A Place to Read: Journey Through Memory, Text and Space
A Place to Read: Journey Through Memory, Text and Space

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For my mother who taught me how to read
For my father who gave me lots of books
For my wife, Lora, who taught me to read between the lines

"I've been to every single book I know to soothe the thoughts that plague me so..."

Sting
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The Beginning

—The library is a great labyrinth, sign of the labyrinth of the world. You enter and you do not know whether you will come out.— from The Name of the Rose by Umberto Eco

When I began to think about my thesis project I knew it would center around one of my favorite activities - reading. Ever since I was a kid in kindergarten I’d always loved going to the library, (the public library and my grandpa’s own private one) so a library seemed like a good building for me to design. At this time when I was bouncing around ideas for a thesis, I was fortunate enough to see James Burke give a lecture here on campus as part of UniverCity ’92. My dad had introduced me to the mind of James Burke through the Connections series on PBS. I liked the way the man thought; he was able to breathe life into the pages of history the same way a good author breathes life to the words on a page of a book.

Burke’s lecture was titled Axmakers of the 21st Century and dealt with the thesis that the invention of the first tools by prehistoric man caused mankind to be a technologically competitive system. Burke traced the history of man (a.k.a. axmakers) through a series of technological advancements and he projected this analysis into the 21st century. Burke believed that telecommunications would be the dominating technology of the next century and that learning and exchange of information would not occur in a classroom or even a library, but rather on a beefed up version of the personal computer.

This simple but profound premise got me thinking about the result this would have on the library building type as we know it. I decided to invent and program a building type for this 21st century method of learning. The program was for a library that would have electronic access to information sources such as the Library of Congress, major think tanks, etc., around the world. I called it an electronic library. This library was to be set in a rural Indiana county to accentuate the effect of bringing a virtually endless amount of information to the fingertips of
someone at a very remote location. Besides envisioning the technology that would be necessary for such a facility, (a library of CD roms as well as terminals that linked to outside information sources, etc.) I tried to deal with what it would mean for someone to do most of their reading and learning from a computer screen rather than from a book.

This programatic consideration of not reading from a book brought me to a question that was both strange and simple. It would be a question that would cause me to abandon my desire to design an electronic library, at least for awhile, and direct my thesis project to a very focussed issue. The question was this: what does it mean to read?

Reading

"There, I said to myself, are the reasons for the silence and the darkness that surround the library: it is the preserve of learning but can maintain this learning unsullied only if it prevents it reaching anyone at all, even the monks themselves. Learning is not like a coin, which remains physically whole even through the most infamous transactions; it is rather like a very handsome dress, which is worn out through use and ostentation. Is not a book like that, in fact? Its pages crumble, its ink and gold turn dull, if too many hands touch it."—from The Name of the Rose

The thesis question seemed both easy and impossible to answer so I shied away from it for awhile and just did some reading of my own. Through this reading I was able to come back to the thesis question and factor in partial answers to the equation. I read a book by Ellen Eve Frank called Literary Architecture that compared literature with architectural space. The chapter on Marcel Proust was the most useful to me and the one from which I pulled several ideas that helped me to answer my thesis question. The chapter was an analysis of Proust’s A la Recherche du Temps Perdu (A Remembrance of Times Past). Proust mentions at the end of his autobiographical work that the structure of the book was modeled after a cathedral. Besides the obvious analogies that can be drawn from a story structured like a (gothic) cathedral, such as relationships of small
anecdotes to a larger story (single bay to nave), one powerful analogy that Proust intended was time. Proust saw a cathedral as a container of time; the stone carvings and stained glass windows that tell stories took time to create, they take time to study and reflect upon, and they represent a period of time long ago. Proust was a scholar of Ruskin and translated many of his works. One such passage echoes Proust's impression of time in church architecture: "in the stones of architecture (living thoughts) there is not only the light of a particular moment as it struck the surface, but the colours of the centuries as well".

