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PHENOMENOLOGY and AMBIGUITY: physical perception of indefiniteness

Regan Ziobro

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State
University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Masters of Architecture

Committee:
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Marcia Feuerstein
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PHENOMENOLOGY and AMBIGUITY:
physical perception of indefiniteness

A thesis by Regan Ziobro

“All space for the reflecting mind is sustained by thinking which relates its parts to each other, but in this case the thinking starts from nowhere. On the contrary, it is from the heart of nocturnal space that I become united with it. The distress felt by neuropaths in the night is caused by the fact that its brings home to us our contingency, the uncaused and tireless impulse which drives us to seek an anchorage and to surmount ourselves in things, without any guarantee that we shall always find them.” (Merleau-Ponty330)

ABSTRACT

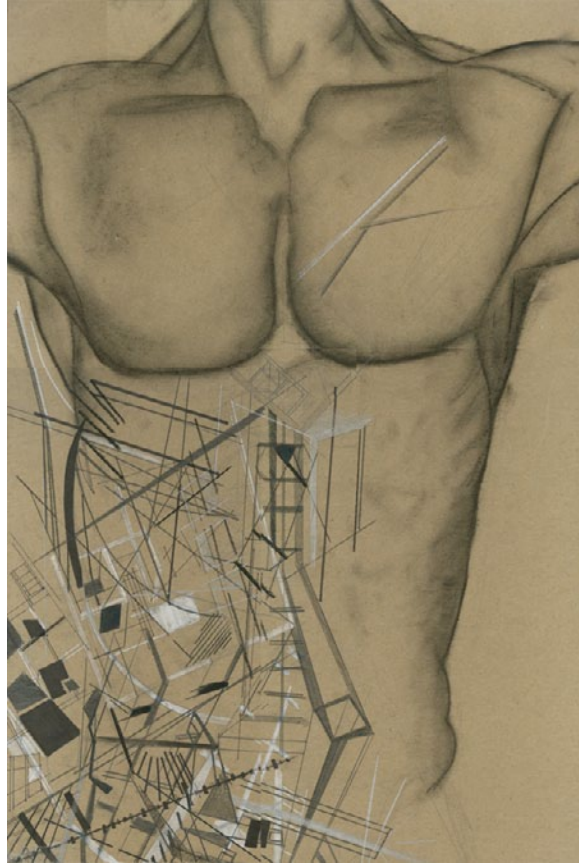
I wanted to devote a year of my life toward creating a building and participating in a body of research that was meaningful. My goal proved to be much more complex than originally thought, for meaning itself is ambiguous. Although ambiguous, meaning is not without definition: it is bounded by the contingency of our ‘cogito’ or horizons of experience. And so I argue that if we assign meaning through a function of self reflection, than perhaps a shared experience may transcend the self and reflect community. In an attempt to fertilize community through the built environment, I designed a Charter School on the abandoned 1400 block of Walnut Street in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood of Cincinnati, Ohio.

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'The Reality of Complexity'

THEORY

“The problem of the world, and, to begin with, that of one’s own body, consists in the fact that it is all there.” (Merleau-Ponty 230)

Jacques Derrida’s Post-Structuralist and later Deconstructivist theories in literature argue that it is impossible to identify a firm system of meaning within a culture when culture is perceived differently by each individual. The reality of meaning, therefore, only exists as a personal reflection of self experience and not through shared cultural consensus. This supposition of absolute relativism does not allow for common meaning to be constructed within any particular context and therefore negates any investigation into the evolution of meaning itself.

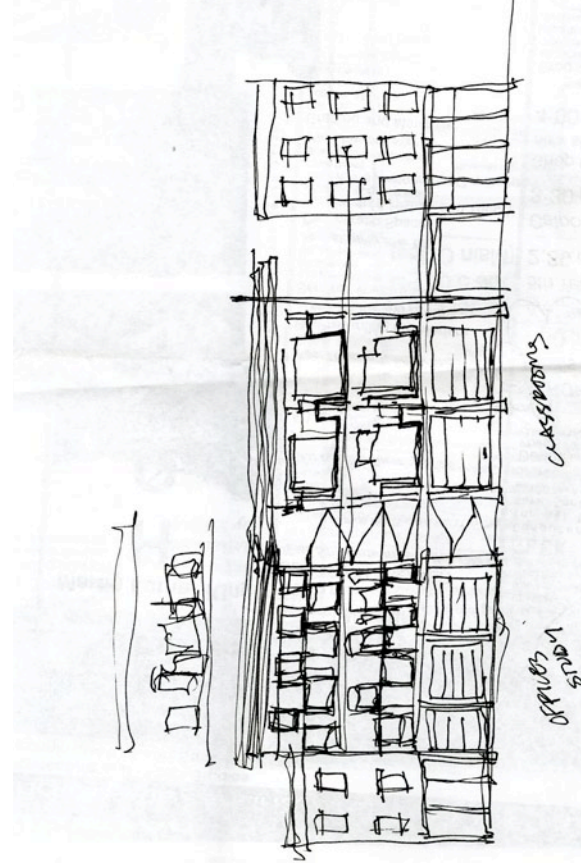
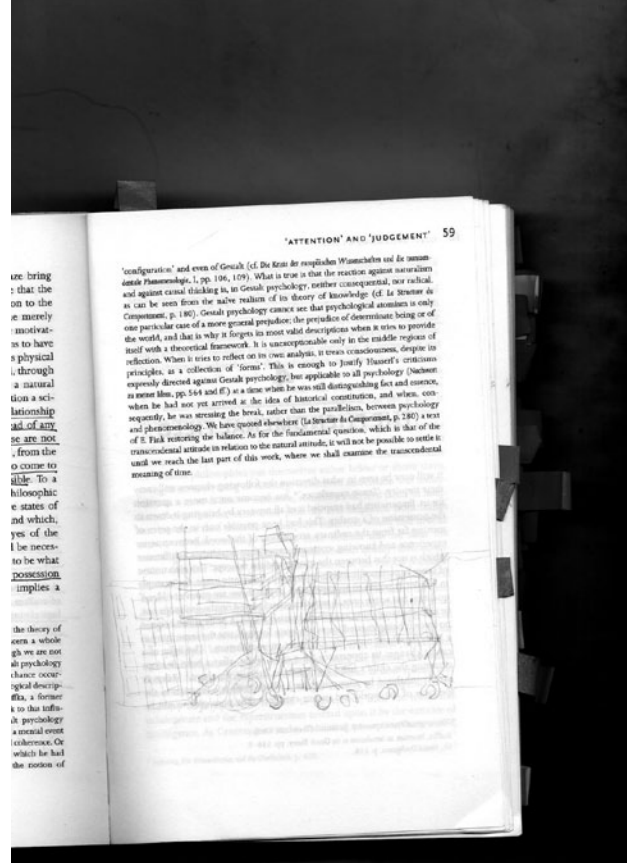
Deconstructivist theory, in both literature and architecture, supposes that one author is capable of deconstructing meaning. The meaning one author is able to deconstruct, however, is just one view in an indefinitely obscure collective reality. Meaning is not a fixed notion one could unearth, but instead, “*floated in a world of absolute contingency*” to quote Avital Ronnell, a contemporary of Derrida. (The Unexamined Life) The concept of contingency supposes that meaning, although intangible, is also not entirely without definition. For ‘Contingency’ implies boundaries from which meaning may be oriented. Heidegger explains, “A boundary is not that at which something stops, but as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that, from which something begins its presencing.” (Heidegger, “Basic Writings” 332) The pursuit of meaning demands boundaries, factors must exist which presence meaning.

