

2009

Blueprints Worth Writing About

Christina Yiannakos
Western Kentucky University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses



Part of the [Interior Architecture Commons](#), and the [Other Architecture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Yiannakos, Christina, "Blueprints Worth Writing About" (2009). *Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects*. Paper 278.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses/278

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

BLUEPRINTS WORTH WRITING ABOUT

by

Christina Yiannakos

2009

A Capstone Experience/Thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of

University Honors College at

Western Kentucky University

Approved by:

Travis Wilson

Tom Hunley

Dana Bradley

INDEX WORDS: CE/T, Undergraduate Research, Architecture, Poetry, Western Kentucky University, Interior Design, English Capstone Thesis, design theory

Copyright by
Christina Yiannakos
2009

Committee Chair: Dr. Clay Motley

Committee: Travis Wilson

Tom Hunley

Dana Bradley

Electronic Version Approved

Honors College

Western Kentucky University

May 2009

DEDICATION

To my parents, who saw my gifts before I did. And to Mr. Wilson, for making this
happen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey has been very long, and would never have been completed with the many people who helped, guided, proofread, and comforted me. Dr. Cobane has been an essential part of this project from day one, and has always been there when I needed help (which I always seemed to). Travis Wilson, my amazing thesis advisor, put up with all of my unnecessary panic attacks, starting over two years ago when I first began to brainstorm ideas. Shannon Schaffer has always been an inspiration to me and has helped lead me on my journey. And I could not have gotten anywhere without my amazing thesis committee: thank you all!

Table of Contents

Index words.....	i
Copyright.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Invoking the Muse.....	4
Definition of the Color Black.....	7
Brick Chimneys.....	8
Elegy From Track #5.....	10
When I Boarded the F Train.....	11
Temple.....	13
Cathedrals.....	14
If Frank Lloyd Wright Had Been a Poet.....	15
Planned Community.....	16
Creative Block.....	17
Notre Dame du Haut Ronchamp by Le Corbusier.....	18
Monument.....	19
Works Cited.....	20

A Brief Introduction

One of the most common questions I am asked, usually immediately after telling people I am an English and interior design double major, is “what do you want to do with those?” Although, admittedly, these are two degrees that would not seem to fit together well, I have come to realize just how much one can depend on the other. When the time approached to decide on my thesis topic, it seemed only natural that I accept the challenge to explain to people just how interlocking these two subjects can be. The natural conjunction was a design theory book, delving into the theories about why we design. In order to prepare myself for this quest, I began reading other design theory books, considered “essential” in the subject, and quickly realized something.

They were incredibly boring.

This was where I found my niche. This was where my majors could intermingle. I began to ask myself questions about design, philosophical questions which I did not find the answers to in the books I had read. Why do we have such an infatuation with something which is essentially there only to protect us from the elements? Why do we feel the need to make them the way they are? Although some people might consider both architecture and design technical fields, I propose that they are instead forms of art. Our buildings, both outside and inside, can stir intense emotions within us. In order to reflect the amount of symbolism and passion which can be found in architecture and design, I decided to write a collection of poetry which will attempt to answer the question “why do we care about what we build?”

The style of architecture and design for a specific era always reflects what was happening in that era with the people and the society. For example, one of the biggest revivals of classical design in America happened during the late 18th Century. American architecture took a turn towards ancient Greek and Roman designs. This trend shows how the people of America were searching for what they wanted out of their new country, a civilization to echo, to idolize. Buildings such as Monticello and the original White House reflected ancient designs from countries considered the greatest in the ancient world. The blossoming country of America wanted to prove to themselves and others that they could be the Greece or Rome of the modern world. By calling upon architectural elements of Greek and Roman design, American architects wanted to install a sense of reassurance in the American people. These specific elements such as columns, porticos, and pediments reflected—and still reflect today—certain universal emotions. A design of Roman columns and pediments brings to mind a sense of permanence and traditionalism that a Bauhaus design could not. One of the greatest debates in architectural society today is the rebuilding of the World Trade Center. Perhaps nowhere on Earth are emotions and architecture so closely intertwined. Although almost every famous building can boast this fact, monuments and memorials are highly symbolic.. Every stone is placed with a purpose. There is a meaning behind every window or turn the building makes. They are agonized over by architects and designers, much the way Hemingway agonized over his famous short story “The Old Man and the Sea.” The time, passion, and attention spent in designing the buildings are reflected in the creations themselves, and in what we feel when we look at them. This is the difference between average buildings and the architecture that is considered the great designs of the world—the passion that was put

into them at the creation process. Buildings which stick out in our mind do so because they bring us to the same emotional or spiritual level as a work of art, literature, or poetry.