Through Proust I began to think of the act of reading as an event that was also engaged in time. Reading recreates the thoughts of an author from a previous period in time. Generally, reading as an act requires the passage of lengthy periods of time in a single place. Reading a piece of fiction has the power to distort time for the reader; in fiction oftentimes the reader will read a passage for an hour that spans a period of days weeks or years, and , conversely, a reader can spend days or weeks reading a book that spans a period of a single day. This idea was reinforced by another book I was reading at that time called Pleasure of the Text by Roland Barthes. Barthes wrote about how time isn't a constant in reading; a reader may stop and read a section very methodically and with great interest and then may skip over sections that are boring or irrelevant. Through my studies of these two books, Time began to be an important part of the equation to answer my thesis question.

Several other concepts presented in the Proust chapter of Literary Architecture were useful to my understanding of reading and to architecture. One interesting concept dealt with language. The concept was directed at language in writing, but it seems equally applicable to all forms of communication, architecture included. To Proust all language is metaphorical, that is analogical. One can only communicate an idea by representing it with some other idea that is already understood. The narrator of Proust's story, Marcel, explains metaphor as something that must "imprison forever in a single phrase the two separate terms of experience". The metaphor both connects and "preserves the distinctness of each term", and does this because it comprises the essence of
each term. If architecture is a language it seemed to me that it is also a metaphor or analogy for an idea(s) that already existed in time. It seemed that in architecture I could “imprison forever” an idea or a piece of me. Just like Petrarch could seal his love for Laura for all eternity through his words on a page, I could, through the creation of architecture, preserve an idea or a passion “in the stones of architecture” for anyone who chose to read that piece of architecture. This was exciting to me not only as a personal revelation on the power of architecture, but also as a factor in the equation of what it means to read. Reading is the preservation of an idea, memory or passion.

Another concept that Proust presented that helped in my understanding of reading was the concept of memory. Proust’s whole book is a memory “of Times Past”, and memory is often triggered by seemingly unusual devices. In one of the most famous passages of the book Marcel is able to recall a memory of his aunt after he sips some tea and eats some ices that his mother has just fixed for him. The aroma of the tea and the cool sensation of the ice triggers Marcel to recall vividly an occasion when he was with his aunt as a small child. The theme of memory is a recurrent one in Proust’s book, and Marcel mentions that memory for a person has a starting place that is based in architecture — the childhood home. Our earliest memories are of our childhood environment. Our understanding of architecture and the meanings we associate with specific places are the beginnings of our metaphorical language.

Proust continues his discussion of memory in the realm of dreams. When we dream of places, they must be based on a real place(s) we have experienced either physically, or experienced through our recreation of a place that we have read in a book. Proust argues that it is the fictional experiences that are the most powerful because they are closer to the Truth than an actual experience. It is the “fictional analogue” that presents Truths of creative perception, whereas the “historical real” can only be described. Reading then (fiction specifically) provides a link to understanding a perception of an event, whether real or imaginary, and our collected perceptions are the filter through which we experience memory.
If this theory was translated into architecture, it would resemble Aldo Rossi’s Analogous City. A city can be thought of as the collective memory of the inhabitants and visitors of that city through time. Each building represents the perception of both the architect at the time it was built and the perceptions of those who have used it through the ages. The latter can be ascertained by seeing the modifications to the original design as well as the physical condition of the building; these factors act as a historical record of the perceptions and values of a group of people, and as a historical record it is the collected memory of the city. My creation of a piece of architecture then is both an expression and rearrangement of my memory of places I have experienced physically or through reading, and it is a statement about my perception of those experiences.

it seemed to me now with all of this philosophical bagage I was carrying, that dabbling in the act of creating some architectural schemes to respond to my thesis question might be a wise next step.

