THE NOSTOS OF RICHARD MEIER. A NEW ULYSSES

About Richard Meier

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Like a modern-day Ulysses, Richard Meier has crossed the straits of fame and recognition, lashed to the mainmast of Architecture by the ropes of reason, honesty, and beauty. The sirens of money, fame, and power have tried to lure him with their seductive song. But nothing can prevent him returning to Ithaca to be reunited with Penelope.

THE FIRM DESIRE TO ENDURE

Paul Eluard believed that the primary impulse behind all poetic creation was “the firm desire to endure”. I would add that this is what motivates all forms of creativity, including architecture. This is clearly true of Richard Meier, a master builder for our times. He is perhaps one of the three greatest 20th century North American architects, alongside Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Kahn, for both of whom he confesses immense admiration. Of course, Richard Meier creates his architecture with the desire to endure. No one could expect less of a master.

I have no hesitation in claiming this in the face of critical opinion. Having praised him ad nauseam in the 1980s, the golden age of the New York Five, critics now maintain an unwarranted silence which I believe must be broken once and for all. Meier has been awarded every prize going, from the Pritzker to the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal. Every single one.

Mies Van der Rohe and Le Corbusier arrived from the old Europe to conquer and convince the USA, but built very little in the New World. Richard Meier, however, built large and significant European projects – in Barcelona, Paris, Frankfurt, Prague, and Rome. Even so, the construction of a variety of notable buildings in the Old World is not the main reason for Meier’s importance. He is an American architect who has triumphed in Europe – but even that is not sufficient reason. It seems that critical opinion, fickle as a weathervane and more fleeting than the flowers, has forgotten that Richard Meier is the great American architect of the second half of the 20th century, as Frank Lloyd Wright was of the first.

And I can imagine Meier standing amazed—like stout Cortez standing “silent, upon a peak in Darien” in Keats’s poem, gazing in wonderment at the infinite immensity of the Pacific—looking down from above at the present problematic panorama of contemporary architecture.

TRANSCENDENCE

In his most recent book in the Electa series on Richard Meier, Kenneth Frampton contends that in Meier’s architecture “nothing remains of that Greek, inexorably tragic, vision which pervaded all Le Corbusier’s work, even more so after the apocalypse of the Second World War.” And he ends by noting that Meier “wisely keeps his distance from the hectic and disconcerting perspective which Gramsci identified when he spoke of the

time when the old dies without the new having yet been born, a time when unhealthy symptoms are incubated."

On the contrary, despite the brilliance of the image described by Gramsci and reproduced by Frampton, I believe that the desire to ENDURE THROUGH TIME, indeed the desire for TRANSCENDENCE with something of that tragic Greek vision is what Richard Meier, like any self-respecting architect, boldly strives to achieve. Which is more than a good sign.

This will to transcend goes hand-in-hand with his constant research into the nature of architecture. Building a pavilion or a restaurant – such as 66 in Manhattan – is very different from erecting a church or museum, like the Jubilee Church in Rome or the Ara Pacis Museum in the heart of the same city. In the architecture of our times (notice that I do not use the word "contemporary") sometimes experiments are set up which are no more than that – experiments. And although they often have the virtue of "freshness," they don't have Paul Eluard's "desire to endure."

Perhaps architects these days value experimentation above results and process above completion. The history of architecture is full of examples. In the 18th century, temporary structures were created to celebrate events and amaze the public. Our 21st century equivalent is the exhibition pavilion. So many exhibitions provide a test bed for experiments that turn out to be no more than footnotes to the history of architecture, no matter how subtle and thought-provoking they may be. And don't let anyone tell me that Mies Van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion is not a chapter in that history, for it most certainly is. Of course, it had to be rebuilt. I don't know what Mies would think if he were to see it now.

Today, it seems, many buildings are erected with the pavilion in mind. They are merely temporary in the fullest sense of the word. Although they fill many pages of countless magazines which, like fairy-tale monsters, need to devour a princess every day. Among the buildings that appear in the magazines, jostling for space among the adverts, very few will last. Only those with the will to TRANSCEND and ENDURE will survive. Those that do not will disappear, as will those glossy magazines which, at this moment in the third millennium, are doomed. The overwhelming power of the computer screen is unstoppable.