The challenge of this thesis was the magnitude of it. Whenever one dives into the question of “why?” and how it relates to human emotions, he or she must be prepared for the depth and magnitude awaiting them. Books have been written for centuries on design theory, and most likely will continue to be written for centuries to come with no “right” answer in sight. The difference between those books and my thesis is the manner of approach. Every design theory book available is a technical description of what the writer believes is a technical field. The problem lies in the fact that design theory is, like any study of theory, completely subjective. Technical writing and technical fields are mostly objective, and therefore do not lend themselves easily to subjective discussions of why. I believe this is why all design theory books written so far have fallen short. They may successfully describe why a building is built with a foundation, or why the best width for a doorway is three feet, but they cannot really tell us why we will always feel pride when we see China’s “Bird’s Nest” stadium, or why a building like Yad Vashem—the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem—can bring tears to someone’s eyes without ever setting foot inside. My approach, however, is to see design as an artistic field and use the highly subjective and artistic language of poetry. I believe that poetic language is the language of the indescribable, which is why so much poetry focuses on love, death, God, humanity, and the unexplainable parts of the world. If there is one type of writing that may successfully explain why future generations—generations who will have no personal

memories or emotions of September 11, 2001—will still cry whenever they approach the World Trade Center Monument, I believe it is poetry.

The invocation of a muse is an essentially Greco Roman idea, stemming back to the earliest poets we have recorded. Traditionally, this invocation would come before anything else in the play, collection of poetry, or any other piece of literature or music, to ask the muse to assist in the creation of the piece. Inspired by this idea, I created my own personal muse of architecture and design, and called upon him to begin my collection of poetry.

Invoking the Muse

Hewn together with
rough edges and crooked nails.
You stand smaller than one would think,
an illusion of man's reach for the divine
but still firmly dug into the earth.
You are Architecturo!
Young, godlike, powerful.
You see the world not as it is, but
as you wish it to be. Because you control
creation and destruction
in the delicate touch
of pencil to paper.

Your creaking joints resound of shouting men
sweating in the sun
and creating in the only way
They know how.
You are the desire for tradition
and the desire for innovation.
The desire for old and new in one.
Since humanity began
you, Architecturo, have existed.

Your whisper is sawdust hoarse,
the sound of a skyscraper sighing
in the ears of Frank,
in the dreams of Michael,
in the mind of Mies.
You once inspired the Greeks and Romans
their temples spoke of gods
but were really an homage to you.
You once spoke of a tower to the Hebrews,
whispered your swaggering words
in their ears
that they could reach the heavens,
know what you know of touching the divine.

I am a woman
in the world of men
struggling to do what is essentially
me.
But your voice is a compass sliding across paper,
softly comforting,
Yes, you have guided the hands
of Louis
of Marcel
of Corbusier.
But my hand is new, is uncertain.
Assure me of my place
in these halls
echoing with male voices.
Be calm, you whisper me
fear not.
For this may be a world of men
but creating is essentially female.

This specific style of poem is called “Dictionary as Ars Poetica.” The idea—to take one word and write many different “definitions” for it—fit with my theme perfectly. Emotions can be so deeply embedded into color; a single color can affect different people in entirely different ways depending on what personal history each brings with him or her. Like literature, architecture and design is completely subjective. Perhaps one of the most “controversial” colors is black, which was the inspiration for this poem.