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1. In the same subject conversation into the listener's mind. A word is not just a signifier, but a signified. It is not just a sound, but a meaning. It is not just a word, but a thought. It is not just a symbol, but a reality. It is not just a sign, but a presence. It is not just a word, but a world.



Early conceptual sketches composed in the margins of books

The philosophical theories of Hans Georg Gadamer further the idea that meaning is indeed contingent, yet presented by boundaries of experience and hermeneutics. *“All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pre-given, what with Hegel we call “substance,” because it underlies all subjective intentions and actions, and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility for understanding any tradition whatsoever in its historical alterity”* (302) Therefore meaning, as a quality of perception, is subjective, but also bound by the fabrication of our horizons. And although individual horizons evolve in real-time, their existence (no matter how transient) presences perception and meaning. It is this belief in the presencing of perception that allows for the investigation of meaning.

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Griffioen, James D, *The Other Half, Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati* (2008)

PHENOMENOLOGY

“The Phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people’s intersect and engage each other like gears.” (Merleau-Ponty xxii)

As I write (speak) and as you read (listen), both of our individual horizons are evolving. They are evolving because we are actively participating in the world. By writing and reading we are interpreting thoughts through the construct of shared words and language; we are communicating. This communication takes place both consciously (as we absorb and process what the other is saying) and sub-consciously (as we reflect and analyze what we are hearing). This sub-conscious processing of communicated information constantly informs our notion of self and presences us in our world. It is through active processes of information transference that our selves (horizons, perceptions and assignation of meaning) are catalytically evolving.

We participate in the shared experience without any knowledge of or proximity to one another. Our horizons are evolving through a similar equation of processing. The below statement is a analogous formula from which we may discuss (ϕ) or the fabrication of a point within an expanded horizon that may potentially inform culture.

$$\delta \times \eta = \phi$$

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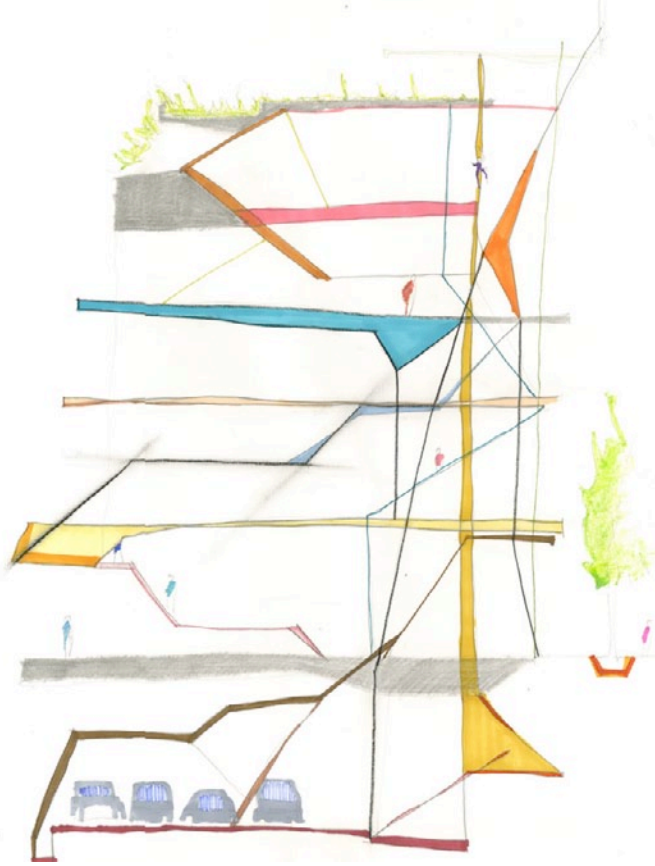
Griffioen, James D, *The Other Half, Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati* (2008)

As active participants we constantly gather and feed off our world; we are the cosmic black holes we read about in science journals. However, unlike our complimentary black hole selves, we do not destroy matter absorbed, but instead internally process it. Each experience, or allegorical ‘piece of matter,’ is absorbed, recorded and filed away into our cogito. Through reflection upon this cogito, we inform our self on how new matter is to be processed: absorbed, recorded and filed. The cogito acts as the variable (δ) within the above equation.

Because each filing of experience has been processed through an intrinsically unique function of self and world, one’s perception becomes exponentially more unique with each passing experience. Therefore, the scope of activity - and time spent participating in said activity - influence the form and breadth of our perception of self, world and meaning. (δ) is both a variable of individual and time.

The journey through an interesting building is an experience. This experience is absorbed by our cogito. Each person who journeys through this building will therefore have this shared experience and interpret the world through this new expansion of horizon. This new experience acts as the constant within the above equation (η) (Ponty) Dalibor Vessely writes in his book, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, “*Memory, seen as the embodiment of human experience, probably offers the best approach to the question of the nature of architecture and its role in the making of the world (culture).*” (102) It is not the product of the formula, but the absorption of (η), the shared memory, which builds culture.

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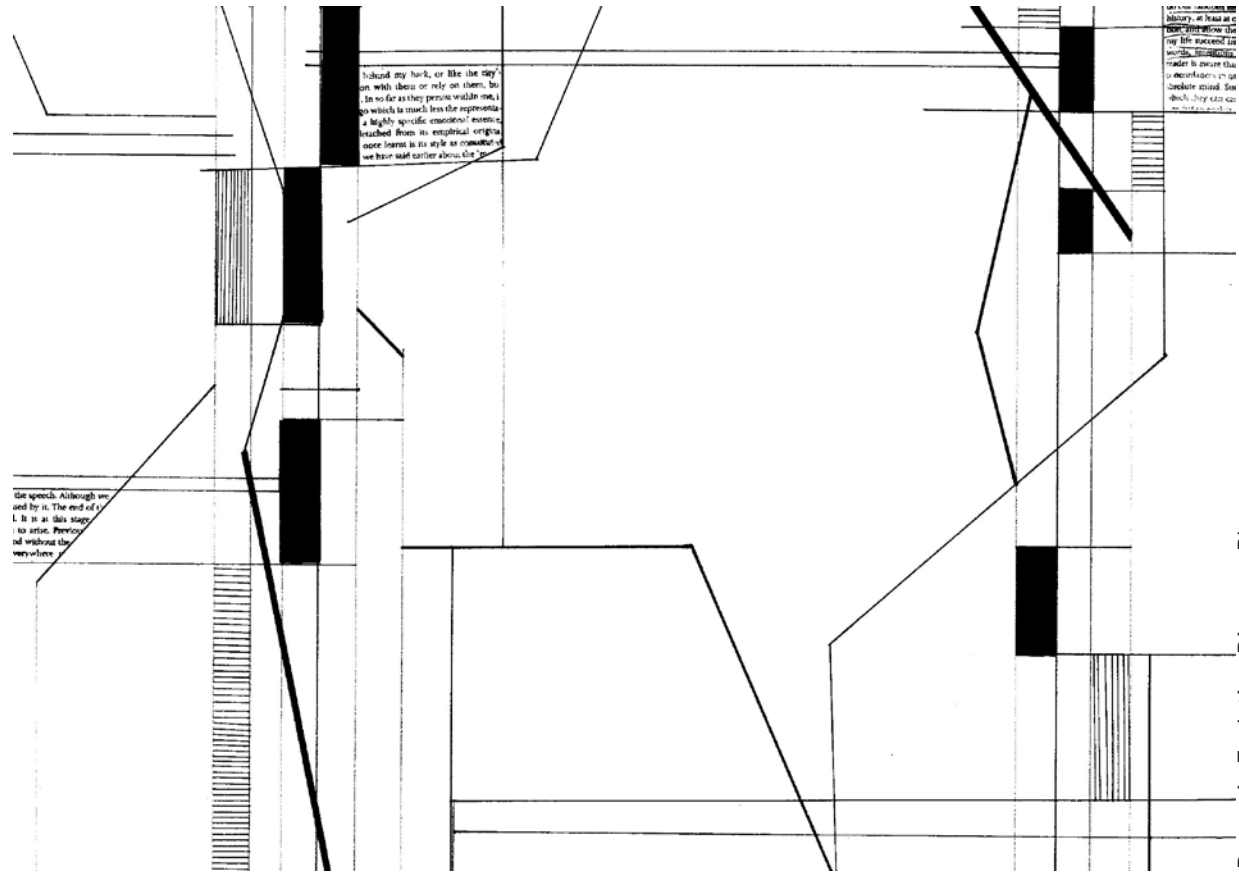


