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The House of Myth and Legend
Storytelling in Architecture

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Department of Architecture
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The House of Myth and Legend
Storytelling in Architecture

Bachelor of Architecture Degree Program
Thesis Design

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Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor
When I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more!
A letter he never had dreamed of before!
And I said, "You can stop, if you want, with the Z.
"Because most people stop with the Z
"But not me!"

"In the places I go there are things that I see
"That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z.
"I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends.
"My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends!"
Why stop with the Z?

This thesis will encourage you to go beyond the Z. It concerns an architecture that goes beyond function. It speaks of the ways that Architecture can start to do so much more than merely keep the rain off our heads.

Before we can go beyond to the other talents of Architecture, we need to understand what Architecture is in the context I use. Architecture has become so much a part of human consciousness that it is nearly impossible to imagine our world without it. It is lucky for architects that people have not tried to go without it. Indeed, Architecture serves far more purposes than just that of shelter. It serves to house our religions, our law and justice, and our dreams, in the forms of art, books, and films. More what is more important, we put something of ourselves into our buildings, as man has done from the beginning in his search for immortality.

Architecture expresses a part of our culture that we cannot seem to say in any other way. From the Pyramids to Gothic Cathedrals to Frank Lloyd Wright’s FallingWater, our buildings express our need for beauty, for a permanent expression, and for function. Architecture is a form of art that needs an excuse. We plan for our needs, but in such a way that a simple mud hut will not do what Trump Tower will. Our expressions of architecture are a distinct reflection of the cultural climates that have produced them. Architecture has become a part of our human consciousness. It appears in our stories and mythologies. It is fundamental to the way in which we perceive ourselves. What would the Minotaur story be without the Labyrinth? Would Sleeping Beauty be the same without her castle?
Even as our stories speak of our buildings, so too can our buildings speak of our stories. In this thesis, I have tried to approach and discuss some of the ways that I think Architecture can participate in the storytelling process. Storytelling is much more than watching a Disney movie, or reading a book. It is a communication of the fundamentally human parts of us. It is how we can pass ourselves along and truly become immortal.

The most important thing about incorporating storytelling into our Architecture is the willingness and ability to see the things we are used to in a different way. We need to learn to see them not as what they are, but what they could be. So go on, go beyond Z.
Collages

My collages have always been an important part of my efforts to enter another world. A world that is filled with the same objects and people, but in ways that the ordinary can become magical. I have enjoyed the medium of collage as it easily allows an ordinary image, taken out of its normal context to become extraordinary. I find this technique allows everyday perception to become slippery, and allow it to shift to the point where one can see the common for the first time again and allow the possibilities to come flooding forth.

Here, I have presented two images of the same collage, done on the first floor plan of my thesis building. The images within the lines of the plan are meant to provide clues to the characters of the spaces. The surrounding images, more clearly shown in the second picture without the overlay, show some of the ideas and sources that have inspired me throughout the work on my thesis. Included in the collection are images from classic and modern film, books, and fragments from various cultures. Some of the works shown are modern, some ancient, and yet, they all embody something of the spirit and feel that I have tried to infuse into my thesis.
Storytelling in Architecture

My thesis is an exploration of the ways that Architecture can participate in the generation and telling of stories. I feel that Architecture contains elements that are so fundamental to our view of the world that they have become givens to the normal way of thinking. In this way, there is the possibility for those elements to surprise us when they are altered but still recognizable. When we look through new eyes, the ordinary can suggest a realm beyond that of explicit concrete realities. That is, they can be more than what they seem.

Architecture has the means for expressing ideas and embodying non-specific archetypes that inherently contain the seeds of stories. The very elements that make up most forms of architecture are very much a part of our collective consciousness, drawing images to mind with the very words roof, window, and floor. It is the universality of ideas such as these that connect them into our historical and cultural mindsets. The idea of roof is simple, yet has limitless possibilities. The different interpretations of the same idea are fascinating in their variety. In this way, architecture has much in common with the art of storytelling.

