The History Of Entrapment: A Reading Of Architecture's 2-D Accessory

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By reference to a classical style low-relief building facade in Auckland, this paper gives a reading of architecture's origins supported by connection with the adventures of Mowgli and Daniel. Concealment of three dimensionality, inherent in the device of the trap, is advanced as a crucial accessory to architecture

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Just as the wallet, pen, chequebook, and jewellery are the body's power accessories, the signet ring of old, from which one's individuality, signature, stamp of authority, patent, intentions is derived, so is the two dimensional ornamented surface for architecture. The rest - body and building - is that dependable or disposable, conforming to function, conventional, lovable vernacular of matter, of which some save the bones (seeing structure as the essence) others the skin (parchment). All is ultimately water soluble although parchment, so esteemed by lawyers, unlike paper, is resistant to this process.[1] It is toward parchment that the architectural accessory of the 2-D ornamental surface is inclined. The concern of this paper is with the design that is placed upon it; and with the power of the 2-D ornamented surface, architecture's key accessory, for subordinating 3-D building.

Some architects, unlike Alberti, are uneasy about the tension between the 2-D and 3-D aspects of architecture.[2] Architecture's 2-D aspect is surely part of its repertoire despite culturist scorn of Ancient Egypt, Archaic Greece, Byzantium, and Asia's sophisticated use of 2-D surface and low relief as a representational device which makes schemas of ornament an archive of design and culture. The 3-D aspect of architecture can get out of hand. Perhaps the 2-D/3-D issue, associated in this paper with the accessory issue, is concerned with the conflict between realism and poetry.[3]

As an example I will refer to what I would like to call 'the most beautiful building in Auckland' but if I do this I will alienate all my colleagues. I will instead refer to the selected building as one of Auckland's architectural good lookers. The building, the *Pacific Forum Line*, I assume faces Custom Street but it is the rear facade facing north onto the *Britomart Place Bus Terminal* that I wish to discuss (*fig 1*). This facade is beautiful because of its two dimensionality. In its texture and colouring it is like a painting. Painting, being a higher, finer art, gives access to beauty in a way that eludes most buildings on account of building being unavoidably coarse, site-bound and circumstantial.

The *Pacific Forum Line* facade, by means of its composition and ornamental scheme in low relief, is clearly a representation of a 3-D building, both of a simple and grand kind, and one unlike the actual building within the facade. A simplistic three-fold analysis of classical building refers first to the plinth/base, secondly to the shaft, and thirdly to the capital/entablature/roof pediment. Speculation, treatises, and investigation concerning the first building from whence this 3-D classical scheme has been derived, and concerning the notion itself, have been largely preoccupied with the primitive woodwork of the upper two zones for reasons which Wigley, following Derrida, has probed.[4] These studies tend to focus on the 3-D building itself and not on its accessory 2-D role. As accessories, designs in the form of textiles, parchment and ceramic have been bundled up quite literally in history's Silk Road baggage and have stayed with us, whatever our existential journeying, ever since. That these 2-D designs are, on a huge scale, sometimes laid over buildings, like the festival thankas of Bhutan and Tibet, is not immediately apparent to, nor appreciated by, all. Modernism, particularly, has protested against this practice.

One can safely say that the *Pacific Forum Line* facade is so straightforward in its use of the classical scheme of ornament that it, like others nearby, is in touch with, and depicts the first, original building (a house perhaps). By means of its accessory ornament this facade gives access to the very moment of building's invention. The *Pacific Forum Line* thus wears a blueprint plastered onto its face; a mask perhaps, but with the pathos of the whitened circus clown, and with the bathos of the inevitable custard pie.

Together with many other Auckland buildings and interiors this facade spans the entire history of the human accessory architecture.