Early sketch to demonstrate dynamics of space

Cogito, our individually maturing catalogue of experiences, informs our decision making, behavior, personality, et al. Because we never cease absorbing new stimuli, our cogito is in a constant state of fluxuation. The constant redefining of our perception of self and assignation of meaning forces our perception of the world to be constructed with relative vagueness.

It is through my understanding of cogito that my thesis began to take shape: Life, as understood through phenomenological theory, is ambiguous. Our world is not definite, but an individual perception per a specific instance within our kinetic state of being. If single instances of perception fail to exist (as they are constantly evolving) and perception defines our world, then no absolute world exists. Instead, the world is an amalgamation of various personal perceptions taken from innumerable points along a dynamic spectrum of individual experience.

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Dynamic Evolution Diagram Plan

AMBIGUITY

“Horizon contributes to the identity of a situation, while at the same time serving as a key to exploring its inexhaustible richness. The most important aspect of horizon is, no doubt, its ability to bring to our awareness what is in our experience but is not yet visible or known. In that sense it is a constant reminder that every situation can be defined, up to a point, but never completely, in positive terms. The relative consistency and incompleteness of all human situations has its source in the wholeness of the latent world, the silently structured continuum in which we live and act spontaneously and which we all share.” (Vessely 303)

I find an ambiguous world to be a romantic idea. In an ambiguous world ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ mingle with casual familiarity; the definitive ceases to exist, but is instead a malleable abstraction of humble possibilities. The disavowment of the concept of a finite world is summarized by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that, “Ambiguity is of the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings” (169). So, I ask: If the construction of our self and our world is ambiguous, then why can’t we allow our buildings to be?

In my thesis I attempt to blur the finite qualities of the built environment: the experience is neither inside nor outside, enclosed nor open, new nor old, mine nor yours.

I believe ambiguity is interesting and poetic. Leaving thoughts unfinished, poetics invite the reader into its construction. The endowed words act as an incomplete kit of parts,

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Poetics of the Alleyway Diagram Plan

coercing the reader to contribute pieces of himself in order to complete the thought. Philosopher Dalibor Vessely explains this relationship between reader and poem: “Poetic analogy transgresses the deductive laws in order to make the mind apprehend the interdependence of two objects of thought situated on different planes, between which the logical functioning of the mind is unlikely to throw a bridge, in fact opposes a priori any bridge that might be thrown” (341). It is the contingent qualities of a poem that demand reader participation.

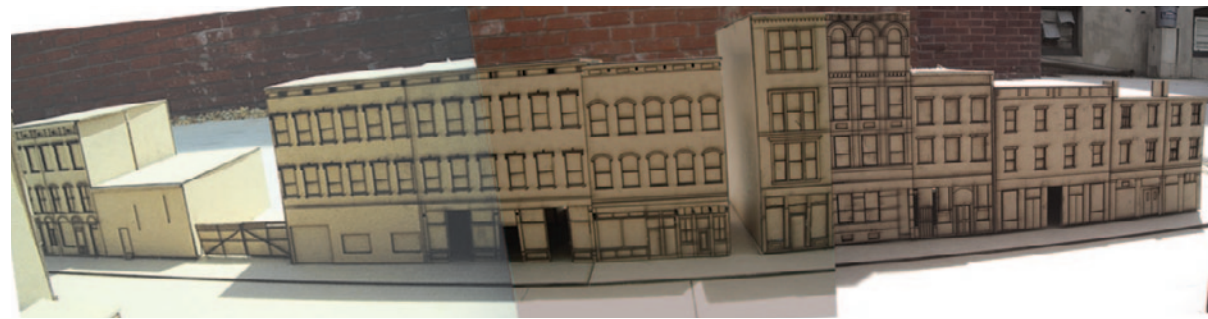
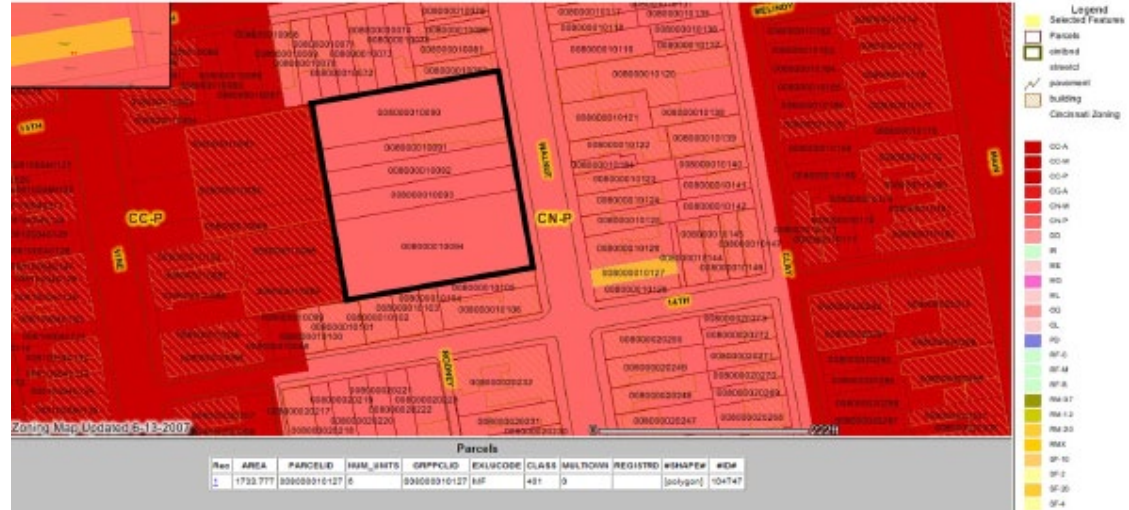
Ink-transfers from books and poems are found throughout my drawings to force the connection between word and image. The information transferred was randomly chosen, because no matter how peculiar the juxtaposition, the interest is uncovered in the participation of inquiry. In the ambiguous connective relationship between the reading of (η) the words and the drawing, against the cogito (δ) meaning is assigned. Through this assignation of meaning (δxη=φ) the individual places his self in the context of the relationship and thus reinterprets his horizon (φ).

