BETWEEN THE IDEA AND THE REALITY

Falls the Shadow

Jennifer Hogan
10107983
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INTRODUCTION

Thesis Intent

The aim of this thesis was to thoroughly immerse myself into the liminal space that lingers between our initial thoughts and realised visions. The shadow, as it were, was the elusive subject I have chased since my childhood. It is an experience, it is the multitude of experiences that make up a lifetime, my driving force. In a literal sense, it is the darkness resulting from placing an agglomeration of matter in the path of light. This is where the idea meets the reality, in the attempt to create these experiences, to allow others to occupy this intermediate space in our minds by bringing it to life.

This piece of writing is an attempt to put into words the places and experiences that have shaped my understanding of space. Some are merely fleeting memories, yet these fractions, these series of brief experiences come to my mind with such blinding intensity that they momentarily disarm me. For a brief instant I remember that such intensity of emotion exists, and there is nothing else but shadow, light and silence.

“...there is no firmament, only a void, unless a jewelled tent myth-woven and elf-patterned; and no earth, unless the mother’s womb whence all have birth.”

Mythopoeia - JRR Tolkien

Never dismiss the ability to create a world better than the one you see around you.
Ambition is the strongest building material

In architecture, we begin with a character that does not yet exist, yet is derived solely from the existing, and through its very being allows others to exist. This character we name concept, as it is born of experience and endeavors to structure our fragmented experiences into a phenomenon that ultimately strengthens our sense of self. What is curious is that the concept, this driving force that transcends the ideological and the abstract, needs no explanation once it has been achieved. It no longer holds governance over the phenomenon it has created, the audience need not a back story as the experience evokes stories of their own. Thus the process becomes cyclical, as a space or a series of spaces unconsciously inspire a non-space to awaken as a new character, a new concept to be brought into existence. This concept, however, reflects merely the beginning of the journey. Shrouded in the ideal, we must endeavor to embody a sense of purpose. The immense power of architecture as silenced construction cannot be disregarded, function must be understood before one can venture beyond it. As Tadao Ando declares, architecture finds its significance in the distance between it and function. As architects such as Ando have proved, such architecture is not void of emotion but rather strengthened through its fusion of the analytical and the ethereal. We begin to know a place through both the power of its structure and the intensity of the space. Thus in memory it becomes an agglomeration of the spatial and the physical, the measurable and the unmeasurable. These are the memories we shall call to mind when we search for a new beginning, and in return understand our previous experiences in a new light. For the measurable is the tool we require to express that which we are, we the unmeasurable.

“What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. ...And at the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started. And know the place for the first time.”


The Soul has more need of the Ideal than of the Real'

Limerick. The city of my childhood, memorable only as a quick flash of ephemeral moments. I now believe these memories are so hard to disentangle because the spaces didn’t excite me. The flickers I recall are grey and muted, murky as the puddles that lined the streets. Perhaps this is why I chose to imagine myself elsewhere, though it may be that this dreariness I remember arose because my city could not live up to the image of the city I had created for myself. As a child, I had whole-heartedly fallen for Metropolis, this imagined city of my mind, a bright canvas engulfing my tedious suburban surroundings. I call it Metropolis as an all-encompassing term, but it was an explosive mixture of Gotham, Kryptonopolis, Central City, anywhere these fictional heroes of mine blazed through in an eruption of colour and incandescent light. What was so beautiful about this idea was that it belonged to me; it was a culmination of images and experiences I had pieced together, spaces I had carefully placed. Towering buildings that hugged the street, large avenues carving through like grand canyons that led further than my imagination could stretch. The buildings, the spaces just are, but they are glorious. They had grown out of the need to glorify something, out of pure passion. It was a place that I could never complete, and this excited me. This fictional world was real to me, and I allowed for spaces I could not yet comprehend. There were areas I could not yet thread, even in my mind. Sometimes at night while we drove through the real city I would squint my eyes at the columns of streetlights and I would be transported. In the shadows Limerick city was lost, replaced by lights dancing in a chiaroscuro of suspended darkness. The world dissolved and these spaces in parallax were reduced to movement, sound and light. This radiant beauty, once perceived, evaporates, leaving a trail of fragmented memories like breadcrumbs to be followed. In an evanescent moment both worlds collided, and this is when reality excited me; when it could reach out and touch something that I believed could only exist in my thoughts. That feeling has never disintegrated. I remain the bricoleur of this imagined, anonymous, hectic metropolis. Everywhere I visit inspires a new district, every new experience leads me further up the avenue. Each night the streetlights carry me back. I will never stop building. I will always see a world influenced by the one I carry within myself. It is the world I have refused that has defined me.

