

## Backdoors and Stereotypes

Travel persists in memory as a collection of experiences or incidents strung together temporally by a chronology and spatially by a path. So essential to the planning and execution of a trip, these organising sequences form the common thread connecting the various beads of memory. The blunt edge of time acting on this thread causes it to fray, releasing beads from their ordered positions. We are then left holding the individual sensations that may begin to speak to us in entirely new ways. The following collection of four of these beads is a consideration of the different types of preconditioning that can shape perception at the moment of experience. It begins at the end of a voyage...

**3** After the third day of fasting or illness, the body goes through a brief period of rejuvenation. This is how one of my travelling companions explained my state of apparent well-being under the noon sun among the ruins of ancient Priene. After the third day... how symbolic. In my case, it happened to be three days of testing my internal constitution — a common ritual upon arrival in Turkey.

**4** Priene is situated on a south facing slope, in the transition between the horizontal plains and marshes stretching out before it and the vertical sheer mountain cliff standing behind. On top of this cliff stood the acropolis: a spiritual place and a fortified refuge. A plan of the site on a pamphlet depicted a wall encompassing the city and the rear of

the acropolis. A small broken line indicated a path zigzagging from the town site up the cliff...

I was drawn to the cliff, this backdrop of Priene, which thrust heavenward behind the lonely re-erected columns of the Temple of Athena. With a ration of water and a few biscuits, I departed from the group in order to find a vantage point from which I could perceive the rigid order of the city. The city grid, for which Priene is renowned, was disguised by the undulating topography.

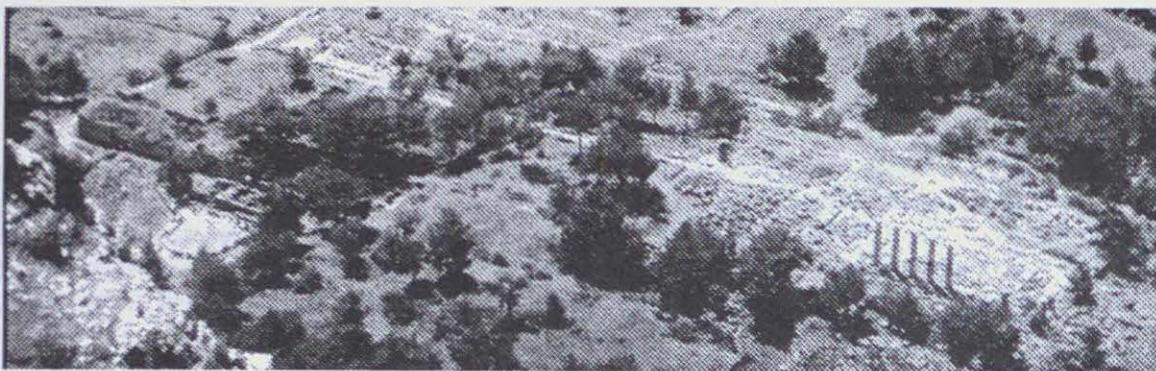
Conscious of my tenuous physical state, I proceeded up the steep rocky ground beyond the grassy steps of the amphitheatre, temporarily relieved by the generous shade of a coniferous grove. Scattered boulders and talis marked the abrupt stone face of the cliff. Although I had climbed a significant distance, the trees prevented any possible glimpse of the city I was leaving. I looked up at the ominous unshaded rock face, and with my hand reached up towards its baking surface...

Anyone who climbs, knows about setting progressive goals: mine was merely to get a view over the trees.



*body*





9 Alone on an exposed rock face in a foreign land, with a half-litre of water and no assurance that the nausea and dizziness of the preceding days wouldn't suddenly return, I proceeded. From one outcrop to the next, over loose rock and occasional vegetation, I gradually rose up above the trees, and the ruins slowly came into view. *From the next level point I would stop, photograph, and descend. From the next level...*

10 I suddenly found myself walking on a terrace of solid rock. Before me lay a path, distinctly recognizable by the pattern of stairs worn almost to obscurity by centuries of natural forces. This path appeared out of nowhere — even after a later search, I could not find its lower terminus. It beckoned me forward, against my better judgment. Zigzagging over a carefully designed ascent, the path was in places less than a foot and half wide between the cliff face and the stony ground far below.

