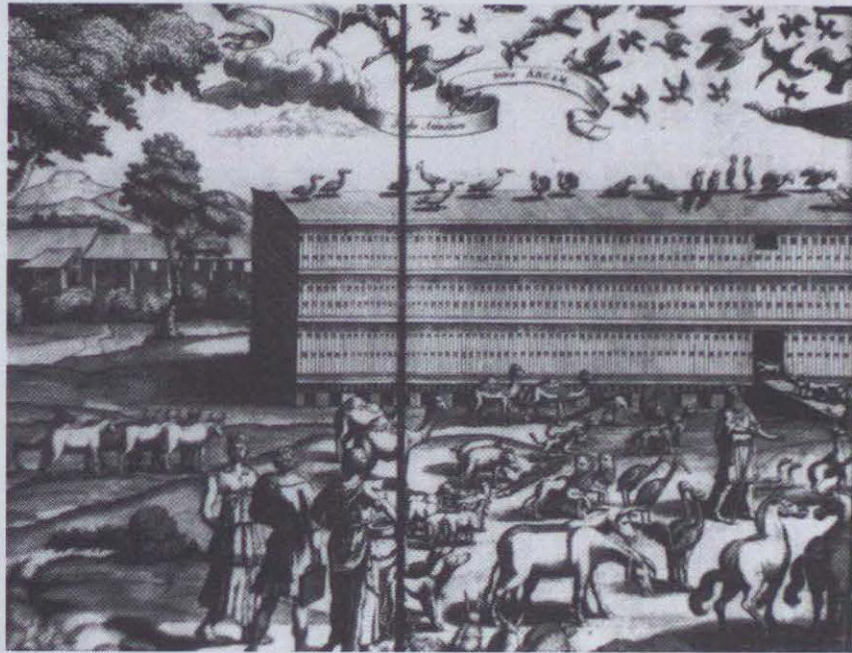


FROM NEW JERUSALEM TO NEW YORK:

THE PROBLEM OF EXISTENTIAL DISPLACEMENT

1. The Ark of Noah, by Anthonis Kircher. From *Arca Noë*, Amsterdam: 1675.



The biblical struggle between man and God could be viewed as man's attempt to make architecture (as a form of knowledge) versus God's imposition of existential displacement. Existential displacement, whether literal or figurative, derives from the Fall.

1. In a recent interview entitled *The Great Teacher*, aired on C.B.C. television on Christmas day 1989, Northrop Frye stated that the Old Testament marked the history of human consciousness.

We are all familiar with the person who has had to leave her or his culture and move to a foreign place due to war or strife. Such people often try to rebuild the memory of the place through photographs, books, artifacts, and stories of the culture they left behind. This type of existential displacement produced Joyce's recollections of Dublin as he lived in Paris or Trieste. One's own identity is associated with a particular place, and loss of identity can result from loss of place. Thus, the development of Chinatown or Little Italy attempts to re-establish the culture from which their inhabitants have been displaced. It is an attempt to regain identity and cultural continuity.

The other type of existential displacement is associated with the children of Israel wandering in the desert (Exodus: ch. 12), a displacement that denies the possibility of rebuilding. Job alludes to "those who cause the naked to lodge without clothing, that they have no covering in the cold. They are wet with the showers of the mountains, and embrace the rock for want of shelter" (Job: ch. 23). I suggest that both these types of existential displacement are at the root of the origins of architecture, for the history of human consciousness begun by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden marks the birth of man having "to till the ground from whence he was taken" (Genesis: ch. 3). The themes of tilling, marking off territory and establishing foundations are related to the act of construction and the foundation of cities.¹



F.L.L.M.: Fielding Lloyd Mellish--

TONY: --and see if I've got it right. Please correct me if I'm wrong. I think we can all see that this thesis is about PLACE, FACE, and TRACE, yes?

F.L.L.M. (whipping piece of lace from trousers): Yes, but you forgot one thing: old lace!

TONY: Yes, good point. Old lace. Perhaps I'd like to now ask Julia-- Professor Mindfart--Julia I mean--for her comments. (waving and snapping fingers to get MINDFART's attention).

JULIA (wakes up, grunts, retrieves pipe, lights it with help from CHORUS member, peers at work through clouds of smoke): Ah... I see... Yes, you have a thesis. The question is, where is it?... Actually, Fielding,

F.L.L.M.: Fielding Lloyd Mellish--

JULIA: Yes, well, taking a cue from something I believe you said, or perhaps it was in another crit, about biflatulent symmetry, I'd like to lapse, (to TONY) if I may--

TONY: Yes, well, yes, by golly.