Existence, Light and Silence

The creation of space is often referred to as similar to the creation of a piece of music. There seems to be some truth in this, not solely for their geometric and mathematical roots, but also for those who can find the same transformative beauty in both. Goethe described architecture as frozen music, I disagree. It should aspire to be music in motion, in which form and content are one in the same. Perhaps music is the wrong word and sound itself should be considered. For a piece of music that exists and is static can be replayed and pulled apart, it can lose its allure. Once we understand it, once we lose that curiosuty, we no longer hear it. As much as John Cage suggests that we should not listen to something we no longer hear, we are incapable of appreciating an architecture that no longer speaks to us. Thus perception must be considered as a condition, allowing a building to move and bend, with the same sense of natural order we understand in the flow of music. There is an inherent sense of comfort in the sound of a footstep, a constant mystery in the concept of an echo. Yet in each movement we lose a hundred views, a thousand sounds. Thus spaces in parallax must be understood at a personal level, for they are not to be experienced in the same manner twice. That is not to dismiss stillness or silence, as each has its own place, its own enchantment. Each silence is different, and all can be incredible if you listen. A space should hold us in a moment, where sound and motion pause for a fraction too long. This petrified silence is the silence one can only hope to stumble upon. For we cannot create silence, it is always lurking around the next corner, and if we look for it, it shall never show itself. For a building that is this silent just is, it is not a symbol, it is not an expression, it merely exists. The silence of architecture is a lingering, remembering silence. Too long have I associated silence with darkness, believing both to possess an inherent absence. Absence, however, is incorrect, for they are not nothing. They are everything, for all things are merely light which has been consumed, and the mass remaining casts shadows, and these belong to the light. Without these shadows, we do not know what light is. One against the other creates. Without light, that which is measurable, we cannot pursue the unmeasurable silence. When one comprehends the true expanse of such matters, the question arises as to whether we can uncover anything else that speaks so strongly of eternity. These are moments that must be experienced, they lie beyond the notion of thought. Artificial light exists on a different level, as it is created, its intensity controlled, its lifespan indefinite. It belongs to the night, projected ellipses flickering in the darkness, ensconcing the roofscape like a large velvet quilt. It dances and spins and thrusts itself into the sky, it blurs and entangles as we move swiftly past it. Corbusier experiences New York as a Milky Way brought down to earth, unimaginable diamonds cool yet sparkling, experienced more in the mind than in reality. Such places, these fairytale catastrophes we call cities may be vehement and reckless, they can overcome you, but there is a moment just before darkness falls where everything is silhouette and light, and you can imagine yourself falling in love with the place. For a moment, for a lifetime, you feel as though you will never need to be anywhere else, while understanding that wherever you go, you can find this moment that makes your heart beat that little bit faster. Perhaps experiencing it in such a manner is necessary, as no space is truly a real, tangible space without such light. Yet artificial light is an energy, and it charges the viewer with emotion. We are engulfed in this transitional reality, where the object merges with the field. This celestial condition speaks most definitely of the importance of experience. Sometimes all of the pieces just fall into place, and it no longer matters that the light is artificial, or that the silence is disturbed by footsteps. For there is no reason that any of these things cannot be beautiful. Should we remain ignorant to such beauty, one cannot hope to create anything but an agglomeration of meaningless matter.

“So the first of my ideas is this: to plan the building as a pure mass of shadow then, afterwards, to put light in as if you were hollowing out the darkness, as if the light were a new mass seeping in. ... The second idea I like is this: to go about lighting materials and surfaces systematically and to look at the way they reflect the light.”

There existed a time when building required heavy masonry construction, the thick walls of which needed to be punctuated in order to allow for light. These hollows were carefully and skillfully excavated, their positions aligned, their function a necessity. Though born out of need, the spaces formed by such light held a transcendent beauty. They spoke of the passage of time, they assured us that some things can only be celebrated when we have truly felt deprived in their absence. This is something we have lost over time. One can now flood a space with light, no longer do we have the mass and void of wall and recess. Light is no longer treated as a building material, no more so than air. Spaces are filled with a constant, overwhelming wave of light. When darkness falls, our hands turn and reach for the light switch. I cannot help but mourn the experiences we are missing, here in these spaces where the sun no longer sets.