The involvement of the cognito in the above formula represents the viewers investment into the act of communicating . Hans Georg Gadamer explains, “In analyzing the work of art we have endeavored to show that self-presentation is to be regarded as the true being of the work of art”(Gadamer 482). The communication of self against a medium (art or architecture) results in the product of a reinterpreted presentation of self. The degree of ambiguousness in the medium leaves proportional space in which a person may inject themselves. Similarly, Heidegger describes the influence of ambiguity over man, “Poetry

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does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man into the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling” (Heidegger “Poetry, Language, Thought” 209). Ambiguity allows otherwise intangible things to become personal and evoke intimacy between the man and the thing. Ambiguity has the potential to spur dialogue within one’s self and consequently within a community.

What does a building that evokes meaning through ambiguity look like? The structure should be dynamic, interesting and stimulating. It should allow variations in light and seasons to penetrate, be fabricated from tactile textures to evoke multiple senses, and host areas in which participants may reflect internally on the poetics of experience. The physics of construction should be obvious, systems visible and materials exposed to encourage multiple layers of learning. The spaces should be full of life, encourage a broadening of horizons as well as the realization of new perspectives. The building should promote growth of self. Christian Norberg Shultz explains, “From psychological literature we know that a general poverty of stimuli may cause passivity and reduced intellectual capacity, and we may also infer that human identity in general depends on growing up in a ‘characteristic’ environment” (191). Inversely, a characteristic environment filled with stimuli may motivate and cause an increased intellectual capacity.



Screen shot of zoning diagram from City of Cincinnati's Website
Neighborhood Site Model - Walnut Street

SITE

“There is nothing in the appearance of a landscape, an object or a body whereby it is predestined to look ‘gay’ or ‘sad’, ‘lively’ or ‘dreary’, ‘elegant’ or ‘coarse’. Once more seeking a definition of what we perceive through the physical and chemical properties of the stimuli which may act upon our sensory apparatus, empiricism excludes from perception the anger or the pain which I nevertheless read in a face, the religion whose essence I seize in some hesitation or reticence, the city whose temper I recognize in the attitude of a policeman or the style of a public building.” (Merleau-Ponty 27)

In deciding upon a site, I sought out a neighborhood that is inhabited by ambiguous identity. Over-the-Rhine is an impoverished neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio. The neighborhood was once a bustling city center for German-Americans, but its community and once elegant buildings have fallen into disrepair. Although significant grass root efforts are underway to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood, the community remains severely handicapped by challenging social conditions.

The site I chose is a partially vacant urban lot on Walnut Street in the center of Over-the-Rhine. Walnut street is scheduled to host a North-South trolley line that aspires to reconnect the troubled neighborhood with the Central Business District to the South. The site I chose, 1400 Walnut St, is zoned as CN-P, or Commercial Neighborhood with Pedestrian access. Surrounded on all sides by aging masonry buildings from 19th or early 20th century, the abandoned site exists as a gaping sore amongst an already pocked streetscape. A single

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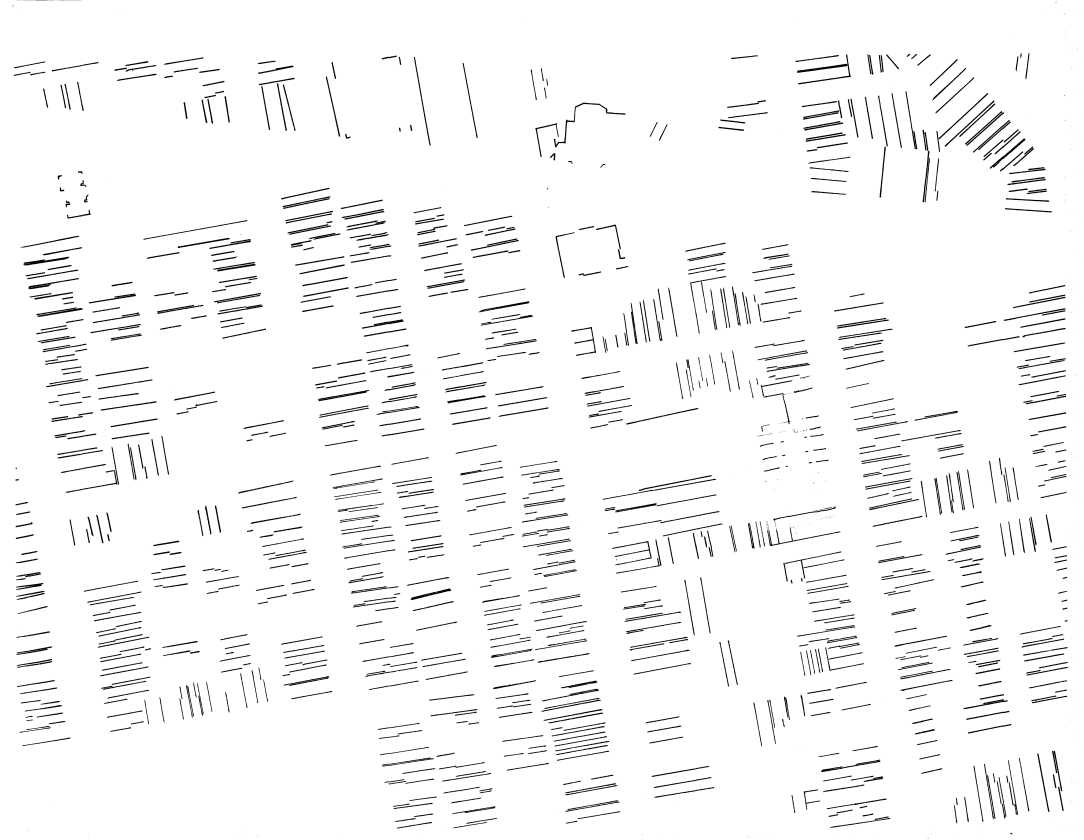
Figure Ground Diagram

three story residential building exists in the middle of the site, stained by the rust of the thick metal mesh permanently affixed across every ground floor opening. A portion of the site is paved over for parking, however, approximately seventy percent of the five lots are heavily weeded over and abandoned back to nature.

The neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine is undoubtedly romantic despite decades of decay. The buildings own a depth and uniqueness of character that draws the eye and weighs on the heart. Each facade each evokes a different, yet similarly imagined story of drama, heroism and inevitable tragedy. Each building demands a level of respect; not the kind of obligatory respect given a cornel, but a knowing, intimate respect found between a child and his grandfather. Christian Norberg-Shultz explains, *“Romantic architecture is characterized by a strong ‘atmosphere’, and may appear ‘phantastic’ and ‘mysterious’, but also ‘intimate’ and ‘idyllic’. In general it is distinguished by a live and dynamic character, and aims at ‘expression’. Its forms seem to be a result of ‘growth’ rather than organization and resemble the forms of living nature”*(69). The historic buildings in Over-the-Rhine are romantic because they have lasted centuries by adapting and evolving with the nature of the city.

