

The Endless Phenomenal Space of Frederick Kiesler

One can not speak of the concept of "space" in isolation, without giving credence to its dynamic presence in life. Western man's concepts of space were, in the past, anchored by a religious faith which was bodied forth by the shared life actions which defined and unified a culture. These inter-subjective events found concrete form in institutions which provided the framework necessary to link the mortal earth and the divine cosmos, and orchestrated collective dance which circumscribed a holy place within the realm of man. Orientation was experienced during the "enactment" which unveiled the presence of the divine continuity within life. Architecture embodied this dynamic ritual inter-action which was a symbolic presencing of the divine. This "space of action" allowed humanity to feel at home in a hostile and endless world.

In hindsight, the initial work of modern philosophy by Rene Descartes¹ and our "emancipation" from Aristotelian physics, can be seen as part of the inevitable historical events which resulted in a mirror being constructed between ourselves and the "space of action". This movement toward what was and is deemed "reasoned thought" is at the very core of "modern science". A science which has forgotten its role in unveiling the presence of the divine in the world and has incorrectly preached this "reason" as the primary intention of Newton's absolute space; a concept of space which consciously placed the celestial and the worldly within one homogeneous realm. The perceived universal void is symptomatic of the gap that had been constructed between the truth of the world as lived and what was deemed "reasonable". The entire mortal world had to be consistent with the certainty provided by the geometry of the mathematical cosmos. The space of action was cast "static", with the necessity of mediating powers of the chora and architecture becoming "doubtful".

Unable to be touched by the world, obsessed by the "cogito", man became lost in this doubtful distance which now separates the space of our "waking lives" from that of our nightly dreams. Our inability to rationally reconcile the mysteries inherent within the experience of life (dreams) allowed modern science, with its measurable truths and mathematical certainties, to remove the "space of action" from the Western intersubjective consciousness.

Frederick Kiesler was born into this intellectual cosmos and recognized the modern collective amnesia; that society had forgotten the primary role of perception in the making of our lives. Man must re-live and re-enact the mystery of creation inherent in being's first movement, a gesture that is simultaneously "articulation and embodiment".² One major question for contemporary architecture, presupposing that the core of the architect's being remains intact in our present existential context, is the role of "space" in a world which has abandoned the concept of divine and the certainty unveiled by perception. In the beginning of his major written project, *Inside the Endless House*, Frederick Kiesler writes³:

happy turtle whose cave
grows on its back and
protects it from imaginary blessings
of the heavens

it crawls the earth
bound to it forever

food is on her path
no matter where she turns
the mate appears uncalled for,
and is welcome

there will be egg rolling
on the green lawns of
millions of white houses
not built by architects

lucky turtle

the touchdown is continuous
belly to belly
shell against shell, constant
friction and no harm

you have the total independence
without that pseudo security of
science, agriculture, industry, art

oh lucky turtle
you are the very dream image and reality
of independence
resting securely in the palm of your shells.
just being a summary of split seconds lived
continuously,