JULIA (lifts glasses, speaks slowly at first, but with increasing urgency):

(As she speaks, CHORUS provides slow build of background noise of tropical forest, changing at end to war sounds: machineguns, bombs dropping, planes crashing):

It reminds me of a time, long ago, in the deep forests of Botswana, when I had the responsibility of erecting worker's flats. It was truly marvellous, you know, how happy those people were, with the simplest of means. Two or three of them could sit for hours torturing one of the huge insects, while their women happily did

The departure from Eden is the origin of existential loss of place, which arises again in the person of Cain who slew Abel when they were in the field. The result of Cain's wandering East of Eden in the land of Nod is the founding of the city of Enoch, another attempt at establishing place in a chaotic world. Wandering somewhere between Eden in our pre-conscious state, and the New Jerusalem in the ideal state, what are we to do? Having once sought refuge from the tempest in the form of the ark, is man really architect of the ship, or is he shipwrecked, an analogy which Ortega y Gasset uses to describe the existential dilemma.

THE FOUR CONSTRUCTIONS:

From the beginning, three of the four constructions sited in the Old Testament were built by man under the instruction and supervision of God. The Ark of Noah (Genesis: ch. 6), the Tabernacle in the Desert (Exodus: ch. 25 - 27), and the Temple of Solomon (I Kings: ch. 6) are the results of the Divine architect through the figures of Noah, Moses, and Solomon. We know that the ark of Noah was made of gopher wood, 300 cubits long by 50 cubits wide by 30 cubits high, including a window and a door². The instructions given to Moses concerning the ark of the covenant were that it was to be made of shittim wood, 2.5 cubits long by 1.5 cubits wide by 1.5 cubits high, and it was to be placed in the inner sanctum, the most holy of places. The sanctuary preceding the inner sanctum contained a golden altar with incense placed upon it, a table upon which bread was placed, and a menorah with its seven candlesticks. Within the external forecourt of the building was placed a laver for ablution by water and another for a fire offering.

The wall, which marked off the territory in which the tabernacle was placed, was 100 cubits long by 50 cubits wide by 5 cubits high. One entered the forecourt from the east. All the vessels were wrought from brass, and all the pillars fitted with silver.³ The children of Israel were exiled from Egypt, wandering errant for 430 years (Exodus: ch. 12). Led by Moses they became involved with the building of the Tabernacle to house the Word of the Lord in the form of the ark of the covenant. Like the commandments, the Tabernacle was inscribed. The act of inscribing the two tablets with the commandments coincides with the Lord's instructions for the inscription of the Tabernacle upon the Earth, as the process of erecting the building took place. Even the event of building the Tabernacle is marked by man's forgetfulness. Once Moses is not with the children of Israel, Aaron forges the molten calf of Gold, and the

people turn their back on the Lord, worshipping instead the molten icon.

A similar description of the house which King Solomon built for God after the children of Israel came out of Egypt states that the length of the Temple was 60 (threescore) cubits, the breadth 20 cubits, and the height 30 cubits. The porch before the temple was 20 cubits in length and 10 cubits in breadth. The temple contained narrow windows, and against the inner wall were built chambers of various dimensions. The material for the temple was stone, prepared before arriving on the site. The temple was covered in beams and boards of cedar. The beams were not fastened artificially to the walls of the house, nor was there any tool of iron on site during construction. The oracle to contain the ark of the covenant was constructed of cedar and overlaid with gold. The two doors on the face of the oracle were made of olive tree. Its dimensions were 20 cubits in length, breadth, and height. The temple took Solomon seven years to build, a secular equivalent to God's creation of the world.

The exception to the four constructions in the Old Testament is the Tower of Babel (Genesis: ch. 11), interpreted as a representation of human arrogance. The chapter in Genesis contains no description of how the tower was built or its dimensions. In the story of the Tower of Babel, we are told that the whole earth is of one language and one speech. This unity of language allowed a collective project in the building of the tower on the plains of Shinar; a project that the Lord knew represented the attainment of knowledge. This knowledge was reflected in the material of construction, since Babel was constructed of brick, a "worked" material. In the firing of clay to become brick, the clay undergoes a transformation connected to human artifice.⁴ Like the Fall, the building of the tower illustrates the struggle of human consciousness. The Lord states that "now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do." The imagination of Man is a dangerous thing, since it allows him to strive for an ideal, which is the domain of the Lord, who describes himself as the Alpha and the Omega. This consciousness is linked to language in the case of the tower, a fact which the Lord immediately arrests through the confusion of tongues (babble), which causes the collective to be dispersed. The connection between language and building is together from the outset. This act of negating one language and one speech hearkens back to the idea that "in the beginning was the Word", and the Word is related to the ear, just as the building or object is related to the eye, and in turn our sense of synaesthetic awareness.