COMMUNICATION

What I have chosen to call TRANSCENDENCE, a term which at first sight seems a little pretentious, is no more than a desire to communicate with others. As every creative work is.

The Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, who introduced his poetry to the U.S. at Columbia University in New York, the city to which he dedicated a book of poems, summed the whole thing up very well. "I write to be loved," he said. And we could say that Richard Meier creates his architecture in order "to be loved."

It is the understandable wish to communicate, to transcend space and time that inspires the work of every creator, including Richard Meier, Wright and Kahn, Le Corbusier and Mies, Shakespeare and Cervantes.

During my most recent long stay in New York, as a visiting scholar at Columbia University, I was very happy. I lived on Columbus Avenue at 72nd Street. A marvelous place in the centre of Manhattan. On the first day I went for a walk and entered the nearby New York Historical Society Museum on the edge of Central Park. Although it wasn't particularly interesting, at the exit I noticed a glass case containing a handwritten letter. It was from President Thomas Jefferson chiding his daughter Maria [Qu.: Among Jefferson's daughters are Martha and Mary; I would guess this reference is actually to Martha AKA Patsy Jefferson] for not reading Don Quixote. In order for that to be possible, Cervantes himself had to commission the translation of Don Quijote de la Mancha into English. Even now, the fame of Don Quixote – and Cervantes – continues to grow. Even then – back in 1612 – Cervantes the great creator knew that creativity was all about COMMUNICATION. It is a well-known precept that "good spreads itself."

In other words, Richard Meier is quite right to keep on pursuing the same TRANSCENDENCE which his works have so often achieved. And, like Cervantes, he is conscious of building architecture able to resist the passage of time and, like Shelton's translation of Cervantes, to reach every last corner of the universe.

ARTIFICE AND ARTEFACT

The Electa book on Meier mentioned earlier includes an essay by Richard Meier in which he speaks with great conviction of architecture as artifice. He defends this artificiality as inseparable from architecture itself. It could not be otherwise. Of course, this is not a popular thing to say at a time when chameleon-like buildings, designed not to spoil the landscape, are springing up like mushrooms.

Like Meier, I too would argue that architecture is always artificial. Animals live in and blend into the natural world. For them, the rocks provide caves and their nests are their cabins. So far, I have never seen a human being living in a nest, and only hermits live in caves.

The architecture of Meier and Le Corbusier, Koolhaas and Mies Van der Rohe, Palladio and Bernini, were and are pure artifice. They are artefacts. In Meier's article published in Perspecta in 1988 he faces up to continuing accusations and offers a totally rational defense of the artificiality of architecture.

I have always made a distinction between the tectonic and the stereotomic in architecture. A distinction thoroughly learned from Kenneth Frampton by way of Jesús Aparicio and explored in more depth with Gottfried Semper. In Meier's case, his architecture, his artifice, is basically tectonic.

And in the same way that the architecture of the stereotomic base, the architecture of the "architectural cave," be it concrete or stone, speaks of gravitational continuity with

the ground, Meier's architecture is much closer to that tectonic construction, the "architectural cabin," and much closer to the sky.

It is light architecture, supported "on tips" above the landscape. It easily establishes discontinuity with nature, which means that it does not seek to create a perfect relationship with the natural environment. Meier's architecture often emphasizes the clear, clean, horizontal planes of the surrounding landscape. It also frames the landscape either by means of light, white structures or voids, judiciously cut voids in his beautiful white walls. It is a never-ending dialogue between culture and nature. Never has culture been as "natural" as the noble savage.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

"And there was light," say the Holy Scriptures. Meier ends his article with a passionate defense of LIGHT and CONTEXT. As one might expect him to do.

Meier knows very well architecture must capture LIGHT as music captures air. In the same way that air passing through a well-tuned instrument produces music, light passing through a well-tuned structure will produce architecture.