Definition of the Color Black

- (rel.) According to Genesis, before everything.
- (art) “There’s something about black. You feel hidden away in it.” –Georgia O’Keefe
- (phil.) If you see it after dying, you’re in big trouble.
- (hist.) The reason there used to be two water fountains at every corner.
- (pvb.) “Better a red face than a black heart.” –Portuguese proverb
- (tech.) Time to buy a new toaster.
- (fashion) Something that goes with everything, like a sunset, or extra cheese.
- (bio.) Your heart, you awful wretch!
- (psych.) Prevents a four-year-old child from peeking under the bed.
- (vet.) Black cats hide more easily in the shadows than other cats.
- (myth.) Where absent socks go.
- (cinema) The bad guy always looks cooler
- (trad.) From far away, many black coats look like watercolor paint, melting down the sidewalk beside stained-glass and stone reaching for G-d.
- see also:* The absence of everything.

During the summer of 2006, I took a study abroad trip to Poland with the Honors College. We traveled to four concentration camps of World War II in five days, all the while hearing stories told to us by a Holocaust survivor who accompanied us. This trip, for obvious reasons, changed my life forever. I have noticed that, since returning home, I cannot see a brick-clad chimney without thinking of the Crematoriums at Birkenau, at Auschwitz. It fascinated me how a specific architectural element could be so tied to my memories and emotions (such as the Cherry Hall cupola is instantly tied to Western Kentucky University). This poem, a type of poem called a “braided narrative,” relates several stories both during my trip and after I returned to the US, tied together with one theme.

Brick Chimneys

On October 7, 1944, the prisoners of Birkenau revolted.
The train tracks now end in green fields,
liver-spotted with dandelions
and college students.
Atop the wooden tower, you can
see nothing but barracks to where grass meets sky,
many of them burned by prisoners.
Only crumbling chimneys and bald spots of ground
mark their place.

June was cold, but perhaps the chill came from
a small, slender, aged hand touching a wooden bunk
as thin, withered lips spoke the words,
“I slept here for years.”
Or from concrete pillars,
curved inward at the top,
holding razor wire rusted at the ends like
ancient, dried blood.
The signs were hand-painted, a skull, crossbones, German warning,
in case someone forgot where the fence was.
Sometimes people forgot on purpose,
and their fellow prisoners would remove their tangled limbs.

She wrote the letter later,
in a style of handwriting
taught when things like that mattered.
Another memory from another woman.
I was in college, she wrote, in New York,
during the war.
I remember.
The Jewish girl,
how they pushed her off the sidewalk
whenever she passed.

Standing outside the restaurant at half past midnight,
I warned him.
I've been there, I said. I've seen it.
But the glint of rebellion in his eye—
the same glint that must have led to his tattoos, and piercings,
and desire to be unique—
only took my words as a challenge.
The joke spoke of furnaces,
of the prisoners who fought back
and burned in my throat, as if I had inhaled their memories and ash.
it tingled in the dark, sparkling from the street light
like Zyklon B and how it still shimmered blue
on the walls of the Crematoria 4.

This poem, inspired by the idea of writing an elegy for an inanimate object, was inspired by all the amazing buildings that have been destroyed over the years by man. The Parthenon, for example, has barely survived through a great deal of damage over many centuries of wars. Other buildings and monuments have been torn down purposefully, such as the Buddhas of Bamyan, which were destroyed in 2001. Many architectural marvels have been dismantled by man, and it seemed important to me to let people know that someone still mourned their destruction.

Elegy From Track #5

"We will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by those we have destroyed."

"Farewell to Penn Station"

New York Times editorial, October 30, 1963

On October 28, 1966
the naked tracks shivered.
Their guardian eagles
protected nothing now,
but a New Jersey landfill.

This poem was also inspired by memories and emotions tied to architecture and design. During the summer of 2007 I lived in New York City. The neighborhood of Brooklyn I lived in was not my father's neighborhood, but he also grew up in Brooklyn. We have lived many miles apart for most of my life, and yet I felt closer to him when I rode the subway to Coney Island than I had in many years. The sight of the famous Wonder Wheel ferris wheel, or the Cyclone roller coaster always reminded me of him and his childhood. He spent most of his young life at Astroland, and being there, surrounded by sights that had not changed in forty years, always reminded me of him.

When I Boarded the F Train

Brooklyn has not changed much
since my father's day—
new graffiti on old buildings,
Russians now where Puerto Ricans once lived,
before them Italians,
before them Irish—
the trains still end on the same track,
slithering slowly out of their tunnels
like a bride out of her white slip,
all fire and sparks and indifference
for the satin and lace falling to the floor.
The sparkles at a distance look like magic,
wizards fighting by the sea,
hidden amongst dull apartment buildings,
and laundry, flapping on balconies.

