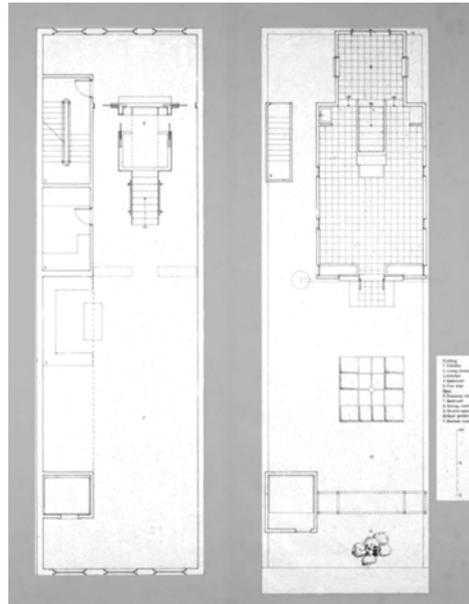
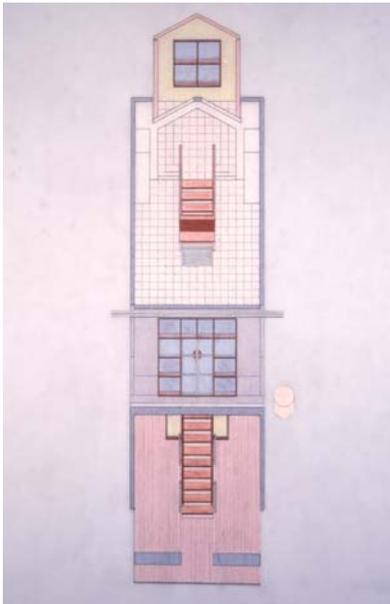


Ritual: Artist's Loft

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A problem with analysis of any sort is the obscuring of the thing itself. What I see, touch, hear and smell as I move into and through the loft is most important. These senses are the final arbiters. They provoke thought and feeling, and, consequently, the awareness of place. Nevertheless, it is clear that this project, and, I believe, all architecture, if not actually generated by specific notions of ritual, does involve a ritualistic sense of purpose and an abstraction from human experience.



This is a place for making art. The plastic arts have their roots in primitive idolatry, cave paintings, and similar practices, which, if not directly used in religious ritual, were inspired by the same necessity. Indeed, one can consider the artistic endeavor to be fundamentally ritualistic in its humble attempt to place ourselves in some acceptable relation to things unknown or metaphysical.



The basilican form, with its spare articulation and solemn frescoed wall surfaces, seemed an interesting one in which to house this ritual. Like the basilica, this painting studio is essentially symmetrical, with an “apse” and “nave” (maintaining a strict axially) and lateral punch windows with a rhythm mimicking that of the colonnade. Although the basilica is best known as an early Christian place of worship (e.g., S. Appollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy),

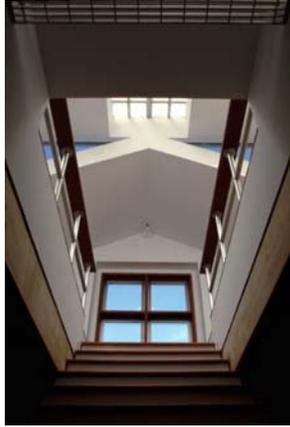


the building type was originally acquired from eastern mystical sects prior to the advent of Christ. This is significant in that pre-Christian paganism exemplifies the relationship of man and ritual in its most essential form within western thought. It would seem that the architectonic simplicity of the basilica provides the neutrality and austerity necessary to promote a range of spiritual lives within.