crawling

crawling

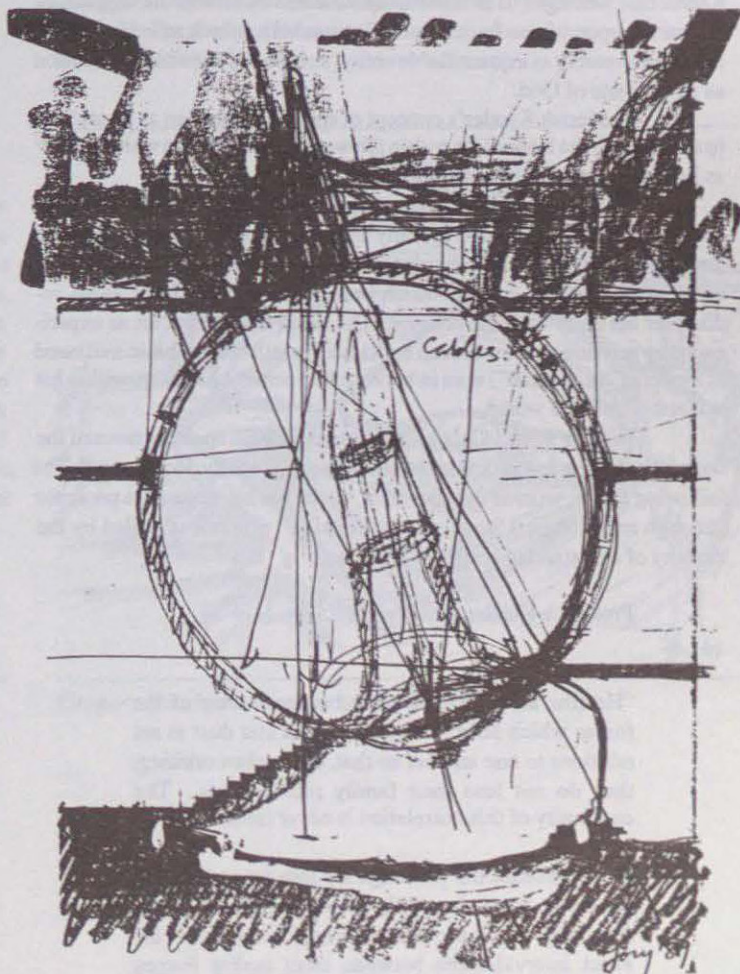
crawling

Frederick Kiesler's turtle is the perfect illustration of his desire to unify the universal space of modernity and the primordial/erotic reality of bodily space. To carry one's metaphysical home within/upon one's self is modern man's absolute dream. This ecstatic freedom was never seen by Kiesler as an intellectual construct, but instead it was believed to be the "endless" given in the nomadic condition⁴ of human existence. To once again recover the faith necessary to live within the infinite world, an experiential reality *full* with the magnetic energy of "cosmic love".⁵ Frederick Kiesler writes⁶:

All imagery vanished
like a child's prenatal memory
I became myself, all burdens were lifted
My heart and shoulders felt weightless
I started first to see
the world around me
as I used to see it,
that is through the filters of my two retinae,
but now I had retained a different vision of the world
around and in me
I perceive differently
Every detail seemed to be bound to a wider world,
a world of infinite links
Bound to links.
Links after links, Links and links and links....
What are they? How do they hold me
and the world together? Magnetic rings?
Or arrows shot through space, piercing everything
without pain?
Are they locks whose keys are invisible to man?
Or waves
thrown at you by natural forces
whenever they feel like it,
to embalm you and then go on
to other plays in infinite space?
Now, it seems to me
we live a life of infinite links.
All and everything bound together.
There is no escape from this prison of cosmic love.

In this vision of the cosmos, space is full, not of God, but of the magnetic force of cosmic love. A question that may be asked is whether or not Kiesler's "endless space" is really that dissimilar from the Kabbalistic conception of space. The Kabbalah speaks of an (Non) Entity before

the coming into Being of the God of the Universe; this force was named "En-Soph". 'En' translates from ancient Hebrew into 'Without' and 'Soph' translates into 'End'. En-Soph is without end, the endless action in the universe before God. This Boundless (Non) Entity may best be understood (metaphorically) as the force which moves the blood of the universe, as the universe was understood by the Kabbalists as a symbolic body. In the Zohar, En-Soph turns in upon himself and forms the God of the Universe, thus "God is Space"; he is the universe which is the "space



of himself".⁷ There are no boundaries in this infinite universe and the same may be said for the Pre-Mosaic Hebrews,⁸ a nomadic people who were linked to the Boundless by a dynamic action called LIFE. Man, the image of his Maker, lived within and tied to this endless space participating in an

ecstatic turning within one's self through the reconciliatory actions which were necessary to provide cosmic orientation.