Early in my research, I performed an in-depth site analysis of existing zoning conditions, special code requirements, traffic patterns, site easements , etc. The facts acquired through site analysis, although relevant, provided little insight into the layered existence of the surrounding neighborhood. In an effort to dissect historical sentiment and more clearly present the context of my site, I began a series of diagrams. Each diagram teased

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Masonry Bearing Wall Diagram

out specific information about the built form of the neighborhood: how it was organized, designed, built, and evolved. Each drawing identifies a specific curiosity and reveals avenues of solution for my design. The final composition of six diagrams identifies hierarchical rhythms, patterns and traditions alive in the buildings and through their relationship to the city fabric.

The neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine has a deeply seeded history in Cincinnati. This history is recorded in the architecture and construction of its buildings. Almost solely composed of masonry buildings, the rhythm of the streetscape of Over-the-Rhine is palpably rooted in 19th century building techniques. Lot lines are typically Twenty-Five feet wide by Two-Hundred feet long, ideal for a single home with two or three load bearing masonry walls and a small yard. (Masonry Bearing Wall Diagram) Height limits are restrictive and site density encouraged. Because storefronts are required to preserve a zero distance setback, the transition between buildings is noticeably rhythmic; abrupt in change, but subtle in difference. Limited availability of goods and simple construction methods for the time mean each original building adheres to a standardization of form and aesthetic - although many of the smaller historical ornamentations are dynamic, they fall within a rubric of cultural normalcy i.e. patterns to cornices, stained glass and tile work. (First Floor Fenestration Diagram)

Today, the uniqueness and interest in the buildings of Over-the-Rhine is not realized by a ornament, but by the modernizations and necessary functional adaptations made to each historical building. Additions, sheds, roofs, fences, fire escapes, grates, etc. are affixed to



First Floor Fenestration Diagram

each building, redefining the city-scape and, in turn, the negative spaces between buildings. No longer is the neighborhood grid rigid and defined by lot lines, but instead appears to have organically evolved with function and need. (Evolutionary Dynamics Diagram)

Ambiguity is not only found within the identity of the neighborhood (lower income African Americans inhabiting buildings designed and constructed by/ for a German-Americans), but also within the physical organization of the urban terrain. The alleyways that dance through the city blocks create a secondary organizing system that complements the existing buildings and urban plan. These alleyways act as the 'in-between', bounded by generations of use, adaptation and history.

The alley system of Over-the-Rhine is best demonstrated within the Figure Ground Diagram of the neighborhood. Although the blank, orthogonally oriented avenues and streets from original zoning plans are apparent, so too is the peculiar shapes of buildings within each city block. The alleys weave through full blocks of blackened figures: small and vulnerable tributaries connecting larger, more evolved systems of circulation. Alleys are interpretive; malleable yet contingent. Alleys are poetic. (Poetic Alleyway Diagrams - Section and Plan)

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Pictures of site

OVER-THE-RHINE HISTORY

"The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between of distanced historic tradition vs. familiarity in present day."(Gadamer 295)

"We are directed in time and our relation to the future is different from our relation to the past. All our questions are conditioned by this asymmetry, and all our answers to these questions are equally conditioned by it." (Weiner 33)

The neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine was originally built by German settlers in the early 1800s. Working in the pork packing plants and lumber mills along the Ohio River, these early settlers would cross over the Ohio and Erie canals into their highly nationalistic neighborhood. For the better part of the 19th century buildings were constructed from cheap lumber and masonry. Today, lonely load bearing masonry walls remain on some lots, relics of a previous life (DuSablon).

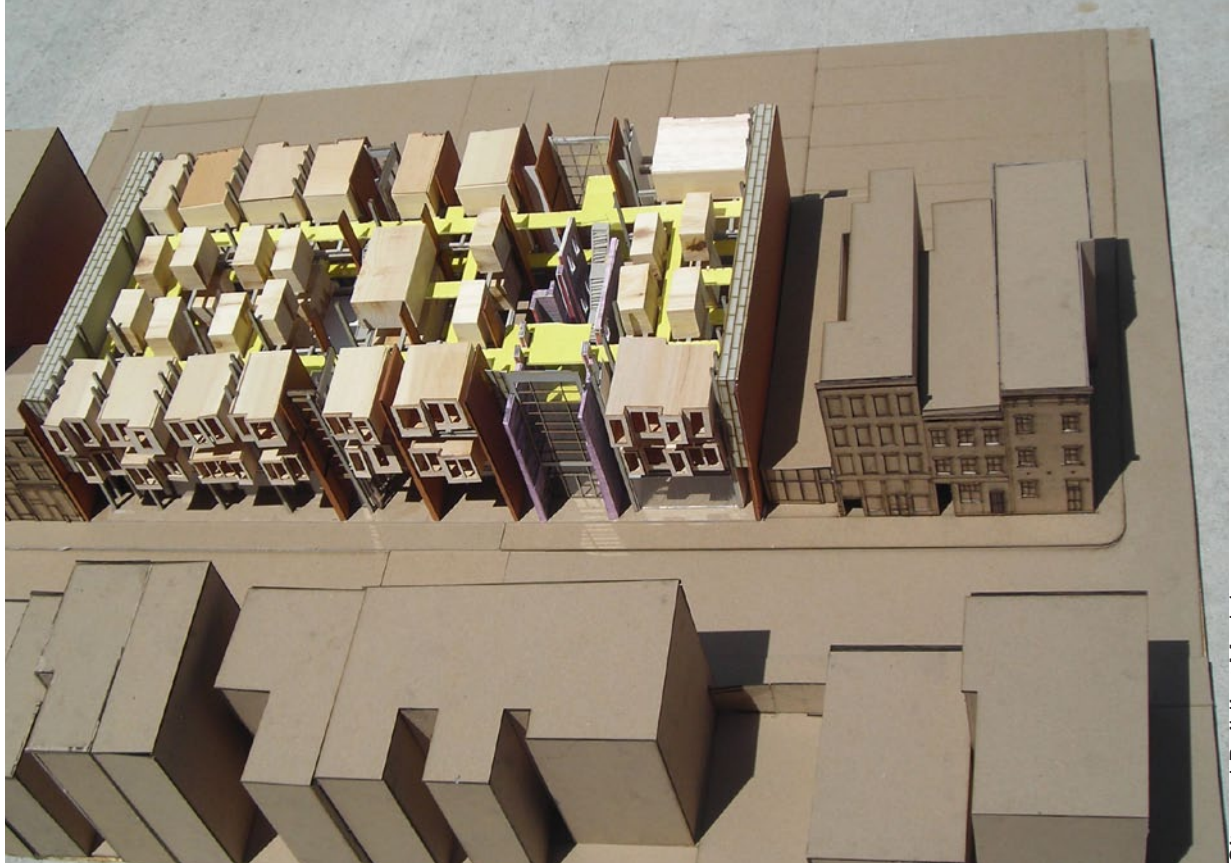
In 1851 Over-the-Rhine was home to upwards of 20,000, of which two-thirds listed Germany as their place of birth (Shapiro 251). The thriving German-American neighborhood suffered three economic and societal blows in the early 1900s: the collapse of the river trade as railroads expanded westward via Chicago, the passage of prohibition (closing the neighborhoods 30 active breweries) and mounting anti-German sentiment surrounding World War I forced mass assimilation into American culture (Shapiro 155). By 1929 both