11 My goals now extended from one hairpin corner to the next, where I would briefly yield to the tug of my conscience telling me that I had gone too far, and that I must return. The city was now coming into full view. From this aerial perspective,

the ordering grid was easily perceived - only the amphitheatre was still hidden.

My water was warm and nearly depleted, and the heat radiating from the rock equaled the intensity of the sun's direct rays. The time to meet back with the group was approaching. These thoughts were circulating in my mind, but my uneasiness was disappearing. I became aware that I had passed the crucial point of no turning back. I *would* climb to the top, and from the acropolis, I would gaze down on Hippodamus' grid, superimposed on the peninsula of rock, which projected into the sea of fields stretching out to the horizon of haze.

12





*Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception - or, rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side, there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. The latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction.*

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1978.

Prague is rapidly approaching the nature of most other European cities in the way that it separates the visitor from the true aspect of its being. On this third visit in three years, I noticed a transformation from its gray essence into a colourful new theme park. The scaffolding has left behind a veil of freshly plastered hope - a fragile shell for the city's ego, a mask for its soul. This shell has come to include the interiors of cafés, hotels, tourist bureaus, and many public spaces: façadism, as an expanding bubble of visual control, separates the visitor from the inhabitant. Much like the Velázquez painting, *Las Meninas*, the essence seems to lie outside the depiction...

The Obecni Dům café at Nam. Repubiisky stands in all its nostalgic opulence inside a cage of scaffolding before the soon-to-be-renovated Municipal House. It is entered from inside the Municipal House, directly left of the base of the stairs leading up to Smetana Hall, a large concert hall. Compared to the dinginess of the entrance, the café appears like the sparkling jewel on a tarnished ring. The richness of the renovated space and its faithful use of former mate-

rials quenches the eye. The vast height gives it a theatrical air. At first, one dares not enter - the attire of a worn traveller feels grossly inappropriate.

Two young servers dressed in formal black suits smiled and ushered me in. The air was fresh, an oasis to the dusty heat of the city. Water gushed from the wall opposite the entrance into a stone basin. Its sound wove through the conversations emanating from the tables, creating a tranquil murmur. The setting was perfect, but something did not seem right.

Looking around the room, I began to understand the strangeness of the situation. The mix of local aristocracy and shorts and t-shirt bearing tourists was odd. At the entrance to the kitchen stood young, pimple-faced, multilingual waiters and waitresses. They alternated between giggling amongst themselves and nervously surveying the hall lest they should break the illusion they were paid to maintain. An American was sitting with some casually dressed businessmen and artists at the other kitchen entrance. He occasionally walked in and out of the kitchen, serving himself and



psyche



speaking casually with the employees. His was the only voice that carried above the murmur, but he didn't seem to care - he owned the place.

**18** The illusion of this place was that it shouldn't exist at all. I decided to leave. Instead of exiting through the main doors onto the street, I climbed the stairs to the concert hall foyer, where paintings by Alfons Mucha decorate the walls and ceilings of this aging arched space. A small metal-clad concession filled a corner niche. I bought a historical booklet from an old man sitting there in absolute silence. Unable to see through the dingy windows of the locked concert hall doors, I hurried up one of the two symmetrical staircases that spiral around an old wire-framed elevator.