2. The Tower of Babel, by Gustave Dore. From *The Bible Gallery*, London: 1880.



The dual symbolism of the Divine Creator, being at once both benevolent and malevolent, can be seen in relation to the four constructions cited earlier. Paradise, the instructions for the ark, and the Tabernacle in the Desert are acts of benevolence. The Fall, the deluge, and the mass Exodus are related acts of malevolence. These situations create conflict and are followed by an attempted act of reconciliation. The history of the Old Testament is the history of man wandering after his lost soul. The angst which has been associated with existential thought from Kierkegaard to Camus is evident in the Book of Job. Job, "a perfect and upright man", is tormented by the Lord as a test and he laments:

Man that is born of a woman, is of few days and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: He fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not (Job: ch. 14).

This feeling of man being forsaken is a common theme in the Bible. Jesus, who is denied

2. A cubit is an ancient measure of length derived from the forearm; it is the distance from the elbow to the end of the fingertips. Varying at different times and places, it is usually between 18-22 inches (O.E.D.).

3. For an excellent discussion of the symbolism of the Tabernacle in the desert, see the article entitled *Philo of Alexandria and the Architecture of the Cosmos* by Jan Van Pelt in *AA Files* #4, pp 3-15.

4. The fact that the Tower of Babel is the only one of the four constructions made by a "worked material" was pointed out to me by Patrick Harrop, a colleague at McGill.



without the most basic of household amenities—no laptop computers, no microwave receivers, no running water. . . . Of course we changed all that, but, MY GOD, their sense of colour, I'm agog at the mere thought of it, the flies everywhere, the starving cattle swatting their tails at you as you passed, the land cruiser knocking up huge billowing clouds of dust and smoke, the rains when they finally came washing great gullies through the cricket field, The workers demanding their pay, the rhinoceros beetles at night dive-bombing the tin roofs of the cottages, severed skulls placed on stakes everywhere and left to rot... visions of twisted metal, bamboo shards, and . . . blood. . . . The Horror. The Horror.

(silence: a pause. TONY is gently shaking JULIA).

GARY: A simple question comes to me as I look at your work, Fielding—

F.L.L.M.:—Fielding Lloyd Mellish—

GARY:—With both LLs, yes, but looking at your model, I get no sense of the way the walls meet the floor. And what is architecture, after all, in its essence nothing more than walls, floor, the simplicity of a plan? You do not have to answer this question, if you do not feel it to be of central importance to your work, but the question must nevertheless be asked. How does the wall meet the floor? HOW DOES THE WALL MEET THE FLOOR?

F.L.L.M. (fiddles with model): Ah. . . . Ah. . . . for instance, when is a wall not a wall, you mean? Well, I might answer (ripping wall off model), when it isn't! The wall could meet the floor, or maybe the wall could BE the floor. . . . or it could have nothing to do with the floor or the wall. . . . The wall could be a name, like Walter, or a place to hide money, like a wallet! Or maybe

acceptance at least in this kingdom, expresses his sense of loss at the event of the crucifixion (St. Mark: ch. 15). Similarly, as the torment of Job continues, he echoes the sentiments of an outsider:

Behold, I cry out wrong, but I am not heard:

I cry aloud, but there is no judgement.
He hath fenced up my way that I cannot pass,
and He hath set darkness in my paths.
He hath stripped me of my glory,
and taken the crown from my head.
He hath destroyed me on every side,
and I am gone:

and mine hope hath He removed like a tree.

(Job: ch. 19).

The separation between spirit and matter is one of the fundamental dualisms that causes the sense of loss. Man is constantly in search of *gnosis* (knowledge), that stage where spirit and matter would be reconciled. Often this revelation is through the form of a Saviour (the Lord) or a messenger (an Angel). The split between God and world, and that between man and world, are two gnostic dualisms that leave man with the anguished discovery of his cosmic solitude. That man turns away from the world is represented in the theme of light's imprisonment within darkness, just as the soul is imprisoned within the body. Camus' understanding of this solitude as an essential characteristic of the human condition is reflected in *L'Etranger's* Meursault, whose solitude is judged by the collective as a crime against society. What the search for Gnosis and existential thought share is the act of recognition of the 'self.' Ironically, one must go outside oneself, in essence, to pursue the Realm of Light. The body and the building are both vessels for this act of revelation.