Architectural Experiments

— “How beautiful the world is, and how ugly labyrinths are,” I said. “How beautiful the world would be if there were a procedure for moving through labyrinths,” my master replied. — from The Name of the Rose

My design methodology can euphanistically be described as erratic. I have a tendency to abandon things that I’ve worked on in pursuit of a whim. A design review was approaching and with all of the reading and philosophizing I had done, I had virtually no design work to show for it. I decided to try a little experiment and design a series of reading spaces. The criterium for this experiment was that I had to think of the worst possible place to read and design a reading space there. Then I repeated the experiment three times, each time getting closer to
a place that was an ideal place to read. My favorite design came from my scheme of the worst place to read. Perhaps this was because it was the most challenging and therefore it produced the most detailed design, or maybe there was a more fundamental reason - a specific place is not required to read and enjoy a book. The physical presence of the book and the piece of reading furniture are the essence of the architectural requirements for reading.

The worst possible site I chose was on the assembly line in a factory. The design solution took the concept of a cocoon or a womb that protected the user from the site. The reading space was cantilevered off of a side wall inside the factory and was gained access by a ship’s stair. The reading platform was small in dimension, barely large enough for a person to sit comfortably, and had four foot high walls that shielded the user from the activity below but that didn’t totally cut him off. A suspended ceiling plane hovered over the platform creating a sense of security and also provided light from recessed fixtures. The chair was located next to an operable window to bring in light and fresh air as well as softer noises. This intent of this very small space was to bring attention away from the space and the site and to help the user focus on the book that the user wanted to read, but at the same time allowed the user to have access to his surroundings by glancing out the window or standing
up and watching the activity below.

Although the experiment was fun and ridiculous, it left me with a depressing reality - reading doesn't require a specific place. I was stuck with a thesis question and the absence of a reason to explore it architecturally. What now.

**Walking Over Rough Water**

*The library could not be threatened by any earthly force, it was a living thing .... But if it was living, why should it not be opened to the risk of knowledge? — from The Name of the Rose*

True to my erratic tendencies, I went back to the books I had read, searching for some way to bail me out of this seeming anti-thesis. One idea I read kept running through my mind over and over: memory has a starting place - the childhood home. At this time I was also thinking of changing the criterium of my experiment from designing in a specific place to designing for a specific person. These two ideas led me to my next experiment that would ultimately take the form of my final project. I decided to design a place for my father to read. I knew this proposal wouldn't sit well with those critiquing my work because of the likely possibility that it would turn into a nostalgic genealogical study, but I had a feeling I could go somewhere with it and pursued it anyway. The hell with what they thought.

The site of my father's childhood home seemed like an obvious choice for the site of the reading place. My father grew up in a large house that sat on a seven acre partially wooded tract of land on the north side of Indianapolis. Our family (my grandparents) still own the wooded portion of the original plot so I made that my site. The site provided an interesting dichotomy that had poetic possibilities for a reading space. Some of my father's earliest memories happened at this place, but the woods themselves were virgin woods, never before violated by man or machine. As container of early memories and shaper of perceptions that still today must influence the way my father sees the world, the site was ripe for the opportunity to introduce a new entity to challenge those
perceptions and provide a forum for new memories to occur.

By choosing this site I was forcing my dad to go somewhere to read rather than just letting him read at home. This arrogant imposition helped me stumble onto a huge concept: part of the act of reading now was the act of **going somewhere** to read. Place was now integral to the act of reading because it was linked to the overall experience of reading. A heightened concentration on the act of reading now would be the end result of the anxious anticipation that usually accompanies a journey. Consequently, the willful act of going someplace to read would influence how the book was read. This highly intense reading in turn would draw the reader into a fictional world and leave him with new perceptions of his own world.

**Spontenity Followed by Reflection**

— "You think too much, boy," he said, addressing me, "don't learn too many bad examples from your master. The only thing that must be pondered - and I realize this at the end of my life - is death." — from *The Name of the Rose*

My design of the reading place started from a model that I built very quickly. I tried not to get bogged down with thinking about building it, rather I just built it in about a half hour's time. The thinking came after the model was built in the form of two diagrams that analyzed the plan of the model. The model had a linear part to accentuate the sense of journey. The linear path penetrated several barriers in the form of tall thick walls. I thought that these walls could become both the dominant architectural element as well as the organizer of the scheme into zones. The diagram had a starting place, the carport, and an ending place the reading room, around which the rest of the path was organized. The carport and reading room were the termini of an axis that afforded reciprocal views, while the rest of the building was offset to one side of the axis. The whole complex was open on one side like a fat "U", and the open side faced the large house that used to be my father's boyhood
home.