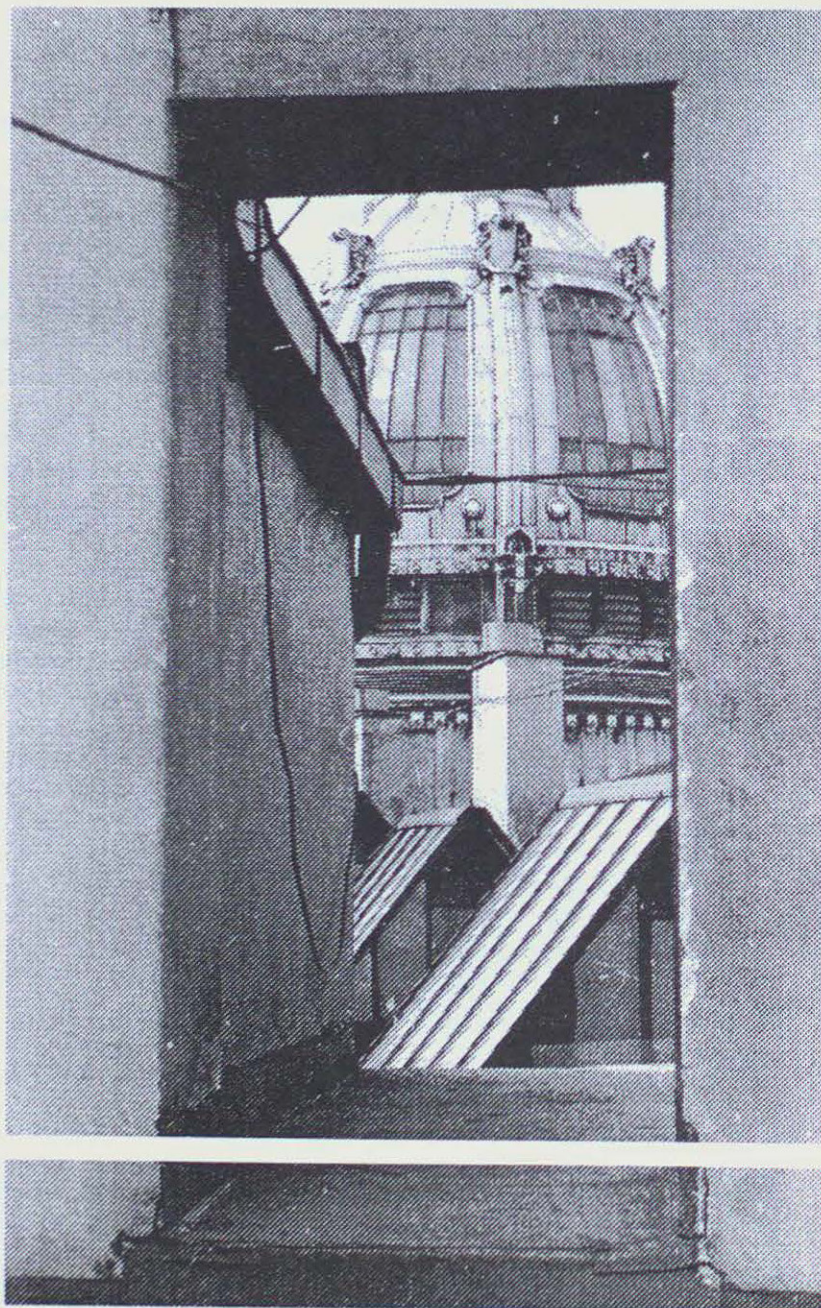
**19** On this upper level, a hall of shiny new boutiques and galleries contrasted with the unfinished surroundings, and drew me from the dark foyer. I saw a door partially ajar, ventured through, and found myself walking along the perimeter of the concert space. I climbed up several flights of a smaller curved staircase. Through an open window in the stairwell, I noticed that I was about six stories above ground. Soon I arrived at the top. I judged myself to be behind the centre of the stage, in line with the building's central axis. Faced with yet another door, I opened it.

**20** Light flooded the large attic before me, through a pitched glass ceiling on which a layer of grime prevented a view of the sky. A giant oval lightwell, centred over the concert

hall, covered most of the floorspace. Standing for a moment, I took in this privileged sight before proceeding around the lightwell to the space

beyond. I looked into the recesses of the attic, and suddenly froze. Across the room, I saw a long table flanked by two benches, and covered with bottles and food. A jumble of pin-ups hung from the sloping wall directly behind the table. I realized that I was not alone in this magical place. Yet there was nobody in the room, only the sounds of the city coming in from a rough

wooden door hanging open. Sensing that I was trespassing, I nervously escaped out onto the roof, knowing that in all likelihood someone would probably be sitting at the table when I returned. Outside, among the cupola, skylights, and unpainted Jugendstil relief, unseen from the street below, I felt that I had finally pierced the membrane of the city.





When I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the fifties, someone told me how I could get onto the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike... It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and coloured lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many views I had had about art... Later I discovered some abandoned airstrips in Europe - abandoned works, Surrealist landscapes, something that had nothing to do with any function, created worlds without tradition.