MEMORY & RE-CONSTRUCTION:

Speechlessness and wandering seem to be the frustrating terms of the human condition. The concerns of architecture are the *event*, circumscribed by time, and the *site*, circumscribed by place. The image of the Lord answering Job from among the clouds in order to alleviate his angst is a memory, but the potential for constructing meaning in language and architecture remains. A passage from T. S. Eliot's poem "Ash Wednesday" (1930) illustrates that, as long as we have the faculty of memory,⁵ there still remains the potential to build:

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time

And only for one place

I rejoice that things are as they are and

I renounce the blessed face

And renounce the voice

Because I cannot hope to turn again

Consequently I rejoice, having to
construct something

*Upon which to rejoice.*⁶

Camus' protagonist Meursault is wronged and forsaken and then imprisoned. His problem became how to occupy oneself when given so much leisure that it was a punishment. In Camus, as in the New Jerusalem, the body is once again the temple; the public can imprison Meursault, but his memory and imagination remain free. Meursault alleviates the boredom through the use of memory, the repository of experience. Like Van Gogh, he recalls his bedroom in great depth:

I made a point of visualizing every piece of furniture, and each article upon or in it, and then every detail of each article, and finally the details of the details, so to speak: a tiny dent or incrustation, or a chipped edge, and the exact grain and colour of the woodwork. At the same time I forced myself to keep my inventory in mind from start to finish, in the right order and omitting no item. With the result that, after a few weeks, I could spend hours merely in listing the objects in my bedroom. I found that the more I thought, the more details, half-forgotten or malobserved, floated up from my memory. There seemed no end to them.

*So I learned that even after a single day's experience of the outside world a man could easily live a hundred years in prison. He'd have laid up enough memories never to be bored.*⁷

These two passages point to the importance of construction, this time in relation to constructing a meaning for life, the thrust of an existential inquiry. The question of man's existential displacement has been closely related to the question of making architecture. In recognizing the theme of displacement in the Old Testament, the story of the Fall represents the dual

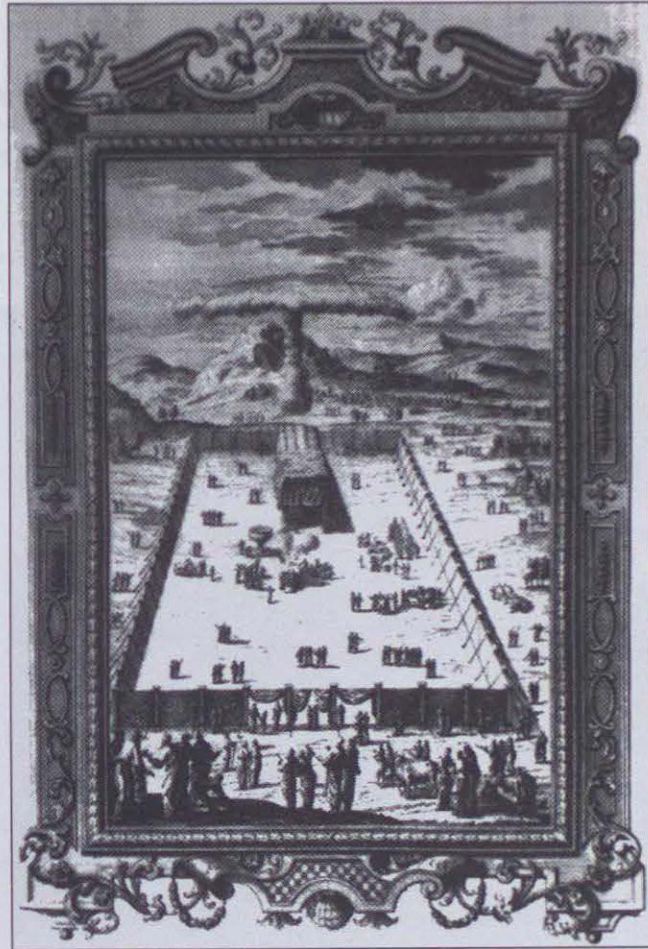
3. The Tabernacle in the Desert, from *Philo of Alexandria and the Architecture of the Cosmos*, by Jan Van Pelt. *AA files* #4, p. 6.

next page:

4. Plan of the Temple of Solomon, by Johann Fischer Von Erlach. From *A Plan of Civil and Historical*

Architecture, London: 1730.

5. The Temple of Solomon, by Johann Fischer Von Erlach. From *A Plan of Civil and Historical Architecture*, London: 1730.



condition of man's search for permanence against his fate of expulsion and existential displacement.