Sir Isaac Newton's conception of absolute space may be seen as the genesis which grounds Frederick Kiesler's concept of the Endless in the modern world. Newton merged the "reasoned thought" of Rene Descartes and Man's resultant emancipation from the world of experience with Robert Fludd's preaching of the immediate presence of God in all of Nature, whose primary sources included Hermes Trismegistus and varied Kabbalistic writings.⁹ It is therefore quite ironic that it was the "cogito" of Descartes, upon whose foundations Newton built, which aided in 'space' being seen merely as a quantifiable entity, stripped of its primary intention as an attribute of God.

Frederick Kiesler's concept of space may be seen as an attempt to re-establish the Boundless within the world of experience which he saw as linked to order of the cosmos.

In our modern atheistic context, institutions have failed to reconcile the enigmas posed by daily life. Kiesler saw *Art*, now accessed through the work of the individual artist, as the only remaining useful constant in Western culture which can enable man to once again re-discover his unity with the cosmos. The ritual function of art as experienced by primitive man was seen by Kiesler as still being a basic tool/need of modern ("existential") man in his search to achieve harmony within his self and within the world.

Kiesler's first "Galaxy" construction, built upon the news of the end of World War I, was destroyed before being visually documented. The following quote, written decades later, describes his attempt to presence (through an art object) "the fourth dimension" which is unveiled by the motility of an extended bodily experience.

Frederick Kiesler writes:

"He (the artist-architect) has become aware of the forces which hold planets, suns and star dust in set relations to one another so that, even when orbiting, they do not lose their family relationships. The continuity of this correlation is never interrupted.

In my galaxies the paintings are also set at different distances from the wall, protruding or receding. Naturally they have no isolating frames, since the exact interval-space between them makes frames superfluous. The total space of the wall or room space provides a framing in depth - in fact, a three-dimensional frame without end."¹⁰

There are 'galaxies' which Kiesler built later in his life to aid our understanding of this first construction. Still, one can imagine a series of unframed images, not linear but in succession, a movement which folds back upon itself while moving forward. It is a device which reveals the intentions behind memory in the cinematographic use of montage, the construction of metaphors, a non-framing which enables one to find one's own body within the world. This first 'galaxy' is an experiential model of the Kiesler's "Endless". Yet as an 'art object' the galaxy remains (without use) empty, it is Newton's void awaiting reinhabitation.

Following from Kiesler's understanding of the unavoidable ritual function of art, a major dilemma for modern man is that the exploration and unification of the perceptual and cosmic space can *not* merely remain within the solipsistic and consumptive art world. Kiesler saw that there can be no separations between 'life - intentions' and 'architectural - intentions'. They mutually co-exist and thus architecture should not be seen as a reflection/representation of the world.

Architecture should delineate the 'space of action' which at its core was and remains visually "no-thing". The kabbalist used this term to refer to the unspeakable name of God, but for Kiesler this "no-thing" was understood as "the breath of the cosmos";¹¹ the 'other' unveiled in the space of action. This is the sea air that must fill our lungs with the faith necessary to once again 'hallow the everyday'¹² the harmonic blood flow which delineates a symbolic space. A spatial orientation which Kiesler never saw as "static" but instead must be seen as "dynamic", a united "becoming and enacting"¹³ which is bodied forth in time.

In 1923 Frederick Kiesler designed the first "Endless" as a space theatre for the play *Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neill in Berlin. The "Space Stage" was the first theatre set to have the actual stage in continuous motion and incorporated a film into the context of the set. This concern for dynamic action later took static physical form in the first spiral 'theatre in the round', where the actors' movements constructed space through the narrative of the play. This is the birth of what Kiesler later called "the space-time continuum", where one is forced to recognize that a gesture can never be separated from its intentions; the content constructed by action in time (bodily movement) which forms space. In his 1926 article *Debate of the Modern Theatre* for the International Music and Theatre Festival of Vienna, Kiesler writes:

"...the new spirit bursts the stage, resolving it into space to meet the demands of action. It invents the space-stage, which is not merely a priori space, but also appears as space. ...Space is space only for the person who moves about it. For the actor, not for the spectator. Optically there is only one method for giving the experience of space with precision namely, motion which is converted into space."¹⁴

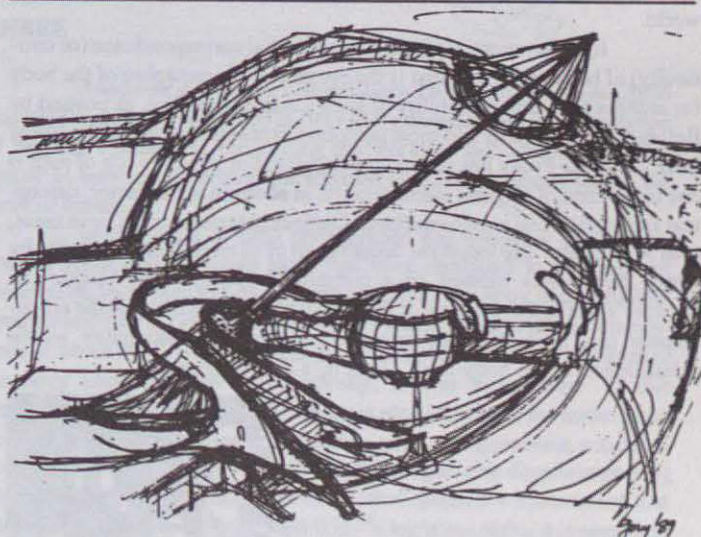
In an attempt to overcome the limitations inherent in the Galaxy as an "art object" and the problematic issue of the "spectator" in the Space-Stage, Frederick Kiesler's interest in endless space formed what was to become his primary life project: The Endless House. In the Endless House, which obviously merits being more fully discussed, space is 'continuous' and is molded by the content of life; by "the daily happenings of no end".¹⁵

"The 'Endless House' is called 'Endless' because all ends meet and meet continuously. It is endless like the human body - there is no beginning and no end to it."¹⁶

This is the space of the contemporary embodied nomad which is no longer tied to an institutionalized myth but is instead guided by a profound faith in the power of 'man's experience in the world' to unveil the presence of the unknown in the known. For Frederick Kiesler his Galaxies, Space-Theatres, and his Endless House were never seen as ends in themselves, for there are no ends in the Endless, but as projects whose intention it was to aid the static "spectators" in the recognition of the dynamic core of our primordial being. Architecture should once again allow the forces of man and the cosmic world to unite in the 'space of action', it should reveal the mysterious "other" which is bodied forth in life, bodied forth by the seemingly contradictory reality of endless phenomenal space.

1. See Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*.
2. Dalibor Vesely, seminar given at McGill University in 1988.
3. Frederick Kiesler, *Inside The Endless House*, (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1966) pp.14-15.
4. "nomadic" is being used as a metaphor to link bodily motility, Kiesler's Endless, and the primitive nomad with the displaced position man experiences in our increasingly homogeneous world.
5. Kiesler's "cosmic love" is the energy which fuels all of man's reconciliatory actions; it is the force which permits man to find himself in relation to others.
6. Kiesler, *Inside The Endless House*, p. 137.
7. See Charles Ponce, *Kabbalah*, (London, England: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1972).
8. See Thorleif Bowman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960) pp. 157-160.

9. See Max Jammer, *Concepts of Space*.
10. *Inside The Endless House*, p. 20.
11. Kenneth Baker quotes Kiesler in *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 14, 1969.
12. This phrase of Martin Buber's has been (ab)used out of its theistic context.
13. See Thorleif Bowman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*.
14. See Kiesler's article "The Debacle of Modern Theatre", in the catalogue of the New York 1926 International Exposition.
15. *Inside The Endless House*, p. 566.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 569.



Gregory Henriquez is not an architect.