Tony Smith, Minimalist, in Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., "Talking to Tony Smith," *Artforum*, Vol. V, No. 4, Dec. 1966.

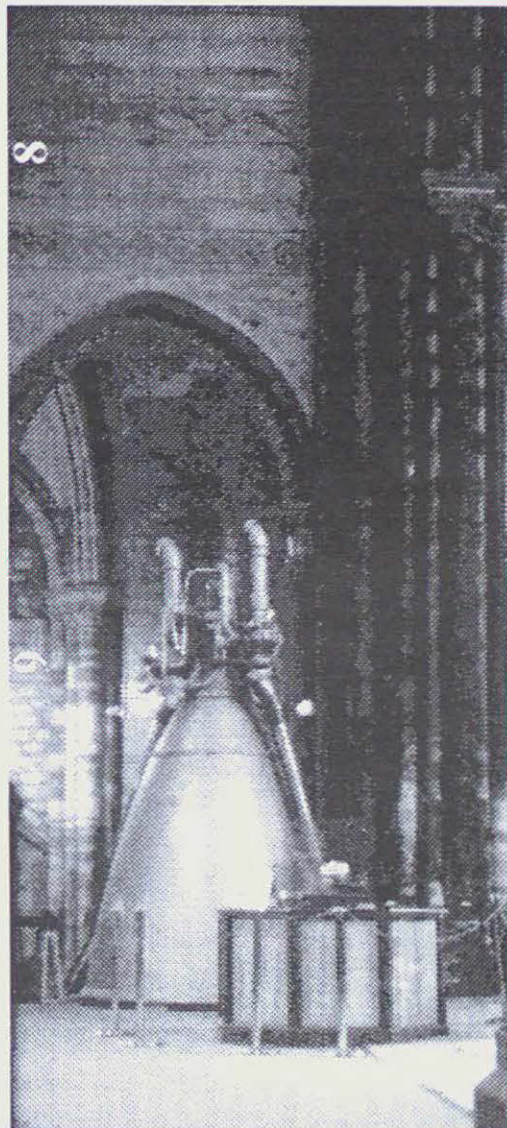
I found the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers to be exactly as described by Umberto Eco in *Foucault's Pendulum*. In fact, the only reason I was even aware of the existence of this archive/museum was because of the vivid images portrayed in the book. Actually, this is not entirely true. I had heard of the name once before, in connection with the SI system in physics class. Apparently, before the standard metric unit was measured as a fraction of the distance light travels in a second, it was defined by two lines inscribed on a platinum bar stored under controlled conditions. I remember my fascination with the idea that something as arbitrary as the distance between these two scratched lines would be the standard for all lengths - the king's foot - by which the world would be measured. That platinum bar can be found at the Conservatoire, or perhaps it was the kilogram?

To enter the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers in Paris, you first cross an eighteenth-century courtyard and step into an old abbey church, now part of a later complex, but originally part of a priory. You enter and are stunned by a conspiracy in which the sublime universe of

heavenly ogives and the chthonian world of gas guzzlers are juxtaposed.

On the floor stretches a line of vehicles: bicycles, horseless carriages, automobiles; from the ceiling hang planes. Some of the objects are intact, though peeling and corroded with time, and in the ambiguous mix of natural and electric light they seemed covered by a patina, an old violin's varnish. Others are only skeletons or chassis, rods and cranks that threaten indescribable tortures. You picture yourself chained to a rack, something digging into your flesh until you confess.

Beyond this sequence of antique machines - once mobile, now immobile, their souls rusted, mere specimens of the technological pride that is so keen to display them to the reverence of visitors - stands the choir, guarded on the left by a scale model of the Statue of Liberty Bartholdi designed for another world, and on the right by a statue of Pascal. Here the swaying Pendulum is flanked by the nightmare of deranged entomologists - chelae, mandibles, antennae, proglottides, and wings - a cemetery of mechanical corpses