ARCHITECTURE & THE HEAVENLY CITY:

The heavenly New Jerusalem is of pure gold, with a surrounding wall of Jasper. Built on these foundations are twelve gates with inscribed names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel. The twelve gates have foundations garnished of precious jewels; these foundations represent the twelve apostles. Each gate is presided over by an angel. There is no temple built within, and there is no night. The glory of God is the Light, and the people are the temple, "for they house the tabernacle of God within them." The length and breadth and height of the New Jerusalem are uniform. The wall surrounding the city is 144 cubits in height, purported to be the measure of an angel. It is important that both the Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem are enclosed within the wall, for the wall is a gesture of existential security, differentiating the chaos outside the wall from the order and harmony within. The wall is primarily symbolic, and only secondarily a defensive device.

We recall that in many cultures, the first architectural gesture is to stake out the territory upon which to build. The ritual of laying a foundation for a building or a city wall recalls the

5 In this context, "memory" denotes either a collective or a personal history.

6 T.S. Eliot, *Collected poems* 1909-62, London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1974, p. 95.

7 Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961, p. 81.



(ramming pieces of model together)
the wall and the floor get LACED
together, one running through the
other. You see?

TONY: We must come back to the
issue of scale. Have you considered
the scale of your project?

F.L.L.M. (produces rudimentary pan
balance-type scale): I'm glad you
asked that question, sir, believe me
scale is one thing I've thought a lot
about in the Architecture of Placeness.
See? Rocks... feathers... Rocks are
heavier!

TONY: Perhaps it would help to
understand your project if you
explained to Julia—Professor Julia—
Professor Mindart—your PROCESS
of design. Obviously you gave it great
thought.

F.L.L.M.: Process?

JULIA: Yes, that would help I
think... You seem to have been
concerned with a metaphysical
deconstruction of the existential self
(FARTS, pans audience). Thawed
music, if you will.

F.L.L.M.: Uh huh, Yeah, Um, sort
of a metaphorical bifurcation if you
will.

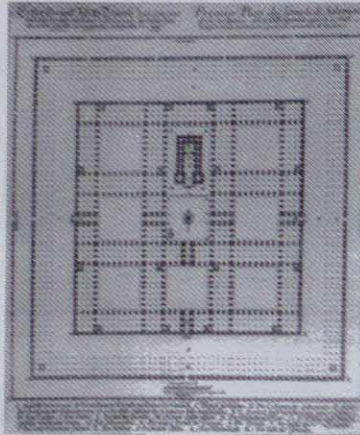
(in following speech, F.L.L.M.
shakes, scatters, distorts, spills model
as required).

The amazing thing about my
project is that it's more than what it is.
Not just one plan, for example, but any
number of plans, the ultimate in
flexibility. You don't like it this way? I
can change it! You don't like it still? I
can change it again! The overall effect
is like LACE

(F. L. M. drapes lace over model,
holds model up to show critics, all
loose pieces slide to floor).

importance of this act of circumscribing. The
initial markings of the place have a symbolic
meaning tied to existential security. This
provides a possible connection to the origins
of architecture, for the act of raising a wall is
to capture the light, to allow the invisible to
become visible. The feast of Jubilee
(Leviticus: ch. 25) recalls the ritual of place
whereby every 50th year
the people return to their
original territory.

Within the heavenly
city, the crystal river runs
past the Tree of Life. The
river is a symbol of the
eternal cycle of birth,
death and rebirth. On the
banks of the river is the
Tree of Life, the
counterpoint to the Tree
of Knowledge. Often the
forbidden fruit is
associated with the apple, for "malum" is the
Latin word which denotes both "apple" and
"sin". The ideal purity of the New Jerusalem
contrasted against a man-made repository of
culture such as New York (also called the Big
Apple) makes the city sound like the
description of the reality outside the walls of
the New Jerusalem. The last passage in



Revelations (ch. 22) states that "outside of the
walls are dogs, and sorcerers, and
whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters
and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie." The
image of New York as a model of late
capitalism, complete with its array of
homeless and otherwise existentially displaced
"citizens" is the reality of our existence and is
symbolic of the city as an
artifact.

The Old Testament
begins and ends with an
ideal. The Alpha
corresponds to the Garden
of Eden (Genesis: ch. 1),
and the Omega
corresponds to the New
Jerusalem, the last image in
the New Testament
(Revelations: ch. 22).
Dwelling somewhere
between these two ideals

lies the quest for human
consciousness, which is manifested by what
we "make" in an attempt to define a locus, a
sense of existential security in an otherwise
constantly shifting world. We continue to
pursue the heavenly city on Earth. This is the
ironic fate of architecture and of the human
condition.