Storytelling has been with humankind since the very beginning of mankind. Our earliest records of recorded civilization
come to us through stories. They embody our history, our dreams, our 
hopes and wishes, the very indefinable something that makes us 
human. Stories allow us to connect with one another. They teach our 
history, ethics, religion and philosophy. They can provide means of 
relating experience, poetry, drama, or mystery. Stories help us to find 
ideals of Justice and behavior and teach us to understand words as 
ideas, both concrete and metaphorical. They entertain us and yet, 
they do so much more. The tales of our childhood help to shape our 
minds in ways we never suspect. The power of stories in their many 
shapes and forms from the Bible to Aesop to Stephen King, is in their 
ability to tap into that language that transcends words, those very 
ideas and emotions that make us human and bind us together in our 
humanity.

In this same way, architecture can touch the unconscious pool 
that these ideas are a part of. Through the use of universal and 
archetypal elements, architecture can force our gaze back upon 
ourselves, or push it outwards to question the validity of our own 
assumptions and the ideas behind what we know. By challenging the 
expected state of things, architecture can force attention back onto 
those elements that are common and which we think we know well. 
The act of noticing something that we see every day and yet, never 
really look at, can lead us towards starting to see the possibilities that 
lay dormant around us every day.
The ability to see things for what they could be, instead of what they are, is the genesis of stories and of worlds. Both stories and architecture can help us to transcend our surroundings, if we allow them to. Within that transcendence, we can find our dreams and wishes. Allowing ourselves to see things and consider the possibilities is a form of enchantment. It can give us the power of creativity and loose the bonds of strict normal behavior. Giving ourselves the freedom to look at things differently can give us the key to perhaps find the idea that will create a new invention or theory. We must transform our surroundings in our own eyes to give ourselves the luxury and necessity of seeing again for the first time. As Ralph Harper, an existentialist philosopher, said, “We must be enchanted in order to cross the guard-ropes of experience. We may be in touch with an order of life beyond experience which resembles the realm of desire, but represents the region of hope. We may be, and we may also not be. We will not be able to confirm or deny this second order of nature as long as we stay within the first part.”

In my experiments with my thesis, I have attempted to prove that Architecture can help us to cross the borders of experience and enter into the spirit of stories, through both the making and the telling of these tales. By tapping onto those ideas that hold deep meaning for us, archetypes that reappear throughout the years, we can connect to new possibilities.
Architecture has a mystique, a position in our collective consciousness that stems from our primitive need for shelter. The creation of architecture has allowed mankind to express certain things from inside. For why should mankind bother to erect palaces and cathedrals for purposes beyond shelter if not to express an urge within us, a need to communicate and express ourselves. In as much as a cathedral is an expression of devotion to God, it is also a statement about the man who built it.

My thesis speaks of an Architecture that allows stories to be created by the building's users in a way that allows the form to do more than suggest one concrete and known story. It should allow for a variety of interpretations and work with the user in a fashion that allows maximum participation and a variety of ideas. Just as no man is the same as his neighbor, every man sees the world differently. These views vary even with mood, and who is to say that one view more valid than any other? I feel that Architecture can provide a stage and setting for stories that are directly connected to the user and change with that user. Moreover, the architecture can embody those ideas in such a way that the interpretation can change, varying with the user's mood. The use of universal ideas and transcendent themes is a way to provide non-overt cues that may suggest stories. An example of this would be a room using the archetype of the forest. In certain moods, the forest may be a peaceful and sunlit place, full of happy memories and good creatures, such as the singing forest.
animals of Disney. In other moments, the forest can be noble and full of grandeur, like the California redwoods. Or the forest can be threatening, a place where evil may lurk behind every tree, such as the woods around the lost Hansel and Gretal.

Architecture can tap into the realm of the unconscious by touching on those images that have multiple connotations. The image of the city has become a modern archetype. From the glossy clean advancements of the Art Deco future cities, to the squalid congestion of *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles of 2019, the city is a part of our modern consciousness and has a huge variety of connotations.