text

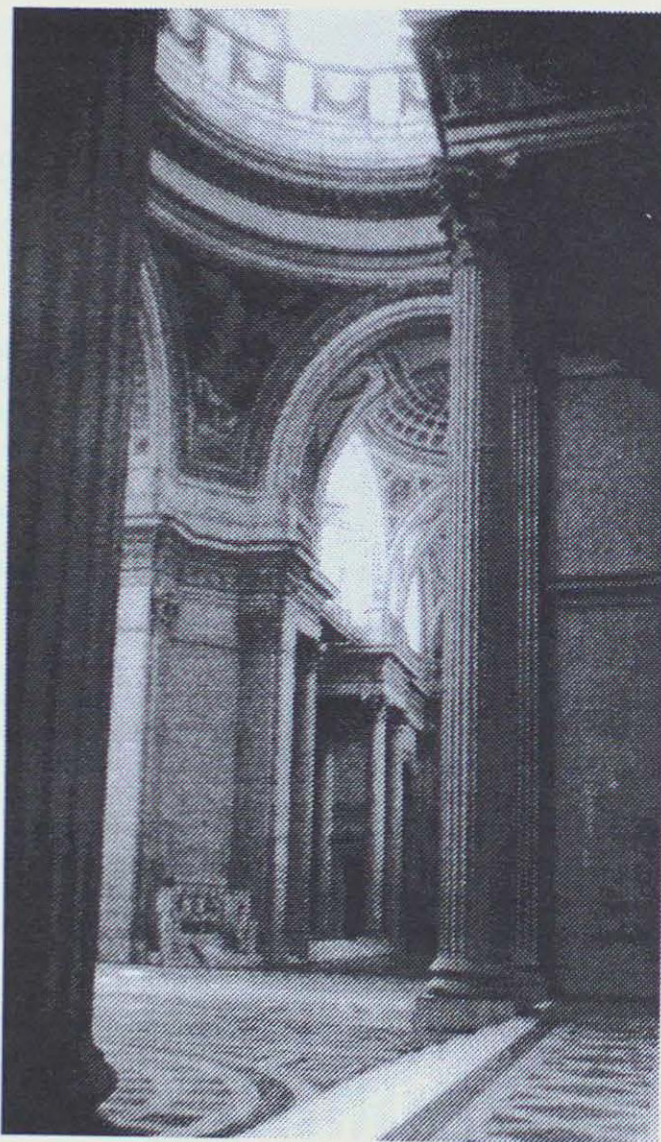


that look as if they might all start working again at any moment - magnetos, monophase transformers, turbines, converters, steam engines...

- 10 The Pendulum told me that, as everything moved - earth, solar system, nebulae and black holes, all the children of the great cosmic expansion - one single point stood still: a pivot, bolt, or hook around which the universe could move. And I was now taking part in that supreme experience. I, too, moved with the all, but I could see the One, the Rock, the Guarantee, the luminous mist that is not a body, that has no shape, weight, quantity or quality...

Umberto Eco,  
*Foucault's Pendulum*  
New York: Ballantine  
Books, 1989.

- 25 I felt strangely connected with this place. My experience was an extension of the fictional events that were situated there — it was as though I had stepped onto the stage of another reality. I was alone in my space, isolated by my memory of it. The occasional person shuffling through became appropriated into my experience, and thus, left the spell unbroken.





October, 1993

*But what was Smith's experience on the turnpike? Or to put the same question another way, if the turnpike, airstrips, and drill ground are not works of art, what are they? - What, indeed, if not empty or "abandoned," situations?*

*...On the one hand, the turnpike, airstrips, and drill ground belong to no one; on the other, the situation established by Smith's presence is in each case felt by him to be his. Moreover, in each case being able to go on and on indefinitely is of the essence.*

Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Gregory Battock. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968.

DRESDEN, GERMANY June 1991

My head bobbed drowsily on the early morning train taking me northward along the Czech Vlatava and Labe rivers, which are the Elbe in Germany. I tried to imagine what I would see during my first visit to the eastern Bundesländer of the reunified republic of Germany. En route to Leipzig, where I would meet for the first time relatives separated by the Iron Curtain, I planned to make a stop in Dresden.

