life of the artist/shaman is as symbolic as his work.

Jack Burnham, in “The Artist As Shaman” sees a similarity between the psychological (and neurotic) distance from normal for both the archetypal shaman and the contemporary artist.

In our time, art begins with the psychological make-up of certain individuals who to some degree usually suffer from psychoneurosis. While modern society contains more than its share of neurotic individuals, only a few produce art ... [Also as] one time psychoanalytic circles debated whether art expressed neurosis in sublimated form or was the catharsis of neurosis, that is, the means of working out neurotic syndromes.22

The psychoneurotic may be compared to shamanic formation in the following ways: (1) the call/departure is equal to the personal choice to be an artist, (2) the sickness or withdrawal/the trials and victories of initiation are equal to the psychoneurosis (the distance from the normal) and the use of art to cure one’s self, (3) the emergence of shaman or the return is equal to the heroism of making one’s art public and living a genuine life.

The religious nature of the shaman might be broken into four distinguishing categories: the prophet; the sage; the yogi; the priest. Of these four our artist/shaman belongs to the first two. The artist/shaman may be seen as artist/prophet and artist/sage. “The term prophet is derived from the Greek word prophets for the person who narrated the cult legends at festivals...”23 This prophetic position is given to the artist because he who speaks a cult language of forms. As prophets the artists become the contemporaneous legends made outside of historic structured religion. By way of his transcendental expertise the artist/prophet, “is the one who speaks the divine revelation directly to the community.”24 In this instance we read “divine” as the psychic energy. Therefore, the artist is a prophet in direct proportion to his work’s ability to participate in the (all pervasive) psychic energy. The prophet/artist in tapping into this energy source may be either structured or spontaneous. Although, the spontaneous methods belong to the undescrivable mysteries, the structured is artistically evident.

Characteristically the “structured prophets gathered in communities and used various ecstatic techniques, such as music, dance, and fasting, to encounter the divine word.”25 The prophet uses art as a means to evoke the divine. It is not a coincidence that the artistic nature of the ecstatic techniques are the prophetic experience. We might also add sculpting (modeling), painting, drawing, sleep deprivation, and other artist or architectural studio practices to this list of art techniques for inducing ecstatic experience. If shamanism is defined as “technique of ecstasy” and art is ecstatic technique, it follows that the architect as artist is shamanic.

A second shamanic characteristic is that of the shaman/sage. This distinction is useful in two ways. First because it shows the “sage is a person with a rich humanist and intratemporal orientation, as well as a sense of the all-pervasive numinous presence.”26 Which is restating the fundamental characteristic of shaman, but in a less mystical way. Secondly, the sage teaches by living a life of profound integrity. The sage can be understood as a “gentleman-scholar.”27 This notion of sage is useful for its allusion to profession. In a sense, part of the sage’s art is that of living an exemplary life. In part, Art is equal to the integrity of his life. In other words:

The sage personality fulfills the potential for cosmic relatedness within the human order by cultivating sincerity (ch'eng). In the Confucian tradition sincerity underlies the most authentic life possible, namely that of the sage personality. Sincerity completes the sage’s own ethical responsibilities and enables him or her to aid all reality in the realization of its own integrity ... The Doctrine of the Mean further explicates the sage as a religious personality by identifying his creative integrity as equal with Heaven and Earth. In this manner the sage demonstrates that the authentic actions of the human being can assist in the transformation of the entire cosmic order.28

An artist or architect may be a sage/shaman in direct proportion to the ethical sincerity of their life. This will reveal itself in the intentionality of their work, that is, to the extent that the artists’ work is authentic to himself:

... The innocent young master—thoughts moving ever faster—has formed the plan to change the man he seems. And the poet sheaths his pen while the soldier lifts his sword.

Perhaps the most significantly shamanic activities for architects are their participation in sacred crafts. For it is in this notion of craft that our gentleman/scholar, sometimes prophet, artist/shaman overlaps what is considered architectural practice. Craft in architecture should be understood in its many facets of design and building, particularly in regards to ones making of things. Shamans (and others) are:

The spirit intermediaries... competent to receive and transmit efficacious power. The sacred crafts embody these spirit forces, which are intimately associated with the earth. Shinto crafts gradually developed into priestly traditions... This process is suggested in Langdon Warner’s statement: ‘Knowledge of natural processes is the very basis of all arts which transform raw materials into artifacts. Possession of the mysteries of a craft means nothing less than a power over nature gods and it creates a priest out of the man who controls it.’ The personal experience of spirit presence, however, is not usually associated with the priest but with the shaman.29

Architecture can, as sacred craft, predict the transformation of materials into an act of sacred building.

What architects do in the back rooms of their drafting studios is generally mysterious (to non-architects among others). The term professional implies a specific realm of expertise. For architects the implication being a specific knowledge and craft of building design. The craft of architecture is entrusted to those society names its architects. Specific crafts like drawing, modeling and specialized modes of seeing are exclusive to this cult’s craft. Even if you are suspect of the architect/shaman proposal there is one coincidence which is indisputable. Architects, artists and shamans are all able to visualize and represent the world before its material realization. An architectural project predicts a future reality.

I am not saying all architects are shamans. Be reminded that one is shamanic only insofar as they recognize a call and intend to act mythically. One must recognize one’s place in history. I have indicated that there is specific coincidences between the definition of shaman and architect. The shaman is the one who makes the myths and lives mythically. This is a value latent and whole life style. Architecture, as it is predominately practiced, is expertise or knowledge based and economically valued as in the “Business of architecture.” On the contrary, if an architect answers the call (a personal choice) and is intentionally creating mythical artifacts with his cult craft—Architecture—then he is, to some degree, shamanic.