Architecture, through the use of archetypes and methods of storytelling, can provide ways for people to transcend their surroundings and the bonds of the concrete. It can show us how to see the world around us as new again. It can be a springboard to dreaming and to the stories that tie us to each other and our subconscious. Our buildings can be ships to carry us to new lands if we let them be.

Our building can draw images that are familiar to us as well, perhaps seen with a new twist. Why can’t a living room design draw images of gangster decadence or radical innovation? New inventions and futuristic designs are often called “Star Wars.” Doesn’t the reference to George Lucas’ story show how deeply ingrained it is are to our thinking? So deeply imbedded that we seldom, if ever, realize the lasting effects they have on us. Few people have forgotten the first
time that they saw *Star Wars*. It changed our lives by opening a new world to us. This new world is a place of fantastic new technology, but is still populated by people whose emotions and reactions we recognize. Did the technology of the light saber make the battle between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader any less apparent as the fight between good and evil?

Architecture can portray many different genres of story, from Fantasy to Thriller. No one who has seen *The Hunt for Red October* can deny that part of the tense atmosphere of the film came from the tight landscape of the submarine and the force of so much human action exploding within it. What is the architecture of a mystery? Secret passages, dim rooms for shots to ring out in, or a butler's pantry for the killer to hide in as the others discover the body? Places can be ordinary, but the goal is to be able to look at them in new ways and see what they could be, or what could happen there.

The usefulness of storytelling in architecture comes from manipulating the emotional element and the instinctive reactions of the users when they start to place themselves and their own possibilities in those spaces. The stories that come into our minds as we experience spaces help to set our emotional states. Architecture can help to manipulate the emotional reactions of its users through the use of various elements that have a connotation for one thing or another.
In this thesis about storytelling in architecture, I have come to realize that the possibilities are even greater than I had thought. Architecture, through the reinterpretation of familiar elements and the use of universal ideas, can start to challenge the way that we see things. Through its timeless qualities, architecture can draw our minds to our pasts and our cultural heritage. It is an art that can manipulate our emotions and a science that can open endless opportunities. Through teasing our perceptions, architecture makes us do a double take and pause to consider the what ifs. It is historical and it is the future, and it is able to call both to our minds. It is a transmitter of the creative impulse that is an intrinsic part of man. Stories, in their many shapes and forms, are the radio waves that cultures send out. It only seems logical to use the time honored instrument of architecture in ways that express the ageless parts of us that stories are.
The House of Myth and Legend
An Institute for the Study of Mythology and Folklore

For my thesis building, I decided to focus on one aspect of storytelling, that of Mythology and Folklore. In deciding to focus in this area, I choose to design a University facility. I felt that this would allow my to develop some of my ideas about Architecture participating in the creation as well as the telling of stories. I choose mythology and folklore because of its wealth of archetypes and architectural motifs, as well as a deep personal interest in the area.

In the months preceding the start of the actual thesis, I thought a great deal about what I was going to try to accomplish and the themes that were important for my project to touch on. I wanted my project to have something of wonder and enchantment about it, as well as exploration and discovery. I tried to give the building a sense of mystery, and yet preserve a clarity to it. The forms I was going to use should inspire both performance and creation. Also, I tried to use some transcendent themes in my project, linking it to a larger context. I came up with a list of things that I was trying to evoke in my project and my exploration of storytelling and story making.

One of the first things I did was to look at my own writing process. During this last year and the time I was working on my
thesis, I have held an Undergraduate Honors Fellowship with the English department. In my Fellowship work, I was writing fairy tales and exploring some of the possibilities there. This was another reason that I chose the area of folklore and mythology, so that my Fellowship and Thesis could begin to dovetail. I have included one of the stories written as a part of my fellowship in the Appendix of this book. Darlene Mathis-Eddy, who has been serving as a member of my thesis committee, has also been the mentor for my Fellowship.