Although the model was constructed almost spontaneously and the diagrams were intended only as a formal analysis of the model, there were several aspects of the scheme that seemed to fit into the philosophical issues that I had been developing about reading. The obvious issue that the scheme addressed was a sense of journey. The variety of spaces that were beginning to develop in the diagrams were architectural moments or fragments of a journey that would be continued in the journeys of reading. Another issue that was being explored dealt with the origin of memory. The diagram was responding to views of my father's childhood home by offering only glimpses at first and then panoramic views of it after the journey through the building and the text was complete. This progression of views from different viewpoints was intended to be symbolic of the change of perception that my father would experience after going through these series of journeys.
Piecemeal

The panes were not colored like church windows, and the lead framed squares of clear glass allowed the light to enter in the purest possible fashion, not modulated by human art, and thus to serve its purpose, which was to illuminate the work of reading and writing. — from The Name of the Rose

From the diagrams I began to design pieces of the reading place starting with the reading room itself. I drew a section that was very close in concept to the reading space I had designed in a factory. It had a low ceiling and a small window close to the floor that looked back at the carport. The chair was low to the ground so that the window could only be used as a visual connection to the outside if one was sitting in the chair.

Although the reading room was incomplete, I moved to the library. I'm not sure if it was my affinity to the library in Eco's The Name of the Rose or my feeling of guilt for not doing a library for my thesis that made me so passionate about the design of this small personal library. I started by blowing up the portion of the diagram that corresponded to the library so I could take a closer look at it. The library was a wedge that got smaller as one walked through it. It was divided into three bays of shelves, and each bay contracted in both width and height. I saw this directional spatial force as a tension that could distort my father's sense of time in this space. Like Barthes' statement that we read at different speeds and intensities, we also look at and pass through space at different speeds and senses of awareness. In one instance my father might browse through his collection of books deciding what to read; and in another instance he might already have a book and just walk through. The narrow passage at the end of the library (barely two feet wide) draws attention to the phenomenon of leaving one space and entering another just like one might reach a milestone in a journey.

As the library developed in section I took on a cavernous quality enhanced by the thick wall on one side (that would eventually be designed as rusticated stone) and thick concrete piers on the other side. Both walls had shelves that nestled between large piers. The shelves on the side opposite the stone wall were designed to be glass. Behind the
shelves in the alcove were a series of small stained glass windows that brought in a mysterious light that back lit the books. The books would take on an almost spiritual quality, and this idea of sacredness would help me to organize the rest of the building.

From Parts To Whole

— "But how does it happen," I said with admiration, "that you were able to solve the mystery of the library looking at it from outside, and you were unable to solve it when you were inside?" — from The Name of The Rose

I began to think of the reading place as a house, and this house had two parts. One part, the sacred side, was directly devoted to reading. The other part, the profane side, was devoted to the everyday activities that happen in a house. I divided the two sides with two parallel walls that were slightly offset. One other wall that ran the breadth of the site separated the house from the outside world. If the act of reading was of a caliber of a spiritual experience because of the perceptual change that it caused, then separating the place where reading occurred from the outside world seemed like a necessary response. It also accentuated the system of limited views that I had begun to develop in my earlier design work. I took my organizational cues for the profane side from the system of bays I had designed in the library. If the library was where my heart was, then it would serve as the heart of the building. The bays on the profane side opened off of a hall that hugged the rusticated stone
wall. The bays were divided into small individual pockets for each of the different functions of a house (toilet, shower, kitchen, etc.).