SO!
Come on ye childhood heroes! Won’t you rise up from the pages of your comic-books?
your super-crooks?
and show us all the way. Well! Make your will and testament. Won’t you? Join your local government. We’ll have superman for president
let Robin save the day.
Ted Spivey has praised Jung, Campbell and Eliade for placing “myth, literature and religion on a footing with certain aspects of modern science. Jung, Campbell and Eliade all posit energy as the basic element of the universe instead of mechanism. If matter is essentially energy for Einstein, then the human being is essentially a unity of what Campbell, following Jung would call psychic energy.”

This energy-matter relationship clearly finds its way into Architecture via Louis Kahn’s theory of “silence and light”. Louis Kahn is an example of a Modern architect who’s theory of practice borders on shamanic intent.

It will not surprise many that a discussion of the architect as shaman leads to Louis Kahn. However, what may surprise you is the depth to which Kahn’s theory of “silence and light” is shamanic. Joe Burton in Notes from Volume Zero: Louis Kahn and the Language of God leaves little room for doubt.

The architecture of Louis I. Kahn speaks of timeless human needs, psychic as well as physical, through a consciously described universal language. Kahn tersely summarized this particular collective aspect of his architecture in the following aphorisms:

‘Art is the language of God’, "The only language of man is art."

In order to achieve these expressive ends, Kahn embodied within his work images which refer to prototypical forms of communication, both mortal and divine. By lifting his architecture into the realm of the absolute, Kahn evidently hoped to make a meaningful architectural expressive of the requirements of the human soul (psyche), as well as of human physical necessities.31

This passage demonstrates Kahn’s awareness of what we have called the psychic energy, within which it was his intention to participate. It is art which plays the intermediary role. The artist (in this case an architect) is the translator of the divine into the mortal. Burton’s essay indicates that Kahn was aware of the mythical structures of symbols, language and creativity. “Kahn’s aesthetic interest in language of universal creative power apparently stems in part from a contact early in life, through his mother, with German Romantic thought. The Romantics viewed the poet or the creative artist as the prieslike mouthpiece of deity, a doctrine formulated in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from a synthesis of several mystical traditions…”32 Kahn grew up in this Romantic ideal, one we have defined as sage.

If Kahn was aware (from early childhood) of the concept of sage, and choose to speak as a poet, then I argue for his being (to some degree) shamanic. He placed himself as an intermediary between “Volume Zero” and the transformation of that spirit or energy into the material world. In this position Kahn became shamanic. Although the words shaman or shamanism are not broached, Burton’s essay explicitly, and convincingly, discussed this mythical foundation. It is not my intention to affirm Kahn as a shaman. He is presented here simply as an example of an architect who understood something of mythology. More significantly, Kahn’s Architectural theory was clearly intended to tap the psychic energy source (Volume Zero) and make it architectural form.

My diagram (above) begins with Kahn’s paradoxical couplet of “silence and light”. The essential nature of this opposition follows the shamanic or mythic archetype, that is archetypal in the sense of paradoxical opposites: good and evil, light and dark, earth and spirit, etc. Listed below silence are concepts which can be categorized as exclusive to the domain of silence. I have done similarly under light. Under light is the equation material=spent light. In this relationship energy and matter are similar to Quantum Physics and aligns Kahn with Jung, Eliade, and Campbell in positing energy as the basic element of the universe. Between silence and light is the human being, who is the only creature capable of comprehending both of realms at once. The central axis represents both the psyche descending towards the human being and the threshold. The threshold is equal to inspiration. The threshold is where the concepts of silence and light converge. This meeting is called “The Treasury of Shadow”. The “Treasury of Shadow” is also “the sanctuary of art”33. The central axis is ART, the meaning of ART. The psyche and psychic energy, descend to humanity through the work of a human, the artist, and thereby manifests its forms as Art. Although diagrammatic, Kahn’s theory is a poetic, mythic attempt to tend “Volume Zero” as the source of Art, and Architecture.

Kahn’s theory is shamanic in several ways. First, it is shamanic by accepting as real a universal psychic energy; second, by intentionally categorizing reality into poetic concepts such that their intersection is of mythic significance; third, by establishing human contact with the transcendental all pervasive energy source, which in a modern age articulates the primitive spirit + matter world understanding; and last, Kahn places the architect (insofar as he is an artist) as the spiritual go-between—that is to say, shaman.

The legends (worded in the ancient tribal hymns) lie cradled in the seagull’s call. And all the promises they made are ground beneath the sadist’s fall. The poet and the wise man stand behind the gun, and signal for the crack of dawn. Light the sun.

Trying to make meaningful art in a society that doesn’t believe in anything requires breaking down the rigidity of specialization, the segregation of functions and activities, both within the personality and within the community as a whole. It means reintroducing the artist in his role as shaman—a mystical, priestly, and political figure in prehistoric cultures, who, after coming close to death through accident or severe illness, becomes a visionary and a healer. The shaman’s function is to balance and center society, integrating many planes of life—experience, and defining the culture’s relationship to the cosmos. When these various domains (the human and the divine) fall out of balance, it is the shaman’s responsibility to restore the lost harmony and reestablish equilibrium. Only an individual who successfully masters his actions in both realms is a master shaman. The art-
This passage by Suzi Gablik provoked my writing this piece. I have questioned how an architect might participate in her challenge. Gablik discloses a summons for the artist to be a modern shaman, to heal our spiritually bankrupt culture. At a certain level an architect can participate in her challenge, insofar as he practices artistically as a shaman in his practice of Modernism. Architects shun artistic integrity for artistic license and commercial stability. Whereas artistic integrity participates in the "totality of man", artistic license participates in modernity's continuing segregation of spirit from matter, humanity from the transcendental, art from architecture.

OF COURSE
So you ride yourself over the fields and your wise men don't know how it feels to be thick as a brick.