In my own writing, I began to find the threads of the classical traditions of folklore and mythology. With this in mind, I began to focus in on some of those universal ideas and how they could be used in my project. This activity resulted in the writing of my program for The House of Myth and Legend, an Institute for the study of Folklore and Mythology. The building requirements are included here in the main body of the thesis, while the individual room statements have been included in the Appendix.
The House of Myth and Legend

An Institute for the study of folklore and mythology

Users
students, professors, outside artists, visitors, researchers, performers

Activities
research, reading, writing, performance of plays and music, storytelling, lectures, classes, exhibitions, films

Time of use
dependent on the events scheduled, but largely between the hours of 8AM and 9PM

Building Description
size: between 30,000 and 35,000 sq. ft.
goal: create an atmosphere in which the study of mythology and folklore and the creation of stories can flourish
form: should echo the spirit of the stories being studied
layout: to encourage creativity and create opportunities for minds to come together

Design Criteria
concept: the creation of a building which embodies the spirit of folklore and mythology.
provides opportunities for its enjoyment and encourages the creation of new works
The Institute should not be too serious, it should embody a sense of wonder, of fantasy, of whimsy. It should capture the spirit of mystery, of answers not given easily that pervades folklore and mythology. The building should provide a respite and free the mind to wander.

The world of the Institute should be made with wonder — colors and motion and transformations that never settle. The building, though solid as buildings are, must have a sense of life, of movement, of presence. It should hold the viewer whether they are visitors or workers in this realm.

Here, the universe awaits this chance to bring forth wonder and magic. This building should be a place where a person might slip across the borders into dreamlands for a while. Whether by reading, or watching a performance, or studying a painting, let the visitors be tempted across into the hazy world where mythology plays. Let the building not be average and so maybe it may free those in it a bit from the behaviors of ‘normal’ life.

Stories are the swords that cut the Gordian knot that binds us down. They speak to something deep within us, something that remembers having wings and longs to fly again. Life is rich with drama, tragedy, and magic that we crave in our realities. Stories have the power to lift us into that realm of unreality. A realm where justice is real, where people act as they should, where we can be fulfilled. Let the House of Myth of Legend remind people of that, let it lift them, if only for a moment.
Panning View of Site and Context

← North
View of Site from across River

View of Site Context
Site Analysis

The site for this building is on the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota. It lies on the west bank of the Mississippi just to the south of the Washington St. bridge that provides a link between the two sides of the campus. The site is currently unused, though there is a new road and paved bike path there. The current administration has been using the site as a place to dump fill dirt, thus the irregular mounds of material that one finds there.

The current traffic at the site is minimal, and the flow of people is very slight, due to the empty nature of the area. There is a park with a river walk approximately half a mile to the south that is more fully used. At present, the road is only open as far as the ramp that veers off to 1st Street, but it should be completed within the next year. The traffic on the vehicle portion of the Washington St. bridge is moderate to heavy, depending on the time of day. There is some auditory intrusion by the traffic on the bridge.
The vegetation on site is wild plants and weeds, untended and untrimmed. There is a pleasant breeze both up and down the river, through otherwise, currently the site feels barren and arid. The flood plain on the site is estimated to lie approximately fifteen feet above the present water level. The retaining wall at the river's edge drops some ten feet to the water's surface at the site edge. With the exception of the mounds, the site and surrounding area is fairly smooth and even, with a gradual rise until it reaches a steep hill that abruptly rises some fifty feet at a distance of approximately three hundred yards from the river's edge. However, this steep rise is hidden from view by the large trees and profuse vegetation that covers the slope.