Different types of musical instruments control the air in many different ways and likewise architecture controls light, be it solid or diffuse light, vertical or diagonal light, light that scratches matter, light that caresses it. Light passing through the architectural artefact will pluck from it the most beautiful sounds. And just as wind and string instruments function differently, architecture resorts to a variety of methods as it works with light.

And while some of us architects work more with solid light, finely tuning light and shade, Meier chooses to accentuate the sheer radiance of light. He opts for an all-encompassing light, for brightness, for light that invades every corner of space, for transparency.

Richard Meier's buildings work brilliantly with this transparent light, and his use of the color white is the result of a skillful game which he plays better than anyone. I mean that his use of white is simply an expression of the desire that nothing should get in the way of these exceptionally well thought-out strategies with light.

SMITH HOUSE

It is impossible to write about Meier without mentioning the Smith House. In the same way, one cannot write about Mies without mentioning the Farnsworth House or speak of Le Corbusier and say nothing about the Villa Savoye. After many years it remains one of his pièces de résistance. And it would seem that both the Farnsworth House and the Villa Savoye already carried the seeds of what Richard Meier would continue to develop in the future. In some instances quite dazzlingly.

While the Farnsworth House, its horizontal plane level with the human eye, floats like a raft and the Villa Savoye, perched on top of its pillars, resembles an ocean liner, the Smith House stands like a lookout, surveying the landscape, more static than the others.

If the raft “sails” and the liner “plies the seven seas,” the Smith House “lies at anchor,” its upper and lower planes reflecting the natural environment in which it is set.

The Farnsworth House offers us a continuous, transparent, horizontal space which ECHOES the surrounding landscape in such a way that it seems we are about to plunge right into it. The landscape actually appears to be coming towards us.

By contrast the Villa Savoye creates a strictly limited horizontal space, suspended with ribbon windows (“fenêtres en longeur”) which, rather than emphasising the landscape, FRAME it, with shade above and below. The large internal windows create a feeling of space inside the house. The internal courtyard achieves more than nature itself.

The Smith House produces a new and different vision of space. It has something that both its predecessors lack – front and back, fore and aft. One enters the house from behind, crammed into a tall, narrow space to emerge into an extraordinarily luminous and dramatic space three storeys high, allowing nature to appear before us, more beautiful than ever, framed within the white structure. And rather than emphasizing or framing the landscape, rather than moving it closer to or further from us, it shows it to its best advantage. We are persuaded, through the medium of architecture, to surrender to nature and to realise that the artifice of architecture, instead of imposing itself on nature, extols its virtues. A major achievement by Meier, the master builder.

It seems incredible that, at the age of only 30, Meier was able so skillfully to incorporate so many of the virtues of contemporary architecture.

Meier’s drawings accompanying publications about this work can tell us a great deal. They clearly explain how light dictates the concept and form of the house and where the utilities are housed in relation to the spaces they serve. They show how spaces are compressed or expanded, the accurate scale of each part of the house, and its clearly ordered structure. All of which are factors enabling the Smith House proudly to demand its place alongside other houses created by great architects.

Now, as I analyze the Smith House for the first time in many years, I again discover fresh nuances. And, once again, I am excited as I grasp and acknowledge the fact that this is one of the architectural masterpieces of our times.

And if, as Francesco Dal Co so rightly claims, Richard Meier’s architecture is the materialization of the American Dream, the Smith House materializes it in the best possible way. The Smith House is the dream made reality.

DOUGLAS HOUSE – LIKE A FINE WINE

Meier completed the extraordinary Smith House at the early age of 33. Only six years later he completed the Douglas House. The starting points for both were very similar. Here, the ground slopes more steeply and the plan is on a slightly larger scale. The architect’s response was similar but the effect achieved is much more dramatic. At the back, the utilities are housed in an enclosed space. At the front are the vast main living

spaces. To enter the house at the upper level, there is a bridge, or rather a gangway, such as passengers might use to board a liner. The white ship anchored on the wooded slope sublimely frames nature.

One could call the Douglas House an aria from Richard Meier's architectural opera.

So much as been written and published about the Douglas House that it might seem that there is no more to be said, that its fascination is wearing thin. Not so. Perhaps, along with Francesco Dal Co, we can see this house as marking the moment when Richard Meier reached maturity, the moment when he perfected his style.