Room with a View

Cinema is perhaps the most substantial example of this juxtaposition between the fantastical and the real. Even when film utilises real and recognisable buildings we are still made to feel as though we are but in a dream; we are at the mercy of the auteur. Establishing a sense of place, painstakingly sifting through possible scenes, framing human existence, these are all components of both the architectural and cinematic experience. The sequential nature is vital, precise manipulation of time and movement are fundamental to the success of either. In contrast to music, which is perhaps more abstract, film lingers on the periphery of architecture in its depiction of the lived reality. Architecture evokes a reaction if it stirs up concealed emotions and feelings, in the same manner that film can awaken a much stronger reaction than the real because it relates to emotion rather than intellect. The viewer does not necessarily understand the inner workings, the scaffolding supporting the set, the rebar supporting the concrete. They do not always need the big picture. The dark corners, the blackness that lies at the bottom of a staircase do not need to be explained; we have projected our own fears, imagined our own reality for these spaces. Film manipulates this fact, architecture seeks to lead us round every corner and explain that there is nothing to fear. It may be that we should look to film, to recapture the sensitivity and emotion that a place can possess. Too frequently we dismiss this in search of a space advocating social interaction, but what is the significance of such interactions if they take place in a space that fails to inspire? This is perhaps where the two mediums begin to diverge. Film is controlled, the characters experiencing the spaces are just that - characters. They are the physical embodiment of the desires of the director. Architecture can be designed in the hope that it can arouse such emotion, but once it has been constructed, we can no longer pull the strings. The walls we build act as projection screens for human emotion, and that is as much as we can influence. Yet these walls are part of the physical world, and this is a monumental intimacy that cannot be transcended.

“That's the kind of movie that I like to make, where there is an invented reality and the audience is going to go someplace where hopefully they've never been before. The details, that's what the world is made of.”

Perhaps what causes me to linger on the connection between film and architecture is the creation of mind-spaces. There is an architecture inherent to the human mind, not merely a collection of images but a vivid, almost tangible series of spaces and moments, human existence frame by frame. Arnaud states that the spaces around us define us, that they are a reflection of our attempts to understand ourselves, “I am the space where I am.” We create as part of our existential desire to make sense of the world, and our place in it. We become absorbed by our creations. Regardless of the medium, there is a need to share these worlds we have created, and a joy in expressing our encounters with the worlds we have inhabited.

Between the Idea and the Reality

Falls the Shadow

 Appearing and disappearing

Though my interest was grounded mainly in the ephemeral dimensions of light and sound, I became quite fascinated in the reality of spaces that lie dormant; teetering on the edge of appearing, or disappearing. There is some enchantment to be found in the nothingness of such places, as though they have fallen out of existence. The building on which I choose to focus had been empty for quite a time, yet I feel as though the difference between empty and derelict is of great significance. Derelict seems to imply that its story is at an end, yet emptiness is more accurate, as only in its current quiescence has it become so full. Only now, as it stands almost void of the relics of its former use as a power plant, can one experience the immense scale and grandeur of its form. Liminal is quite an enigmatic word, yet it succeeds in describing the experience of such spaces. The ghostly forms of upward-leaning structures cast shadows larger and greater than themselves, as if to foreshadow their former glory. The structure has only succeeded in advancing to the forefront now that it has abandoned function, only in its ruined state can we experience it as pure form, and be satisfied. This is a great building, for it tells the meaning of its age and expresses the shadow of its past, all the while recognising that uses change and dust settles, and casting a shadow can sometimes be function enough. Yet as form the building can remain disconnected and impersonal, and so enters the architect. The structure isolated is merely an object, and an object can not hope to be separated from the person who perceives it. For the structure requires an interaction, we do not find true beauty in the structure itself but rather in the interplay between structure and light, structure and sound. The architect must recognise and create an atmosphere, in the hopes that it can be experienced. The architect lies in service to the desire of the building to become what it wishes to be, yet this is particularly delicate in such a case as this where the building is, and has been, and hopefully will continue to be. And though it stands presently, ephemeral and lonely in its stillness, there is a hope that one day the echo of footsteps will give measure to the space and make understandable its immense scale, and awaken, at last, the sleeping giant.
"At times all I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape, a glint of lights in the fog, the dialogue of two passersby meeting in the crowd, and I think that, setting out from there, I will put together piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them."
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THE PROJECT
My hope for this project was to express the monumental intimacy of light. I wished to convey how such an extraordinary encounter could be translated to a personal scale. To do this I needed to deal with light and all that I felt it represented; the passage of time, movement, the experience of a liminal space, ever-changing. I struggled with the idea of a programme - what could possibly encompass all of these factors? As the project developed I began to realise that my interest was infinitely more focused on the experience of the space, and I started to understand my project as a space without a programme. The building, with my insertion, would just be what it is. A cathedral need not be in constant use, yet it still maintains its power in its emptiness.

