Confidences of a Spec-Writer

Douglas Darden

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Confidences of A Spec-Writer

Douglas Darden

These two rhetorical projects, “Confessional” and “Hostel,” will be published this year by Princeton Architectural Press in a major treatise of Darden’s work entitled Condemned Building.

Preface

This article contains the diary letters qua
ARCHITECTURE

Confidences of A Spec-Writer

letter s left me by a man whom, accord­

demned Building.

ter a rather brief interview, I agreed

Douglas Darden

What I know of him is meager enough.

Mter a certain trepidation, the Specter. Whether

virtually nothing at all. He stayed with

these letters need any introductory re­

me of his past life and family I know

marks may be open to question. I, how­

Indeed, of his past life and family I know

ever, feel the need of adding a few para­

except that he had no address. He

these letters require of the Spec-writer a

graphs to those of the Specter in which

When the Spec-writer entered my house

In that case, I required of the Spec-writer a

As I have never forgotten the very moment

of the stair, I was at once astonished

both the left and right go to the

“Both the left and right go to the same place?” the Spec writer seemed to ask rhetorically.

I remained silent. At that, he screwed

I remained silent. At that, he screwed

At the sight of him when he came into

At the sight of him when he came into

remade every day.

The Spec-writer encouraged me as an

This article contains the diary letters qua

subject nor its own sufficient

Several years ago the Spec-writer, who

of terms, saw only winners and losers; each person taking a stand at every point in their lives, never sparing

When the Spec-writer entered my house

By so doing, I have come to know, and

I have never forgotten the very moment

for the first time and became my lodger.

I have never forgotten the very moment

He came at noon, earlier than our ap­

of the world which, in his most cogent

to ask rhetorically.

I remained silent. At that, he screwed

I remained silent. At that, he screwed

which occasioned a good many encoun­

At the sight of him when he came into

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This entry in the Spec-writer’s diary was written while I was in the early schematic design of the confessional at San Pancrazio.

-DD

April 25, 1988

Darden works devotedly on his modest confessional. The whole idea boggles me. I was born and raised a Catholic, so I feel I have experiences behind me which allow me to speak with some authority. Darden isn’t a devout anything. I believe he was probably carried along in his youth as a diluted Methodist. He has no conception of what it means to confess.

To confess is a wretched practice that for most of my childhood years brought me to near nausea. “Hail Marys” could not recuperate my weekly, and sometimes bi-weekly sense of dread, of my fear and guilt, and of the fact that I was obliged to tell about those things I had done which were wrong and for which I thought my parents, informed by the priest, would punish me. Forget that I made it a habit to lie. That came later as a teenager. I’m speaking of the beginning when the Church ministered to me as a child—as for many it does all of their lives—in the guise of a grander parent.

What confounds me now, as I have made several visits with Darden to the unassuming church in Florence where he has been commissioned to design the confessional (which is virtually nothing more in scale than a phone booth, a piece of hyper-rated furniture), is the sheer public nature of this seemingly private act. The violent contradiction! Imagine telling a priest your most personal secrets, your sins, those acts and thoughts which render to you your most unnatural pain—in public! Within the expanse of the open nave of a church, everyone sees the confessor bent on his knees, humble-hunched at the shoulders,—a spectacle of whispers.

And there is also the priest. The interior of his box may be slightly visible, the heavy curtains not quite closed. Then you can see him, too, pitched slightly off his buttock to the left or the right, catching someone’s mortalities through a perforated bronze screen with one of his accustomed ears.

The audacity of it all! The hypocritical seduction!

Were I to design a confessional (rather than dullishly write its specifications), I would hold up for all to see a frank, public structure that at the moment of a confession, would manifest two gods: one would be the inert, fixed god, the established yet tarnished god of the Church; the other would be the fragile and febrile god which would speak for the complex, searching impulse which draws us to religion in the first place and which we can only seek on our own terms. The confessional, in other words, would have one figure, one god, which would stand as a foil to the priest; the other would be a herald for the confessor. I would challenge monotheism itself, and by having two gods, the confessional would show that there are very possibly many; it would demonstrate that seeking judgment of our own actions is a complex trembling; that “to confess” is to have an ache which constantly inflects us around an off-center, manifold source.

-SW

ARCHITECTURE IS AN ADMISSION OF RHETORIC NOT KNOWLEDGE.
CONFESSIONAL A Station at Cross Purposes

Confessional corners the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre designed by Leon Battista Alberti in 1467 for the Vallombrosan monks of the Church of San Pancrazio in Florence, Italy. Through the 19th century the chapel was accessible from inside the church, but it was walled-off at the time of the Napoleonic suppression in 1808. Subsequently, San Pancrazio was deconsecrated. The church was used for the Grand Ducal lottery before being turned into a leather tanning factory, and finally, a military depot for ammunition.