The two key human accessories - building and clothing (particularly women's dresses) both intimately body related - are joined by a third; in our time the motor vehicle. Motor vehicles, and buildings for them, dominate the environs of the *Pacific Forum Line*. The surrounding buildings are aggressively three-dimensional. It requires concentration in such a context to focus on the surface ornament of the *Pacific Forum Line* which brings to our attention a wider architectural repertoire. On closer inspection it can be seen that three buildings are implied by the facade; a short one thoroughly keyed-in to a basement; a second tall one on top of the first with a secondary hesitation within its attenuated pilasters; and a third, short one, on top (*fig 2*). Thus the facade oscillates between the simple and the grand. Each building, short or tall, repeats to a degree the classical three-fold scheme of base/shaft/entablature within itself and in conjunction as a whole.

For Europeans, the cellar or crypt is a much taken for granted vernacular aspect of building, of little visual consequence perhaps; useful for effacing certain people and things, not least for security. In New Zealand, thanks to a literary tradition of which the late Professor Sir Keith Sinclair was an exponent we are tuned to 3-D 'hack' and 'dig' cues in both literature and architecture.[5] Thus, for us, the *digging* of a basement, something we haven't bothered with much, takes precedence over its imaginative aspect. It is easy therefore for a New Zealander to grasp that the *Pacific Forum Line*'s first ground-level, short, simple building atop a basement with windows poking through a plinth, is basically a hole dug in the ground and as such indicates the first building that ever was. This invention is much more basic than caves or twig shelters, for these just happen to be there. A hole in the ground excites, and requires concentration and caution, as the poet Robert Creeley has observed:

> *I could look at*
> *an empty hole for hours*
> *thinking it will*
> *get something in it,*
> *will collect things. There is*
> *an infinite emptiness*
> *placed there.*[6]

The first building/house was undoubtedly a hole dug in the ground.[7] And with death ritual the first became the last. I think it is simpler to think of the necropolis as the last house not the first as Lewis Mumford has suggested.[8] When digging a hole for shelter, as evicted Irish tenants did in the frozen ground in the 19th century during the potato famine, a boon is the spoil. This piled around the hole lessens the depth of dig for head height. Although a parapet from inside, outside this spoil creates the stub of a wall or *'mastaba'* the sitting bench as it has become known in Arab Egypt. There are perhaps batter slopes and gaps for doors; the *Pacific Forum Line* has one such; to which Roman mythology is sensitive, by means of allusions to ploughing - digging a hole for a city and turning up a sod city wall, understanding the gap where the plough was carried *(portare)* across to make the city gate. One might instead step up and over the *mastaba* and then down into the hole. Steps inside are made with a bit of left behind spoil. Solid steps against a wall excite, even in our time, memories of this 'first house.'

I am inclined to the view that the first house - a hole in the ground - was inspired by that dug to trap animals. Somehow it became known that it was snug down there.[9] Life at that time was otherwise very open. Closure had not quite been invented. Snug, but after the catch risky. Someone, like Daniel, had to go down with the animals. Here is the sacramental aspect of house for those who want it. This line of thought crystallised for me when I recently re-read Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*.[10] Mowgli can't bear to sleep in a house in the village; he has to sleep outside; he thinks the house is a trap. This is all legions away from the expansive openness and repetition of the Paleolithic paintings of animals on the walls of caves. Architecture is thus the history of human entrapment. I believe the facade of the *Pacific Forum Line* records this.

After digging a hole, when it is a trap, over it is placed concealment as false ground. This false ground which conceals the hole is the two-dimensional surface. Concealment is thus the inherited function of the two-dimensional facade. That is to say its function is to conceal a 3-D reality. This very facility of concealment becomes a means whereby the 2-D ornamented facade can be read; its 3-D subject detected, swept, cleared, appreciated, defused; disentangled from that within and then approached with caution lest aggressive 3-D power residual within be nevertheless unleashed.[11] When the hole is a house its covering is a roof. This function of roof is concealed also when the hole is a trap. (*tego, texi, tectum* = to cover, protect, to make secret, bury, conceal; *tegula* = roof, roofing tile;

teges = mat, rug, covering; *tectum* = roof, shelter, dwelling; *tector* = plasterer.) All construction above the hole and its spoil can be understood to derive from the roof.