The children fidget
in bathing suits and sunscreen,
glimpse the Wonder Wheel over a gravel roof.
The train station is full of bodies, moving together,
crying, laughing, cursing, living together.
Coming together from the corners of the sweating city
to feel a bit of ocean air.

My father's past and my present can walk together here
past the Cuban woman selling tacky tourist chintz
and Nathan's Famous Hot Dogs.
The hecklers have learned to yell over the sounds
(hey asshole!
Bet you couldn't hit the barn side of a broad!)
of the crowd rushing around them.
Ahead rattles the Cyclone, its screeching a siren call
that only a child's ears can hear.

Atop the Wonder Wheel, we can see the shore

stretched out, fading into the haze of summer,
and although we are both scared of heights
we take the risk and ride again.
Here is my father's childhood, his young years.
Here he learned where the subway ends.
Years later, when I follow his path
and make my home in a quiet Brooklyn neighborhood
I look out across the beach
and still see him walking.
You can have your skyscrapers, your Times Square
and I will have Astroland.

I was walking the streets of Portland, Oregon when I suddenly stumbled upon their famous Japanese Rose Gardens. It was stuck in the middle of the city center; I would have passed it by completely if not for the beauty of the flowers and the temple-like building beside it. It reminded me of how short poems can get lost amongst longer ones, despite the fact that their delicate, short nature can make them all the more beautiful.

Temple

I love short poems.
Each is like a
tiny, delicate temple
(nestled between
cement skyscrapers)
whose beauty makes you
notice it.

This poem is one of the few that could, by itself, nicely sum up my project. I've been constantly amazed by Gothic cathedrals, how they were built by hand over hundreds of years, and how every detail was carved out carefully by the people of the town. I had never been able to describe the wonder of these cathedrals until I wrote this poem

Cathedrals

Poetry is a
spired tower
stretching towards G-d
with pencils drawn,
lead swords in a crusade
of knowledge.

Poetry is a
floor of cold marble,
tiptoed across by a single,
solemn believer,
unnoticed, except for
footsteps echoing forever off it.

Poetry is a
stone statue, arms raised
seeking eternity.
Sometimes asking why,
always demanding
an answer.

Poetry is a
rose window,
crossed and re-crossed
with color that turns light
into rainbows
when it passes through.

Poetry is a
candle burning forever
next to an altar, so that
there may be light.
Even if no one is there
to see it.

Poetry is a
cathedral.
A shrine to the
search for the divine

with its doors always open
for pilgrims to take sanctuary.

**If Frank Lloyd Wright
Had Been a Poet**

He
would
have
stacked
nouns

in neat rows, sharp lines,
and smooooooooooth ends.

If Frank Lloyd Wright

had been a poet
he would not believe

in enjambment.
His stanzas would be
the same
number of lines

and syllables, laid out
like rooms
around his central theme.

He would
create his art in
S I M P L I C I T Y.

If he had been a poet,
his readers would find
unbearable beauty in words like
“umbrella”
and
“hat”
and cry at
“old gray man”

and never know why

except that he wanted them to.

“Writer’s block,” as it is always called, does not affect only writers. Sometimes your perfect design will not come to you. A blank page is frustrating no matter what the task at hand.

Creative Block

The sharp angles and lines
of words and walls are as
fluttering and elusive
as the Black Rail bird
of North America.

I am an ornithologist
searching the meadow at sunrise
without binoculars.