Picture of existing building on site



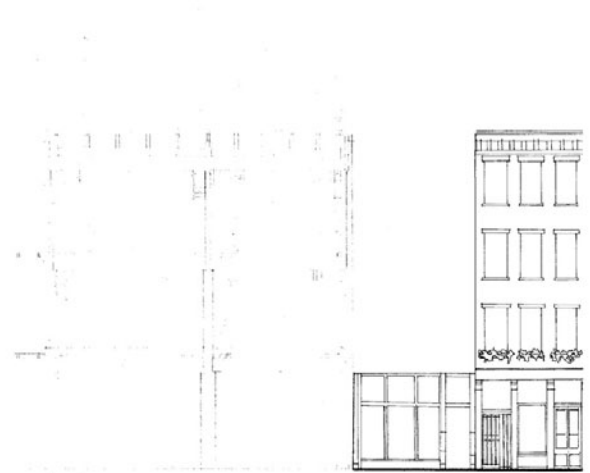
Model showing existing building walls



Site and Building Model

de-facto lines of segregative communities (Germans, Italians, Jewish, etc.). Each ward received one vote on city council (Shapiro 213). In 1960, when the city council decided to build a new North-South highway (I-75), the council voted almost unanimously to build it along the West End; one of three largely African American wards. Displaced by the highway's construction and desperate for housing, many West Enders moved east into Over the Rhine. For the next thirty years, the neighborhood fell even further into complete despair. Street gangs ran rampant (the two biggest gangs were named The Hornets and The Blue Devils) and stirred racist tensions. Often neighborhood confrontations would erupt into violent crime with juvenile crime rising by 50% in 15 years. The decade long struggle between the impoverished Appalachian community and the displaced West Enders made Over-the-Rhine home to the fastest growing crime rate in the city (Shapiro 252-254). As conditions worsened so did the situation of its inhabitants. 1990 census figures show the average household income in the neighborhood was only \$4,999. The financial poverty of the neighborhood showed itself as an outlier for crime with murder rates and calls for emergency services reaching an all time high. (2001 US Census).

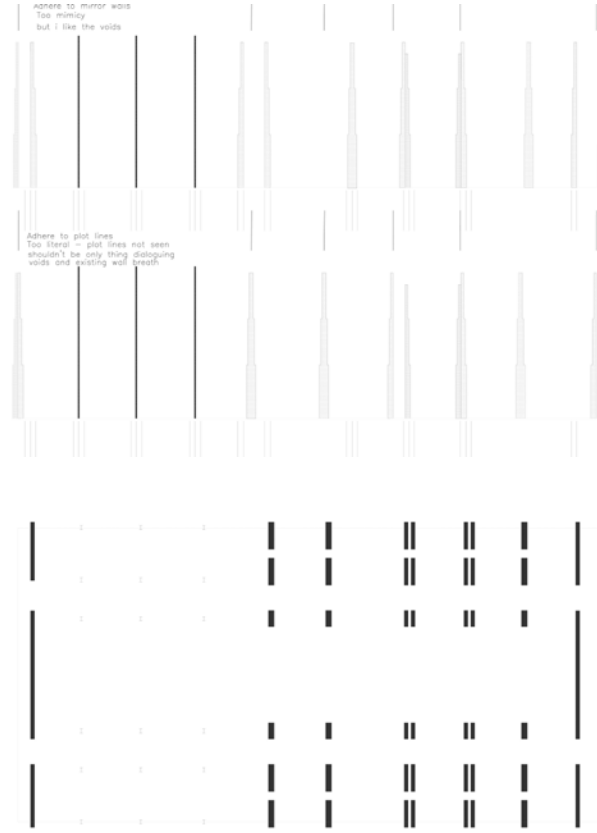
Starting in the 1970s, Historic Preservationists petitioned the city and national authorities to intervene with the deterioration of the historic community. In 1973, 7.6 million dollars was invested into the neighborhood to open Community Action Centers to make social services more easily available. However Over-the-Rhine community council members, still angered by their I-75 displacement, vociferously objected to the city's intervention. Tensions rose as developers and historic preservationists gradually began to buy up property in the neighborhood. Talk of gentrification fueled anger within the already distressed community)



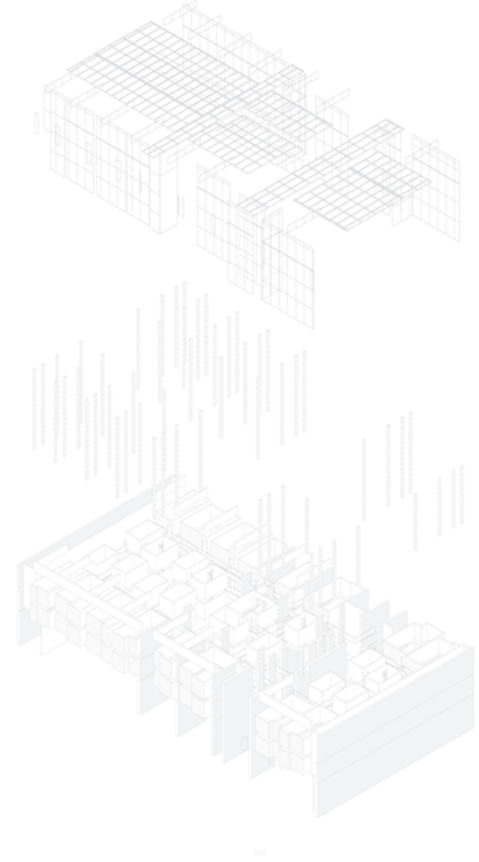
Survey of Walnut street facades

(Ridgeway). Racial and social tensions erupted on April 7th, 2001 when a white police officer shot an unarmed African-American and a two day riot left neighborhood businesses and streets destroyed. Following the riots, another mass exodus of population left many of the Over-the-Rhine buildings vacant. In 2006, the US census reported Cincinnati to have the third highest number of citizens living in poverty. The plague of poverty forced many into homelessness, especially children.

Today, more gradual and locally led initiatives are being discussed within the Over-the-Rhine Community. Although it is still a hot bed for crime and suffers from significant societal challenges, recent improvements to transportation, city infrastructure, support for local businesses and grass-roots community building engagement efforts show promising signs for a more progressive and integrative urban neighborhood. Although overall crime rates have declined in Over-the-Rhine by 37 percent since 2005, the area still holds the title of most arrests among Cincinnati neighborhoods (6,447 arrests in 2009) (Ridgeway 15).