It is worth noting that in the Douglas House and the Smith House, indeed in all Meier's work, the skeleton or the support structure is always white, as white as the space on which it imposes order.

I have written many times that structure is crucial, not only because it bears loads and transmits the force of gravity to the ground, but also for its fundamental role of "imposing order on space." And Richard Meier always does it with Cartesian clarity.

Now, more than 33 years on, Douglas House is even more convincing than it was on the first day. Like fine wine, it improves with age.

AND THE LITTLE GIOVANITTI HOUSE

I owe a personal debt of gratitude to this great little house of Meier's. Built many years later, in 1983, it is smaller and simpler than the Douglas House. However, it applies an old interpretation of space used by Le Corbusier and others throughout the history of architecture. The idea is to create a diagonal series of spaces of double height thus achieving a diagonal space in which tension is created by light entering from above, producing some amazing effects. I later used a similar but more radical version of this in my Turégano House, with fewer resources but very good results.

For me, the little Giovanitti House is the expression of a moment of calm and silence in Richard Meier's life, which inspired him to produce a small jewel. He would do the same years later with 66, the great little restaurant in Manhattan that resembles a flash of white light. Like a well-aimed shot hitting the target. In Spanish, the word blanco means both the color white and the object at which a marksman aims.

A CATHEDRAL FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

There are cathedrals that look like mere churches and churches that look like cathedrals.

Richard Meier's Jubilee Church is so beautiful, so magnificent that it could well be a cathedral. So much so that we should call it Meier's cathedral. The Cathedral of the New Millennium.

There is something of Utzon and something of Le Corbusier in Meier's cathedral.

The extraordinarily beautiful structure is hugely ingenious, created with the aid of state-of-the-art technology and consisting of shells designed to be caressed and penetrated by the light of the Roman sun.

When Utzon erects a building he displays his mastery of structure. Meier's structure is every bit as good. Both understand all too well that structure is at the very core of architectonic reality.

And when the Le Corbusier the master architect builds churches, he creates miracles of light. But he cannot outclass Meier. Both understand perfectly that light is at the centre of architecture.

The layout of the church is immaculate. It makes suitable provision for the central positioning of the altar while also promoting dialogue with the light entering from above. The utility areas are strategically placed. The hallways and walkways are also faultless. The construction is perfect. Vitruvius's first two principles, utilitas and firmitas – function and structure – are observed to perfection. Venustas—beauty—the third and most difficult to achieve, here goes hand-in-hand with the others. And the church, the cathedral, is a work of such great beauty that it alone could have been enough to ensure the "canonization" of any other architect.

ARA PACIS MUSEUM

A project more challenging still. It was no easy task to devise ways of housing and protecting Emperor Augustus's Altar of Peace, while also displaying it to the best advantage. The Mayor of Rome knew exactly what he was doing when he decided to commission Richard Meier. This is a serene and silent piece, transparent and magnificently lit. Meier has succeeded very well in articulating the elements of this beautiful showcase. He has managed very effectively to capture the bright Roman light. He has built a most beautiful structure.

The intervention of an American architect in a landmark in the ancient history of Europe reminds me of the American writer Henry James and his beautiful story set in Rome, "The Last of the Valerii." Has any European author ever described the Pantheon in such luminous prose? Has any European architect produced a better showcase than Meier's Ara Pacis Museum? With great integrity and skill, Meier has created a work that comfortably engages in dialogue with the historic city while at the same time exploiting to the full the important monument that presides over it. In masterly fashion, Richard Meier has made tangible what Henry James described as "the illusion of the golden air" of Rome.

MATERIALITY

After an even more careful rereading of Meier's writings, which are few and clearly put, there is one that is particularly accurate and precise. It is the one he read out in public when he received the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1984, entitled Architecture and

Whiteness. In that hymn in praise of whiteness, he tries and succeeds in summing up the basis of his thinking.