20

My knowledge of the city was limited to banal geographic facts and to the historical event for which it is most famous: its annihilation on the night of February 13, 1945 - an effort to precipitate the end of the war. 135,000 dead. The *Florence of the Elbe* reduced to ashes. Kurt Vonnegut described the experience through his alter ego, Billy Pilgrim:

33

*He was down in the meat locker on the night that Dresden was destroyed. There were sounds like giant footsteps above. Those were sticks of high-explosive bombs. The giants walked and walked... There was a fire storm out there. One big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn.*

May, 1991 p. 133

*It wasn't safe to come out of the shelter until noon the next day. When the Americans and their guards did come out, the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighbourhood was dead. So it goes.*

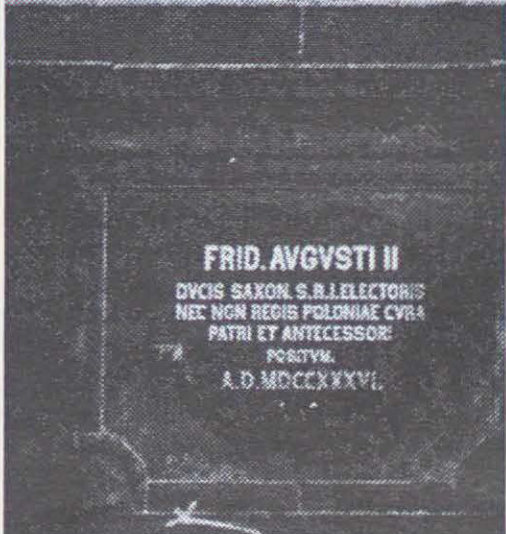
Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughter House - 5* London: Grafton Books, 1970.

My greatest impression of Dresden was its stillness. Leaving the train station at Dresden Neustadt, I proceeded along a pedestrian street bearing a typical communist name, *Street of Liberation*, which led into the old city via the Augustusbrücke. The sun was shining and there was a light breeze. Lined with Modernist apartment blocks, bursting flower beds and trees, this street had an eerie hush - the way screams are hushed in dreams, or like the deafening clamour of church bells engulfing all other sounds. It was an experience similar to watching a silent movie. Any sounds that one might hear, such as those coming from the audience, would be removed by a degree from the film proper.

34



21



# history





**23** The city had been rebuilt, but not resurrected, and the signs of its death were everywhere. Charred stones mixed with new ones, forming Lego-block facades on historic buildings. Less-fortunate structures, like the Frauenkirche, still lay in piles of stone untouched for nearly half a century. A blackened stone sculpture of a person crouched in fear with his head in his knees stood outside the Albertinum at Trennplatz. Inside, an exhibit of Käthe Kollwitz's haunting charcoal drawings and sculpture - spanning two world wars - showed a woman's lucid perspective of the atrocities of man's wars.

Enough of the old city existed for me to get a sense of its past splendour: Gottfried Semper's famous opera house, finally restored in 1985; the late-Baroque Zwinger complex; and portions of the Residenz Schloss, including the Fürstenzug - a 102 metre long mural of the 93 palace princes, depicted on 25,000 Meissen porcelain tiles. The collection of Old Masters at the Albertinum, founded by Augustus the Strong in 1706, and the jewellery collection in the neighbouring Grünen Gewölbe were stunning. As I walked from cabinet to cabinet, I wondered who all the people were who replaced the citizens of Dresden, and now call this city their home. Is a city defined by its inhabitants, or vice versa? Monuments become empty without the memories that inhabit the peoples of its tradition.

**24**



\* \* \*

Architecture is recognized and appreciated for different reasons by visitors and by inhabitants. For the visitor, the relationship tends to function on an iconic level, the emphasis being on visual qualities. One might assume then that the visitor's aesthetic perception would be more objective than that of an inhabitant, whose intimate tactile knowledge of the architecture obscures the appearance of it. However, the 'objective' view of visitors is similarly distorted by their individual perspectives. These individual perspectives or *filters* are uniquely constructed by a multitude of factors, including but not limited to body, psyche, text, and history. Each of the four preceding accounts would have occupied a fundamentally different existence in memory had they been experienced through any other filter. Thus perception and memory are intertwined in all experience.

*Richard Klopp is student at McGill School of Architecture. He claims to do his best work while travelling, "because things just seem to make more sense on the road, when your awareness is heightened, and you take little for granted - where time and space are precious commodities."*