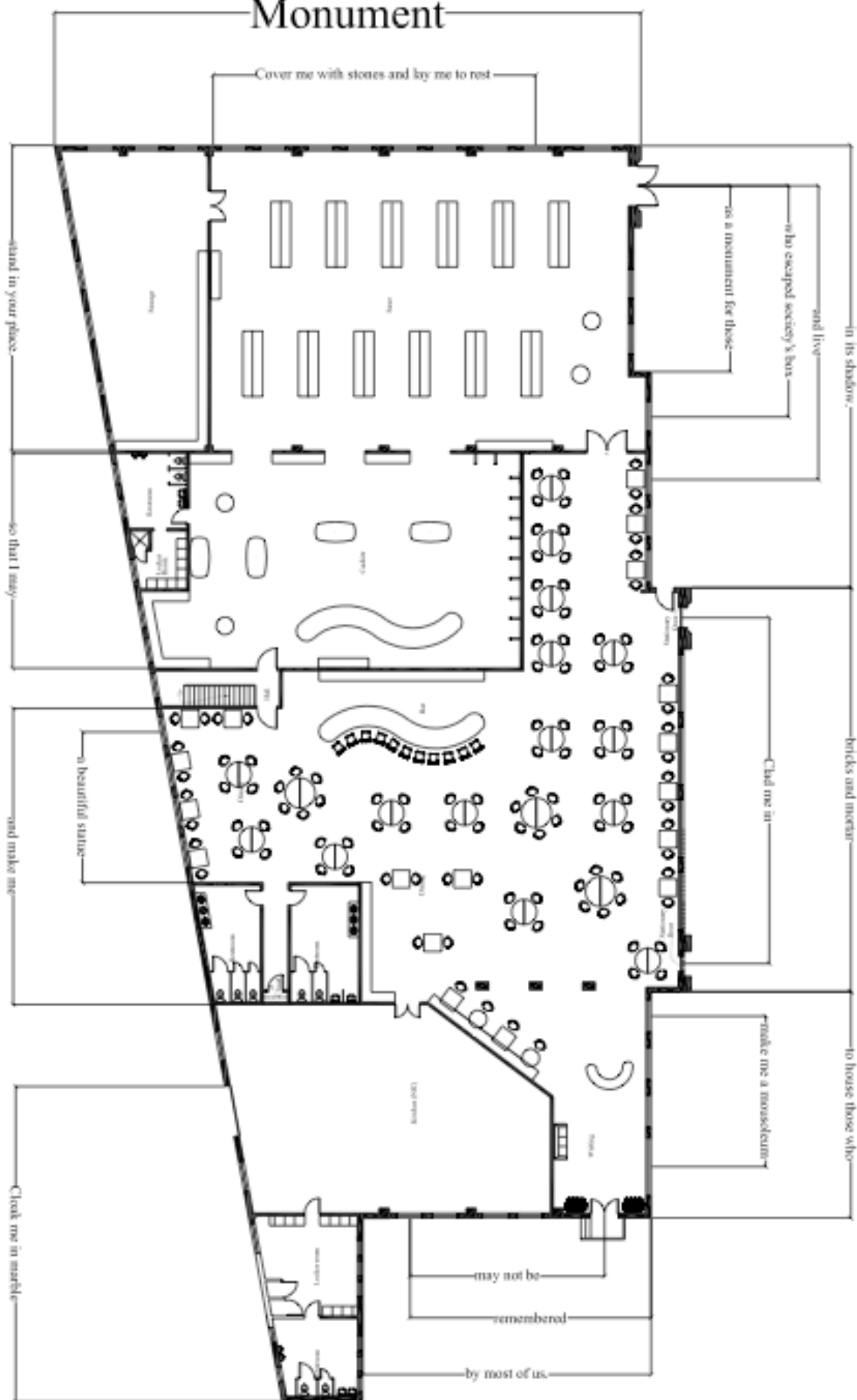
Notre Dame du Haut Ronchamp
By Le Corbusier

The perfect flow of virgin white
hair falling from a dark bonnet.
Eyes sparkling, blue, green, yellow,
brilliant chips of light
illuminating dark shadows of prayer.

A woman's body,
falling into itself as she
folds her legs beside her.
All smooth skin and curves
Except for the sharp corners

Of elbows and knees.

Monument



Works Cited

- Chang, Amos Ih Tiao. *The Tao of Architecture*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Corbusier, L. *Towards a New Architecture*. Thousand Oaks, California: BN Publishing, 2008.
- Harbison, Robert. *The Built, the Unbuilt, and the Unbuildable: in Pursuit of Architectural Meaning*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993.
- Koolhaas, Rem. *Conversations with Students*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.
- Koolhaas, Rem and Bruce Mau. *S, M, L, XL: Oma*. New York, NY: Monacelli Press, 1998.
- Zevi, Bruno. *The Modern Language of Architecture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1994.