Structural Study in Elevation and Plan



Layered Structure Exploded Axonometric

CONTINGENT CONSTRUCTIVISM

“Perfection is secretly monstrous. Tortured from within, the seemingly perfect form confesses its crime, its imperfection.” (Johnson and Wigley 17)

“In the natural world there exists variance / mutation in biology. Buildings that reflect this eclecticism of natural production, that celebrate irregularity, are therefore more natural.” (Ingrahan 12)

Although the world is ambiguous, it is bounded in our minds by the contingency of our horizons. And while a dynamic building should be stimulating, to genuinely mimic the formula from which we absorb stimuli, it too should be bound by some degree of contingency. I found the boundaries of contingency for the building in the hermeneutics of the site. Through contextualization of both the historical past and present livelihoods of the site, the building became more deeply rooted in the dialogue of the neighborhood. This dialogue was vital to the building’s program: charter school and community center. As such, the building must evoke trust and welcome community interaction and participation. In order to be worthy of hosting such a lofty social program, the building would need to modestly participate in the existing dialogue of the neighborhood while motivating a more forward thinking progress.

Through the series of diagrams I mapped of Over-the-Rhine, I was able to better understand the historical precedents and present realities that shaped the neighborhood and its



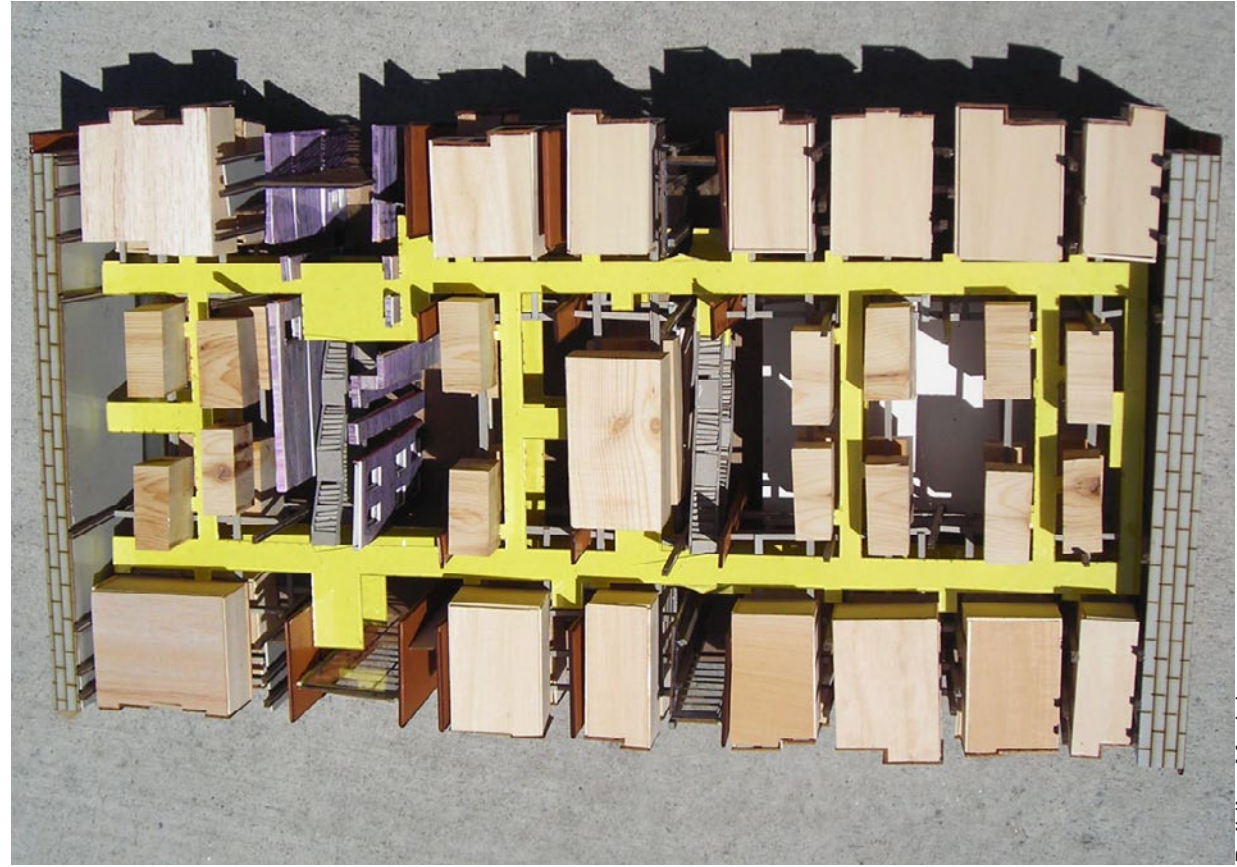
Mirrored Walnut Street Drawing
Facade and Plan Study

subsequent additives. The rigidity of the historical 25 feet wide plot lines outlines a palpable rhythm felt as one walks along the city street. The plot lines, although originally constructed on paper maps, were physically defined on each site by bearing walls. These bearing walls both structure and presence the neighborhood.

The structural assembly of buildings in Over-the-Rhine is an indelibly important quality to the character of the neighborhood. Because of how each individual building was constructed, the ground underneath the entire neighborhood is scored by a series pattern of lateral penetrations. This unique series of lines define the spaces in which life develops. The masonry walls are the scaffolding of the community that serve to 'orient and identify' man to place. They are part of the neighborhood's essence or Genius Loci: "*The Genius Loci becomes manifest as location, spatial configuration and characterizing articulation. All these aspects to some extent have to be preserved as they are the objects of man's orientation and identification. What has to be respected are obviously their primary structural properties, such as the type of settlement and way of building ("massive", Skeletal", etc.) as well as characteristic motifs*" (Norberg-Shulz 180). The skeletal structure of the neighborhood is composed of heavy, load bearing, masonry walls. This style of building, repetition in ground penetration, strength of construction and visible transfer of loads are a few of the quantitative elements that inform the qualitative essence of buildings in Over-the-Rhine.

The importance of structure on the urban fabric of the neighborhood drew my study of architecture toward the style of Constructivism, with a particular interest with Russian