This project, this thesis, was a journey into designing with something that at times seemed quite out of reach. Light is captivating and ever-changing, and impossible to grasp. As it cannot be used as a conventional building material I dared not approach this in a conventional manner. The design served to toy with the balance between light and shadow, to structure the light in order to structure the spaces. I believe this is something I will continue to do, to pull apart and re-assemble in different variations for many years to come.
Photographs taken during a site visit. These images show the immense scale and beauty of the building as it stands presently. The intensity of the light and the contrast between it and the surrounding shadows is almost ethereal. This interplay of light and the manner in which it infiltrates such a dark and haunting place became the fulcrum around which my thesis developed. Throughout my work I attempted to work with the language of the building rather than dismantle the existing and begin from scratch. I believe these images are instrumental in my reason for doing so - this space has its own beauty. It expresses the beauty of a ruin, the solemn enchantment of a building trapped in limbo. In order to allow this to be experienced an architectural move was required, yet I was and am strongly of the opinion that any new intervention must not overshadow the existing but, where possible, strengthen it.
Between the Idea and the Reality

*Falls the Shadow*

I came to the realisation that space is not unlimited and perhaps it is the job of the architect to negotiate our forgotten spaces rather than continue to build on the increasingly more sparse “empty site”. Too often have spaces such as this power plant been torn down to make way for structures deemed more useful, more desirable. This is a fault that must be overcome, our thinking that everything new is by definition an improvement. This site in Poolbeg, Dublin is quite serene in its solitude. It has been stripped of its initial function as the generator for the city’s electricity, replaced by a more modern, less appealing structure located in the neighbouring site. The buses no longer venture down this road, the building has been locked up and hidden behind large gates. Does that make it useless? If the answer is yes, it is only because we have made it so. This is an area of Dublin trapped between former function and future use, and this building could be the instigator. It could also be so much more than that.
In this plan I attempted to show the interplay between light and shadow, with the plan remaining predominantly black and white in order to highlight the areas in which colour was to be introduced. The existing structure is represented as a void in this drawing in order to draw attention to the insertion itself.
In this section the future life of the building is explored. The activity beneath the four metre high concrete insertion mirrors the former use of the building, in which the workers could only traverse through the building beneath a four metre high suspended false floor. The new lightwells are placed in the voids left after the old coal chimneys were removed, and are of a similar shape and size. The fires that burned in these chimneys have been replaced by the light that will illuminate the new insertions.
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Above is a part view of the model, 1:50.
The lightwells are illuminated to give a sense of depth and explore the addition of light into this dark space.
To the left is a rendering of the imagined spatial qualities of the insertion.
Sun path diagrams. My hope was that the building would have fleeting moments in which the sun was aligned with a pivotal part of the insertion.
An exploration into the former turbine hall. To the right is a rendering of the new insertion, with the addition of colour to highlight the ethereal nature of the space. Above is a part view of the model in darkness, highlighting the beauty of the existing long windows and the darkness of the space seen as night falls.
A section through the proposed lightwells. This rendering was an attempt to convey light as it interacts with a reflective material. The change in colour was a study I had carried out in which I created miniature stained glass pieces and studied how light moved through them. The resulting colours were used in the above rendering.
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"Between the Idea and the Reality Falls the Shadow"
A rendering of the circular entrance space, in which rain is channeled along the walkway and down into the base of the circle, forming a shallow pool. This allows for a moment of rest before entering the vast enormity of the turbine hall. The sound of dripping water is echoed throughout the space as you journey around it to enter the turbine hall.
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