Although today there are no religious services in San Pancrazio, the Catholic Church maintains Alberti’s chapel with its ceremonial altar and sepulchre. A priest accepts confessions twice a week.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confessor’s Lot</th>
<th>Priest’s Lot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(outside corner)</td>
<td>(inside corner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Path:</td>
<td>Path:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 folded steps, hand-cranked</td>
<td>12 spring-released fire stairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Path Support:</td>
<td>Path Support:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-draining public piazza</td>
<td>displaced cornice and industrial spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Station:</td>
<td>Station:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heavy drawn curtain</td>
<td>private roof niche</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmitter:</td>
<td>Transmitter:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>composite pine mast, bound by leather straps</td>
<td>monolithic re-cast aluminum upright, scratched in-place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplifier:</td>
<td>Amplifier:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>state-of-the-art microphone in protective marine shell</td>
<td>army surplus one-way receiver fitted into aluminum upright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflector:</td>
<td>Reflector:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baptistry-shaped babbling pond</td>
<td>baptistry-shaped babelring pond</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LITURGY (performed on Cardinal Points)

I. Confessor raises 7-folded path with manual crank; raising of path activates bubbler in pond, priest pulls down fire stair

II. Confessor and priest ascend respective stairs to assume ceremonial positions

III. Confessor draws curtain, pine mast bends to approach aluminum upright for aural transmission

IV. Confessor pulls down amplifier and takes confession (option of bypassing priest)

V. Confessor rolls aside wall section of chapel, pine mast retracts to upright position

VI. Confessor crosses over pond onto chapel floor to proceed past screen all and exposed crown of sepulchre

VII. Confessor descends stone and steel stair to sepulchre, exits under station of priest
ARCHITECTURE IS THE FICTION OF THE AGE CRITIQUE IN SPACE.
This second diary letter of the Spec-writer was recorded after his first visit to the Aswan High Dam, Egypt. I had sent the Specter ahead of me to document the site and to research its history. By the time I myself visited the Dam, the climate in Egypt had become much hotter and oppressive.

—DD

December 21, 1988

There is no way I can adequately convey my sense of dismay, the mortal loss I feel standing on top of the Aswan Dam. What is wrong with me? The dam has brought Egypt into the twentieth century. It now controls the epic Nile floods. Yet for all that the dam has produced for Egypt, something else was taken away—the entire country of Lower Nubia. A whole nation has been drowned by this dam and replaced by a lake.

ARCHITECTURE IS THE MEDITATION ON FINITUDE AND FAILURE.

For every act of construction there is an allied act of destruction. One action cannot take place without the other. This is the only true symmetry in the world, and it is a fearful one. Steel doesn’t “arrive” at a site; it comes from somewhere, a mountain where ore is extracted. Meat doesn’t “come” from the supermarket; it comes from an animal who has been slaughtered. Our gain is tied to that loss. This principle is so fundamental, yet architects and engineers, as two types of makers among others, forget this. When will they see? John Ruskin was correct:

_We the living, occupy a space of too large importance and interest in our own eyes; we look upon the world too much as our own, too much as if we had possessed it and should possess it forever, and forget that it is a mere hostelry, which we occupy the apartments for a time._

Nubia is a barren, poor country with few assets, limited resources, and hemmed in by deserts. The extreme climate and the geo-physical characteristics of the land make Nubia an unproductive country, difficult to live in and capable of supporting only a small population. The Nubians’ grasp on the land has never been strong and what little of themselves they imposed on the harsh landscape was impermanent and fast vanishing. Yet the Nubians’ love of their home, their land, is unexcelled by any other people. Even under water, Nubia remains for them the most desirable land in the world. This is not the same as Nubians believing, as Ruskin admonishes, that they possess the land. The Nubians knew the land was not theirs well before the High Dam and the resultant Lake Nasser made them exiles. They are simply, humbly grateful for their land. Despite Egypt’s resettlement efforts, home for the Nubians is now confirmed as provisional and tenuous.

ARCHITECTURE OFFERS ALLEGORIES NOT SOLUTIONS.

So the question arises, “What to build?” Can there be anything else real enough to construct but this desire to return to a home, even when that home no longer exists? The object of the Nubians’ desire, their country, has been flooded. It is gone forever. All that is left to build is the desire itself. That desire—forever unfulfilled—is the Nubians’ only ground. The building must be about that _utility of desire._

ARCHITECTURE IS THE SYMBOLIC REDISTRIBUTION OF DESIRE.

As I take in slowly with my eyes the long arc of the crest of the Aswan Dam, my last disappointment is a vain one: why is there no built form at the dam which serves as a symbol of this reciprocal construction and destruction? The dam is mute, if not seeming to speak uncritically of “progress” alone. Beyond the dam, the lost country of Nubia says nothing.

—SW
HOSTEL
A Sliding Scale for Habitation

HOSTEL is posed on either side of the crest of ElSadd el-Aali, the High Dam at Aswan, Egypt. The two-faced structure marks a point of stasis and exchange along the two-mile arc of the dam. HOSTEL provides single accommodations and river transportation to and from Aswan for ninety-nine Nubian night workers who were displaced from their homes by the construction of the dam and the flooding of Nubia by Lake Nasser.

The Ninety-nine workers are from the most recent generation of Nubians who have been forced to migrate this century. Nubians were first dispossessed of their homes by the building of the British Aswan Dam in 1902. In 1912 the dam was heightened and Nubians were compelled to move again. In 1933 they moved once more to avoid the rising waters. In 1940 the Egyptian gov-
ernment offered them fertile land in Egypt, but the Nubians preferred their own country and proceeded to build other villages higher in the desert.

With the construction of the High Dam in 1963 Nubians were not able to relocate above the rising waters. Every town in Lower Nubia was flooded and over 120,000 people were forced to leave their land. The great majority of able-bodied men have sought to make a living to the North in Egypt.

**Hosts**

**South Pylon:** Gold-painted skeletal steel with concrete accommodations for 99 Nubian night workers. At the foot of the Pylon is a bath/well and a concealed meeting hall.

**North Pylon:** Lead-plated travelling davit with flying porch and cedar bark (salvaged during flooding of Nubia). The 120-ton pylon descends every evening at sundown to deposit the workers on the Nile River for their jobs in Aswan.
ARCHITECTURE CAN NEVER TOUCH BOTTOM.