Roofing over the hole with whatever is to hand - sticks, leaves, logs, mud, stones - is inevitably arranged for a house to achieve a crucial ventilating and observation gap or strip between elements, and within their thickness, on top of the *mastaba* wall. Modernism with its celebration of three-dimensionality featured this strip; it can be observed in the work of New Zealand's Dr Richard Toy as a clerestory strip - sometimes merely glass set between rafters - as well as the ubiquitous glazing strip above interior partitions in modern design.[12] Lighting often takes precedence over ventilation in these examples as they are not actually holes in the ground. The *Holocaust Memorial Hall*, Yad Vashem, at Jerusalem is a dramatic interior evocative of this hole in the earth scheme.

In classical design this gap strip is the frieze; one breathes through it, sees through it, and hears through it even if the hole is deep; even when inside the strip is trompe-l'oeil painted plasterwork[13] (*figs 3, 4*). In Egypt a continuous visual record of the convention of the frieze derived from archaic and vernacular building can be traced from the 4th millennium BC to Roman times. This is a self conscious alignment of a decorative scheme with a 3-D vernacular celebrated for its archaic significance indicating a primeval time of the Gods and their first abode of which the Temple is a representation in stone.[14]

The *Pacific Forum Line Building*'s first short register indicates this frieze zone at ground level by means of steel barred basement windows reminiscent of an Egyptian *kheker* frieze; and also above the *mastaba* wall by means of a generous uplifted zone which involves by implication the imposition of posts, rather like *Trajan's Kiosk* at Philae. By this means an airy pavilion is created above the hole in the ground, perhaps with its own floor concealing both the hole below and its role as the hole's roof; or perhaps remaining open aloft as a high belvedere lantern as at the crossing of English cathedrals. A roof/floor directly on top of the *mastaba* wall provides the plinth and terrace of the classical scheme. By means of timber or masonry this airy pavilion can be extended vertically as at Ephesus, Baalbek, Persepolis and with buttresses at Beauvais. Whether constructed of ashlar masonry or of fragrant, perfumed timbers as in Turkey's early mosques and Persia's halls of Paradise at Isfahan, as noted by Warren and Mahoney's *Citibank Centre* within sight of the *Pacific Forum Line*, these pavilions have excited the senses throughout history.[15]

A pavilion of this kind is the dazzling intimation of the central register of the *Pacific Forum Line* Building. Of course the actual solid building within, with its tiers of windows, is at odds with this conception which prefigures late twentieth century curtain wall buildings. The facade excites the presence of an immense gilded cage, a single shaded volume, with glinting profiles set over a hole in the ground; like Paris' exquisite *S. Chapelle*. This Auckland facade is unbelievably airy to the casual eye. Pilaster capitals hint of archaic twiggery and leafage. On top is another pavilion rather stubby. This accessory facade thus refers to what was; to that which is elsewhere; to that which isn't, enlivening thereby that which is.

There is thus a sense in which freestanding building, of which the pillared shrine is an exemplar, is constructed within the conjunction of hole and roof. Coomaraswamy has drawn attention to timber building, particularly roofs, built within Indian caves with use of wall brackets for supports. It could even be that Paleolithic cave paintings express the intention of transforming the natural cave into an 'architectural' conception in rejecting its closed wall aspect by painting the fauna of the open landscape as a 'frieze' zone and thereby accepting the floor and roof aspect of the cave itself.[16]

Attempts to trace the evolution of building from a simple closed hut, cryptless and with full height walls, seem in this light to be perhaps rather misguided. Coomaraswamy has attempted to do this for Indian architecture, being convinced that the fully developed, complex Indian temple had such an origin. Neither Meister, Coomaraswamy's posthumous editor, nor Rykwert in their discussion of Coomaraswamy's work seem to entertain the possibility that all building is substantially a roof complementing the pit, despite Coomaraswamy's recognition of the stacking of roofs (*sikhara*) as the generator of the temple tower form incorporating multiple eave/clerestory zones between the roofs.[17] The development of construction is largely the 'raising of the roof'.