He also mounts a convincing defence (which convinces me) of white as a color. In conclusion and in a desire to champion the capacity of architecture to carry its own message, he states: “My goal is presence.” Palladio reaches, moves, and convinces us much more through the Basilica in Vicenza than through his four very fine books on architecture. In order to achieve the Vitruvian principle of VENUSTAS the architect must first pass through UTILITAS and FIRMITAS. Above all, through Firmitas.

When I defended the color white in my essay "The Right White," I used arguments that could very well have been presented by Meier.

As regards PRESENCE, it is clearly an inescapable quality of architecture. Baudelaire found the materiality of language essential to the creation of poetry. Good ideas were not enough for him. The same applies to architecture. The battle to conquer gravity is a constant in architecture, but, however we may try to dematerialize matter, we are still left with gravity.

Mies tried to conceal cruciform pillars that transmit gravity by covering them in shiny chrome steel. The more astute Le Corbusier simply painted his small cylindrical pillars white. The same white used by Richard Meier.

MEIER’S GENEROSITY AND HIS PERSONAL APPROACH

When at this time of life one writes about an architect of Richard Meier’s status, it is also important to talk about the man himself. Not by chance, in his charming PRITZKER award speech, did he speak with such passion and tell delightful anecdotes about his children, Ana and Joseph.

At the same time, I have to mention the extraordinary generosity Richard Meier has always shown me.

In 1979, almost 30 years ago, we invited him to give a series of lectures in Madrid. Helping me was Ignacio Vicens, who now, apart from being a splendid architect, is also a professor at the school of architecture in Madrid. We were two young academics in our 30s, working as assistants to Javier Carvajal. As well as Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman, Jorge Silvetti, Tadao Ando, Emilio Ambasz, and Alvaro Siza came along to the lectures we organized. Those were the days of the New York Five.

Not long afterwards Meier returned to Madrid. I had built very little and, very conceitedly, I thought what I had done was very good. I had no hesitation in inviting MEIER to visit my Turégano House. The generous master accepted. He went to see it and praised it to the skies. There was a lot of Le Corbusier and something of Meier in the house. And his visit is captured in photographs of him and his young son, Joseph, taken in front of the house. The story ends with Meier’s presence at another significant moment – the opening in 2004 of my first New York exhibition at the Urban Center next door to St

Patrick's Cathedral. He was there with Massimo Vignelli, Steven Holl, and Kenneth Frampton. Once again, Meier was generously supporting me. I shall never be able to thank him enough.

FINALE

Like Ulysses, like Bernini, like Palladio, Richard Meier still has some way to travel. I have often thought of Richard Meier as a Ulysses of architecture. This is why I draw the analogy in this essay. He is a hero, the hero of this most recent period of contemporary architecture. And, like Ulysses, he still has not reached his Ithaca.

Meanwhile, Penelope – architecture – continues weaving and unravelling her cloth, waiting for Meier to come home to her for good.

The lovely Penelope's many suitors remain shut into the great room of couché paper, arguing heatedly among themselves, in the knowledge that, whatever they do, their longings are futile and they will die.

And still Meier is caught up in events straight out of Homer's epic.

Meier has already drunk the nectar of the lotus and brilliantly navigated the strait, firmly tied to the mast, with ears unplugged so as to hear the sirens' song without falling into their trap. Against all odds, he has continued his Homeric journey through the world of architecture.

But our Ulysses has not yet reached the final chapter. He has still not created the tensile arch that only he can create, nor has he used it to kill off all those presumptuous competitors – and we all know just how presumptuous some of the pretensions of "star" architects can be!

But time moves at a very different pace in architecture and history. What are 50 years? Nothing at all. More than 500 years went by before Chapman finally translated Homer in the 18th century, for our edification and delight. How many years did it take to build the Sydney Opera House? And it was done against all the odds. Now it is regarded as one of the wonders of the modern world. For architecture, time moves more slowly. The pace of Meier's architecture is the pace of history.

It seems as though all Penelope's suitors are trying to persuade her that Ulysses is dead. And in the same way that Ulysses dealt with those unwelcome interlopers, Meier, a man no less strong and no less astute than Ulysses, can cope with them all. Time and history will prove us right. Meier, the new Ulysses. Meier, the master builder.