I saw the profane side as a necessary support for reading; after hours of reading my dad might have to use the bathroom or grab something to eat. The secondary nature of the profane side was represented by it being on the same grade level as the rest of the site, while the sacred side was elevated several feet higher. I tried to organize the progression on the profane side to match the likelihood of each space being used. For example, I didn’t think my dad would sleep over very often, so I placed the bed chamber at the end of the progression.

The system of small pocketed spaces served several purposes. First it set the tone for the intimate scale of the reading room and it served as a startling contrast to the large volume the contained the reading room. Although essentially an “empty” space, I considered the container of the reading space to be very important to the overall journey. The container is the last space, or the last perception that my father has before he enters the room in which he will sit down to read. The contrast that is created by the change from horizontal path to vertical path, from heavy, textured masonry wall to thin, abstractly painted wall serves as a marker that one portion of the journey is completed and another is about to begin.

**The Chair - The Architecture of Reading**

—I saw a throne set in the sky and a figure seated on the throne. The face of the Seated One was stern and impassive, the eyes wide and glaring over a terrestrial humankind that had reached the end of its story — from *The Name of The Rose*

The first room that I had designed was the reading room so it seemed only natural that I end my designing by coming back to not unlike how an author might reveal something on the last page of his story that he had only hinted at on the first page. The room itself really had already been designed since the factory experiment. What was missing, though from the design was the most important part - the chair. The container of the
reading room begins a sequence of spaces that progress to smaller and smaller dimensions. My final design of the reading room continues the progression by first offering a view back into the large space of the container and then progressing with a series of contracting ceilings that lead to the reading chair. I wanted to design a chair that participated with the progression of shrinking spaces by becoming part of the architecture of the room. When the chair is first seen by my father it is an object in the room. But when my father walks around to the front of the chair to sit down, the high back becomes a wall that defines the microcosmic reading space. The chair is designed with a Cartesian grid structure within which angled planes float and reference the angles in the room. The chair focusses the room into a static system that I see as conducive to the contemplative act of reading, but it also points through the window to allow my father to look at where he has been, and to ponder where he will go.
Presentation

— I tried not to think about it and headed straight for the labyrinth — from The Name of the Rose

The drawings that I made for the presentation of my thesis served two purposes. First, they gave me the opportunity to communicate to an audience the ideas that I tried to give architectural form. Second, they gave me the opportunity to see, as a two dimensional representation, the design that was still, up to that time, mostly in my head. The pencil tone drawings were a good media for me to use because I felt I was able to represent the contrasting textures of materials effectively. This extra layer of contrast I thought was a nice addition to the contrast that I was trying to achieve in the progression of spaces. The drawings were also effective I thought in putting much of the responsibility of “picturing” the spaces on the viewer. The exclusively orthographic set of drawings gave a single voice to the presentation, not unlike the singular voice that an author gives to a story. A story is presented in words only, with no pictures, but somehow the reader is able to create a world in his mind from those words. Although they are the same words for everyone, different people have different readings of the story because they bring with them different perceptions to the story. I was trying to present my design in a similar fashion in hopes of allowing different readings of the building. I knew why I designed the building like I did, but it is the user of the building that must give his own reading if it is to have any meaning for him.

Conclusion

— design is a patient search — from a class lecture by John McCreery

My thesis project was an architectural design of a place for my father to read. As a designer, I can only design in the context of my own perceptions of my memories. So in essence I design spaces for myself or for others as I perceive them. An interesting issue arose in my final presentation. Some of the audience was confused and even shocked to
hear that the reading place was intended for my father - they thought it was a place for me to read. Of course it was a place for me to read! I'm too selfish not to design spaces that I would enjoy. I don't look at my designs as a rude imposition upon someone else, rather I try through the process of design to challenge my own perceptions as well as the perceptions of others. That is what I believe is the purpose of participating in design.

As I sit in the reading chair that I designed (for me or for my Father?) looking through that small window at where I came from, I have the opportunity to assess the present and look toward the future. When I started my thesis I was going to design an electronic library. I decided to answer a question first - what does it mean to read? Through study and reflection I came up with some pieces of some kind of equation that I thought might answer that question. I designed a place to read for my father so that I could play with these ideas and test their importance to me. With all of this behind me the thesis question remains the last issue to resolve. What does it mean to read?