There is visual access to the site from the bridge that connects the two parts of campus on either side of the river. The top of the bridge is pedestrian, while the bottom layer is the continuation of Washington Avenue which runs through the campus. Physical access to the site is found along West River Road and the new bike path that is already in place. There is currently a pedestrian stair that comes down the fifty foot slope to the west side of the site.
Pedestrian access should need to be augmented if the site was to be developed. Also, a method of connecting the building into the campus system of underground tunnels, which make winter classes much easier, would have to be found.
View of Pedestrian Bridge above Site

View of Access Stair

View and Site and Access Road
Design Process

When I started to design my thesis building, I found that there were bits and pieces of it that I had very strong ideas about what I wanted. One of the spaces that I had a very strong idea about was the entrance hall. I wanted it to be the space where you began to enter the world of the building, a world of folklore and mythology, a world where anything could happen. I had an idea about how I wanted to transport people from the rational world of the outside into the realm of the building. My idea was essentially that of a change in the style and materials of the building to reflect more subtle interior changes as one came farther into the building. The hall starts out at the main doors very orderly, with marble columns and floor tiles that proceed in a regular pattern. Soon, however, this begins to break down as the columns start to lose the pattern of arrangement. The floor turns to smaller tiles that change in color from the color of the marble to a deeper color until they run into parquet flooring that they eventually match in color. By the time one has reached the parquet flooring, the columns are scattered irregularly, in a caricature of a forest. This procession in the entrance hall sets the tone for the feel that the building tries to give off.

From the first time I began to layout the entire building, spirals began to show up. Rather than fight it, I let the building be what it wanted to be. The spiral is an important symbol in world mythologies and other cultural expressions. It symbolizes eternity and the continuation of life. It also is an especially apt symbol for storytelling, for a story never stops. It changes form sometimes, but it tends to pass from teller to listener and then the listener becomes the teller and passes it on. It speaks of the long traditions of oral tales that have been passed down from the earliest times. These tales change both the listener and the teller. It also speaks of the universal themes that one finds in these stories, the same things happening in
stories across time and cultures. Joseph Campbell, through his work in comparative mythology, came to understand the power of these elements and the power of the stories to teach and enlighten. In his famous interview with Bill Moyer in 1986, Campbell says,

"When the story is in your mind, then you see its relevance to something happening in own life. It gives you perspective on what’s happening to you. With the loss of that, we’ve really lost something because we don’t have a comparable literature to take its place. These bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage, and if you don’t know what the guidesigns are along the way, you have to work it out for yourself. But once this subject catches you, there is such a feeling, from one or another of these traditions, of information of a deep, rich, life-vivifying sort that you don’t want to give it up.1"

When I started to work on the design again, I was frustrated in working with the difficult spiral form. Philosophically, it said what I wanted to say, but I couldn’t seem to make it work on a practical level. I didn’t like the depth and the thick spaces that occurred where the spiral widened, but I liked the symbolism behind it. I had been thinking of a more linear scheme, with the theater and the library holding the anchoring positions at either end. I began to make a distinction between the performance and the creation oriented spaces. It seemed most of the types of spaces I had envisioned for the building could be easily divided along those lines. I classified the theater, the gallery, river balcony, and entrance hall as performance spaces because it seemed to me that the activities that took place in them were of a

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more performance nature. The classrooms, offices, library, writing studio and apartment all seemed to me to be more creation oriented in activity.

After I’d made this distinction, I begin to organize the spaces by which were more public and which were private. The performance spaces seemed to be largely public in nature, which is keeping with the nature of performance in itself. So, frustrated with the difficulty of working with a spiral, I put the design aside and started over. To my surprise, the spiral showed up again. This time it had become two spirals that interlocked as they widened. One of the spirals housed mainly performance-type spaces and the other creation. I placed the public spaces on the first floor and took the more private functions up to the other levels. By doing this, I was able to take my controlling spiral and make it three dimensional. The two spiral plan has proven to be more flexible and more dynamic.