It may be that the simple closed wall hut is not by any means an origin but rather a constructed 'twin' of the pavilion and understood as an alternative tradition; or perhaps even an adaption of the constructed pavilion made whenever the 'eggshell' hole and earthworks system was put aside.

Certainly, in the history of building, a tension exists between these twins. When the constructed pavilion is revealed, above or outside the pit, the inner secret of architecture is manifest, as by the Greek temple and portico. Coomaraswamy has shown how in Indian temple architecture the closed hut is then inserted or re-inserted into the otherwise open composition.

To conclude I will refer to a nearby building with the same scheme but in a grandiose manner viz the *Ferry Building* on Quay Street Auckland[18] (*fig 5*). I think of this building as the morning after Daniel was thrust down into the lion pit, when the King came to see what had become of Daniel, as if painted by Veronese, accompanied by an Oratorio by Handel. One can observe King Darius, at the break of dawn, with his family and retinue sweeping between the pavilion's massive sandstone columns on the uplifted terrace sealed with his own signet ring. The building's brick interior dissolves in the imagination leaving a tented pavilion over the pit. As in 17th century Turkish pavilions there are retiring rooms with fireplaces. This terrace is set on top of a *mastaba* wall constructed of Coromandel tonalite/granite, like heaps of grey shingle beside a hole in the road.

From this airy, elevated platform, a rather stodgy Persepolis, the Court peers down to see to their amazement, and to Darius' relief, Daniel down there alive, cosy with the lions. At road level one can see the thick arches through which the lions have been chased in and out as in the *Colosseum* at Rome. Like the *Pacific Forum Line* there is another short pavilion on top. Unlike at the *Colosseum* one's thoughts are not directed towards the horrible sequel when Daniel's accusers are thrown down into the pit and seized by the lions even before they reach the floor of the pit.[19] Denied concealment's 2-D accessory they are exposed to a grim 3-D reality.

The whole show is noisy and spectacular. No wonder the Byzantines once, and the Eastern Orthodox Church still, enact this scenario of the first house as part of their liturgy. But this building of intrinsic power impressive as it is, on account of its coarse three-dimensional buffoonery to which architecture is prone, does not have the delicate accessory charm and subtle suggestion of the *Pacific Forum Line*'s rear facade on Britomart Place.

NOTES

1 "A parchment book lost in the Thames was recently recovered completely intact. '*Water simply strengthens parchment, unlike paper. That is why several books have survived for more than a thousand years.*' says Wim Visscher whose family have been making parchment and vellum since 1860." Including restoration of the *Doomesday Book*. R.U., "Living National Treasure: Parchment Maker" *Country Life* (November 24, 1994), p. 32-33.

2 Auckland architect David Mitchell is one of these. He scorns Post-Modern architecture for this reason; for its entertaining the 2-D surface as a key design element: "In 1980 Michael Graves had rendered the facade of the Public Service Building in Portland, US as a gigantic neoclassical collage barely related functionally to what was behind it. In one stroke he had granted a licence to reduce 3-D architecture to 2-D scenography." David Mitchell, "Urban Decline" *Architecture New Zealand* (January/February, 1995), p. 50-52.

3 "The richness and variety of the English school of landscape painters has resulted from the constant conflict between realism and poetry." Laure Meyer, *Masters of English Landscape* (Paris: Pierre Terrail, 1993), dustcover.

4 Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: the idea of the primitive hut in architectural history (*New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), Mark Wigley writes: "The invisible architecture of the crypt is always bound to a visible architecture ... Furthermore, there is no architecture without crypt." *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1993), p. 179.

5 "Life, real life, was physical. To live was to dig, hack, hit, shove, sail, swim, kick." K. Sinclair, "Life in the Provinces: The European Settlement" *Distance Looks our way: The Effects of Remoteness on New Zealand* (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1961), p. 41.

6 Robert Creeley, "Joy" *The Finger. Poems 1966-1969* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970), p. 23.

7 Whilst holes in the ground are included as part of the origins of architecture by some writers they are not dwelt upon e.g. Vitruvius, who mentions "others dug caves on mountain sides" and notes the trenches dug by Phrygians who lived in open country. Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture* trans. M. H. Morgan, (New: York: Dover, 1960), p. 39-40. Sir William Chambers writing in the 1750's dismisses such holes and other early devices as soon abandoned on account of their being "disgusting, damp and dark" Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise* p. 70.