The success of this metaphor depends on recognizing another aspect of ritual and architecture—what might be considered as “the user ritual.” This is a secular rather than a religious ritual, the distinction being determined by the relative priority of the ideal one attempts to attain through the ritual’s performance, i.e. a functional and interesting architectural experience or Eternal Salvation. This inferred user ritual is inherent in the design process and allows the program, the occupant, physical matter, and space to come together in the architect’s mind with perfect clarity, fitness, and harmony. Initially, the ritual is conceptual and intends the consummate manifestation of the architecture in terms of a prescribed physical relation to it. The imagined user moves into and through, pauses, senses and considers, is reoriented, passes onward, all in a specific procedure which allows the “materialization” of the building in its ideal and perfect form. The architecture is insistently “viewed” from particular places, at particular angles, and in a particular sequence, thereby enforcing the relevant issues of frontality, forced perspective, symmetry, asymmetry, compression, expansion and conditions of place.



The axial and sequential nature of the studio parti is the determinant of this user ritual, a fact which lends itself to a metaphor for the ritual of making art itself. From this perspective, the basilican object becomes the most ephemeral of shelters over the more significant spiritual path. An axial approach leads to the ascent of the stair,



framed in a brilliant glow of celestial light from light wells in the floor plane above. Emerging into the “apse” one pauses to consider the primary totems and temple forms of the Manhattan roofscape; then one turns south to the light and continues forth. After momentarily straying from the “relentless” axiality (left or right of the stairwell), one returns, re-centered, to rest on the mahogany and aluminum dais.



There one might witness collected rainwater falling through a slit window at the gutter and splash stone, and contemplate the gardens beyond. At this point also, the sublimity that awaits one at the end of the journey is captured. Viewed as such, the axial organization and its concomitant detailing (mahogany and aluminum occur only and intimately about this axis) can be construed to symbolize a benign and spiritual path to artistic enlightenment.



The making of architecture exists somewhere between primordial instinct and acquired knowledge. In that complex manifold lies the source of the vague impulses which direct the selection and organization of forms and details. Simple allusion to basilicae and/or an inferred “spiritual path” is not the basis for the architecture here (indeed, it should be noted that the specifics of the analogy have been constructed after the fact). What is significant is that the architecture shares a similar intention of providing serenity and opportunity for reflection. Is it not the particular quality contained within forms (or ideas) of the past that is of importance rather than the literal forms themselves? Ultimately, all architecture is bound to ritual in that it elicits the awe and wonder that comes from something that suggests more than its physical self.

The ritualized relationship between the user and building is crucial. It is this idealized interaction that both determines and is determined by design decisions. Although in reality the ritual initially conceived for the user is unlikely to be performed “just right,” it is certain that the success of an architecture will be judged by the degree of variance between the intended ritual and its actual performance and experience. There is not a correct or incorrect architecture: there is only that which stirs the spirit less or more.

(Response by editor, Peggy Deamer)

Peter Wheelwright is committed to the idea that “ritual” does not merely refer to those spiritual and ceremonial acts that the term most immediately evokes, but potentially to all attempts to abstract ourselves and mediate between our condition and that of the world around us. This attitude is expressed on two different levels: the typological, which associates the artist’s work-space specifically with the Christian basilica; and the sensual, which emphasizes the importance of architectural quality suggested by a celebration of the user’s daily activities. Wheelwright asserts that there is a latent ritualistic aspect to the private and merely habitual, but suggests that architecture is the condition that reveals it. Neither the act nor the architecture alone manifests ritual, but together they produce the scenario in which ritual lies. His argument is similar to Bernard Tschumi’s in “Sequences,” in which architectural ritual is located in the narrative that links autonomous events and movements with the spaces that they occupy.

Unlike Tschumi (who is critical of a generally “discreet restraint that does not reveal the maker’s artifices in the final result and favors the certainty of a well-defined axis over the passionate uncertainties of thought”), Wheelwright proposes that “relentless axiality” and symmetry are, in this case, the appropriate means with which to reveal the quality of the activity. While one might challenge his initial assertion that private, secular rituals exist, perhaps the distinctions of ideal and real, symmetry and randomness, prescribed and spontaneous action, are ultimately more significant for the making of ritualistic form than the issues of private vs. public or secular vs. religious rituals.