The plan as a two dimensional image is deceiving. The theater lobby is really on the second floor and can be reached from the interior by way of the cascading steps on the northern end of the entrance hall. The hall with the professor’s offices begins on the first floor level, but winds up around the library so that the professors’ lounge and the other end of the passageway are on the second floor. The Gallery bridge, accessible from the theater lobby, climbs a level as it curves around so that users end up on the third level of the gallery. Inside the gallery, the floors step back, so that the gallery is on three levels, which are open to each other at certain places. The entrance hall itself is three stories high, overlaid with an intricate lattice that casts shadow patterns like those cast by the interlocking branches in a forest.

Through playing with archetypes, I was trying to achieve images that are largely created and controlled by the users. The images in the House of Myth and Legend are meant to be subtle and non-overt. Images like Disneyland’s become cliché after a time. If there were dwarves painted on the walls, it might be cute the first time someone sees it, but after seeing it day after day as the semester wears on, a person would get tired of the same image. The archetypes as I have used them allow for fresh
interpretation as they do not describe exactly what image is supposed to come to mind. They are meant to be interpreted and reinterpreted. Their meaning will change with the mood of the user. The image of the forest could evoke images of singing animals and pleasant days, such as the image of Briar Rose in the woods from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*. The forest can also be a frightening place, when you are lost and it is getting dark, as it could be interpreted if the user is in a bad mood.

Throughout my design process, I tried to keep in mind the things that I was striving to achieve. The elements of discovery, inspiration, voyage, and exploration played a big part and I feel they are important issues that architecture should keep alive. Architecture, as much as anything else, has a responsibility to keep mankind from getting too placid. When things are always the way we expect them to be, there is no innovation, no change. And change, the creation of new ideas, is life.
4" x 4" tile
4" x 12" parquet pieces
1 2" x 12" marble tiles

Entrance Hall Floor Sample
Initial Design Impetus

The development of the set Theater requirements, such as seating, gave rise to a spiraling form.
First Design Effort
Interlocking Conceptual Spirals
Plan Development
Development of Roof Form
West Elevation

East Elevation
First Floor Plan

North ➔
The Views

View 1 is taken looking down at the building from the pedestrian bridge that crosses campus. Due to the large amount of traffic across this bridge, this would be the predominate way of viewing the building. This perspective illustrates why I tried to design an interesting roof. Hopefully, people will be intrigued by the roof and come down to look at the building.

View 2 is taken in the main entrance hall, just inside the main doors. This view shows the hall and the idea of a caricature of a forest that I described earlier. It also begins to show some of the materials which I plan on using, timeless materials like stone and wood.

View 3 shows the theater stage with a rehearsal in progress. The stage is designed as an open thrust stage modeled on Tyrone Guthrie's design for the Festival Theater in Stratford, Ontario. The theater itself is designed for intimacy with the action on the stage. While seating approximately 620, no seat in the theater is more than one hundred feet from the stage.

View 4 again looks across the main entrance hall, though this time from the perpendicular direction. The view is taken from the top of the internal cascading stair that leads from the hall to the theater lobby.

View 5 shows the open gathering space between the library and the gallery stair. As the main feature, this space features the circular stair which leads to the second level. The second floor overlooks the space with a balcony, making a visual link with activities on the ground floor.

View 6 is taken looking across the open space in front of the main floor classrooms. On the floor, in parquet, is a labyrinth. Near the stone wall that separates the student lounge, parts of the maze rise up into benches where waiting students can rest and socialize.
View of Exterior from Bridge

Looking down on the building while walking across campus
View of Entrance Hall

The first impression inside the main doors
View of Theater Stage

A rehearsal in progress
View from Internal Theater Stair

Looking across the main entrance hall
View of Library Gathering Space and Stair

Students come and go and meet with one another
View to Main Floor Classrooms

Students wait for classes in the gathering space
The Models

My thesis building was largely designed in model form, using a series of study models leading up to the final presentation model. In the model, it is much easier to understand the three-dimensional volumetric nature of some the spaces. Some of the forms in the building were only arrived at after three or four versions had been built and rejected. The models have allowed me to test my design and see if it works in three dimensions.
Presentation Model
Study Model

Roof Model
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Bibliography