I already said what it means to design; design is an act that challenges one's perceptions of himself and his world and consequently, when publicly presented, challenges the perceptions of others. Marcel Proust seemed to think there was a strong analogy of literature to architecture. Since both literature and architecture are medias of design, to read someone's words is to be confronted with a perception of the world. This perception either coincides with the reader's or it presents a different perception. Through the process of time, life experiences change our perceptions. Reading provides a forum to experience through the stories of someone else things we might not have experienced, thus supplementing our own perceptions. It also provides for us the opportunity to remember things that we have experienced and to rethink our perceptions of those memories. This is what it means to read.

I guess I'll get back to that electronic library now.
Good Books I Have Read Recently

Barthes, Roland
Burke, James
Eco, Umberto
Frank, Elen Eve
Hawking, Stephen W.
Ruskin, John
Tuchman, Barbara W.

Pleasure of the Text
The Day the Universe Changed
The Name of the Rose
Literary Architecture
A Brief History of Time
The Seven Lamps of Architecture
A Distant Mirror
Appendix

On the pages that follow I have included a reduced reproduction of my final thesis presentation. The presentation was bound and intended to be read as a book in the reading chair I designed and built. The pages that have text and diagrams were drawn on mylar and the drawings were drawn on single ply bristol board. The mylar sheets acted as overlays for each drawing and gave one reading or interpretation of the drawings. Perhaps you will have another reading.
Rationale: The beauty of reading a book is that it comes in a nice compact package that you can take anywhere. Reading on a plane, while traveling, or on a city公交 home, at work, even on an airplane. To me, though, a place is important to reading. Specifically, the anticipation and journey to place is important. The place to read is the thing of importance. It adds to the experience. Whether one has a favorite place or a special spot to read. A place to go, to read. The experience gained by intentionally journeying to that place can

A Place to Read: Journey Through Memory, Text & Space
Reading fiction calls upon one's experiences and memory to recreate the world that the author composed. Memory doesn't work in a vacuum though, rather it has a starting place that is architecturally based: the childhood home. I selected a three-acre wooded site for the reading place because it is part of the land from his childhood home.
Literature and Architecture share the dimension of time. A novel can not be experienced by a reader without the active participation of time. So too in Architecture. Space can not be fully comprehended without passing through it and experiencing it from multiple viewpoints. The difference between the two media is that in literature, the reader has to create the space himself from the characters of text.
The implication from a barrier is that here is something "in there" that is separate from "out here". In this case it is a separation of the world of everyday life from the world of escape and reflection, the world that is created in fiction. The car, the vehicle for journey through these two worlds has its own container. To enter the reading place one must leave the representation of the outside world behind--a journey to the reading space, a container that mirrors the carport.
There are two halves to the reading place, the sacred half that directly relates to reading, and the profane half which resembles functions of everyday living. A barrier separates these two halves, and they are accessible only at one point: a Barthesian flash of skin.

The Profane Side
Scale 1/8" = 1'-0"
The sacred half contains the library, two memory rooms (the first a container of childhood memorabilia, the second glazed on one wall to present a view of my father's childhood home), the container of the reading space, and the reading space itself. It is a linear journey that builds through a sequence of contracting and dilating spaces that ends at the architecture of reading - the chair.
The ambient light in the library is dark to represent among other things uncertainty that accompanies the start of a journey. Light is brought into the space through light-wells behind the shelves that illuminate the books, giving them a sacred quality. The shelves are made of glass to reflect and refract light into the rest of the space.
The two holes run parallel along the paraxial. Space in the paraxial side seems to represent the development nature of every point and in the side to indicate the statement and anticipation of reading.

Comparative Sections
Scale: 1/2 = 1-0
The concept of the container(s) is twofold: to evoke a sense of progressively smaller spaces that end with the intimacy of the reading chair, and to heighten the sense of journey with the wrap around side aisle ascent to the reading space.