8 Lewis Mumford emphasizes the Paleolithic cave sanctuary in the social development of place in *The City in History: its origins, its transformations, and its*

prospects (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961).

9 In Australia near Canberra I once saw a kangaroo, a large male, established in a hole it must have shaped for itself; he had his rear limbs and soft parts snug in the hole with his powerful '*mastaba*' tail on the brink at the ready. His squeaky nose, eyes, and ears were lifted high like the communications masts on the mountain tops around Canberra's moist hollow.

10 "Tiger! Tiger! Mowgli's Song" Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book* (London: MacMillan, 1st ed 1894).

11 "Every apparently stable building presupposes such a concealed and unstable spacing that is itself a mechanism of concealment," "but of seeing what it might say about such a hiding, seeing what it reveals about concealment, what it opens about closure, and so on. In the end, these are the architectural questions." Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction* p. 179, 88.

12 An example is R.H.Toy's All Saints' Church, (1957) Ponsonby, Auckland. P. Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture* (Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), p. 153. More extreme examples by Le Corbusier are Ronchamp Chapel (1950-55) and the Church of S. Marie-de-la-Tourette (1957-60). Also the Fosse Ardeatine, (1945) Rome by Aprile et al G.E. Kiddersmith, *Italy Builds* (London: The Architectural Press, 1956), p. 174-177.

13 William Mason's Old Government House (1856) Auckland, now the University of Auckland Senior Common Room, has all these sense cues, visual, olefactory, auditory worked in relief plaster as an interior frieze; Apollo/Orpheus lyres alternate with garlands of fruit and flowers with ribbons fluttering in the breeze. Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture* p. 34. Recent truncation of the ribbons on Auckland University's crest, in order to merely make them less ornate, is an act of ignorance. Once like the pennons at Thebes, stirring in the air of the God Amon the Invisible One, Auckland University's ribbons now indicate that the University has become an airless overcrowded zone.

14 Egypt also introduced the concept of a building within a building as in Tutankhamun's concentric shrines whereby each, shorter than the one over it, provides a ventilating strip as a *kheker* frieze; and whereby solid interior walls are painted as the elevations of an airy pavilion. Auckland graduate Robert Tse has recently located in China his family's ancestral hall in which a strip of painted landscape is placed in exactly this frieze zone. Robert Tse, "On the way to Ha Leung," (BArch thesis: University of Auckland, 1994).

15 "A clear division into base, middle and top was made." 'Citibank Centre, 23 Customs Street, Auckland.' *Warren and Mahoney Architects 1958-1989* (Christchurch: Warren and Mahoney, 1989), p. 93.

16 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in Early Indian Architecture* ed. Michael W. Meister, (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Oxford University Press, 1992.)

17 Michael W. Meister and Joseph Rykwert, "Afterword: Adam's house and hermits' huts, A conversation," Coomaraswamy, *Essays in Early Indian Architecture*

18 Ferry Building, (1912), Quay Street, Auckland. Architect Alexander Wiseman, in Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture* p. 70.

19 "at the first sign of dawn he was up, and hurried off to the lion pit. As he approached the pit he shouted in anguished tones, 'Daniel, servant of the living God! Has your God, whom you serve so faithfully, been able to save you from the lions?' Daniel replied, 'O King, live for ever! My God sent his angel who sealed the lions' jaws, they did me no harm, since in his sight I am blameless, and I have never done you any wrong either, O King.' The King was overjoyed, and ordered Daniel to be released from the pit. Daniel was released from the pit, and found to be quite unhurt, because he had trusted in his God. The King sent for the men who had accused Daniel and had them thrown into the lion pit, they, their wives and their children: and they had not reached the floor of the pit before the lions had seized them and crushed their bones to pieces." "Daniel" 6.17-25 *The Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966).