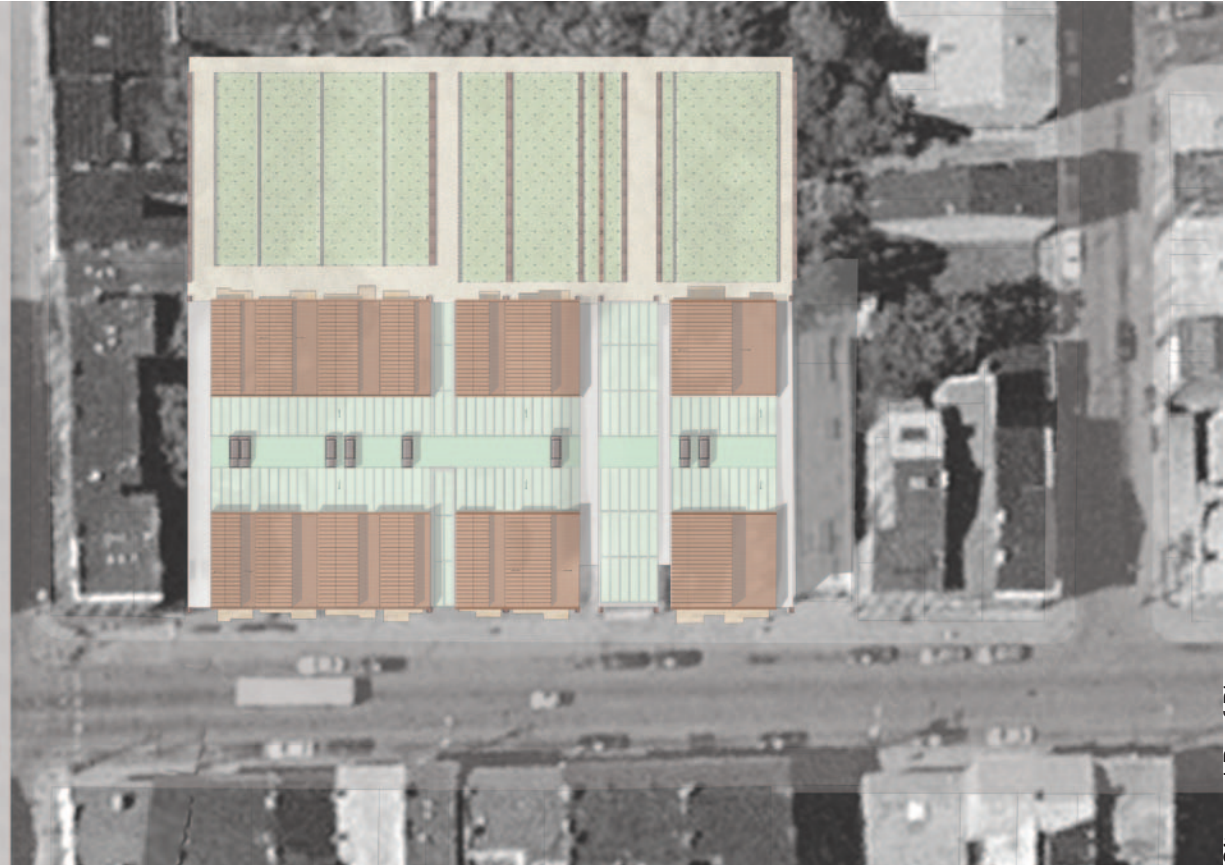
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Building Model

Constructivists. In Western culture Constructivism has been widely misinterpreted as having a purely aesthetic motivation. Instead, many art historians argue Constructivism is about the empowerment of materials as participants in social and political transformation (this argument proves especially true of the Russian Constructivist movement of 1914). It is the materials, forms and relationships (especially between pieces and their whole) of construction that drew Russian Revolutionaries toward the style as a way to propagate their broader social agenda. Author Mark Wigley explains, “[Russian Constructivists] saw architecture as a high art but one sufficiently grounded in function that it could be used to advance revolutionary goals; since architecture is so intertwined with society, the social revolution required an architectural revolution” (Johnson and Wigley 12). If Russian Constructivists saw architecture as a medium through which they may propagate a social revolution, then perhaps architecture could also ignite a social revolution.

Many buildings considered to be Constructivist draw interest; they empower structure, demonstrate the capacity of materials, elaborate connections and expose normally hidden systems. The style makes visible the physics of the building and users cognizant of the surrounding complexities (Lodder). The revealing of complexities in a building plays upon the aforementioned intention to create a dynamic and stimulating environment. Lessons should not be reserved for a classroom but be present within ones environment. Craftsmanship of all fields (Welding, carpentry, electrical, plumbing, etc.) should be exposed and promote inquiry. A school should not just house learning, but also host learning.



Site and Roof Plan

Additionally, the revolutionary ideology associated with Constructivism felt particularly relevant to the social unrest which has come to define present day Over-the-Rhine. (Cooke) Although the hermeneutics of the site established the expectations of contingency on my design, because of the new availability of materials, improved construction techniques and context of time the in-filled building must represent the present while also respecting the past. A new building can never be old; it must own its newness and motivate a new vision of self. Therefore, although many of the 'Orienting and Identifying' characteristics of the neighborhood were maintained, hermeneutical contingency allowed for modern solutions (Norberg-Shulz 19). At the very best the proposed solutions, modern and new, may incite a revolution of pride within the individuals of the community and perhaps encourage a sense of ownership over the buildings. With the fervor of Constructivism, I sought to spur a revolution in perception in Over-the-Rhine.

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Elevation and Mirror Street Facade Study

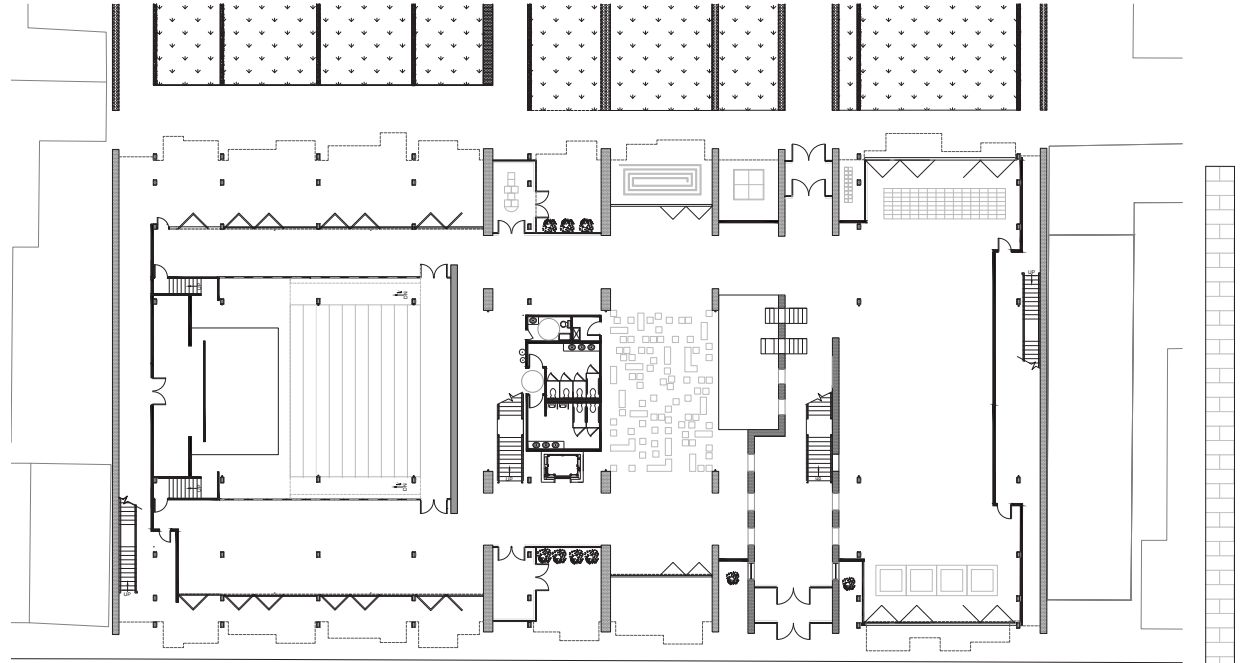
BUILDING

“The real movement of thought now begins; the mind hurries from one thing to the other, turns this way and that, considering this and that, and seeks the perfect expression of its thoughts through inquiry (inquisition) and thoughtfulness (cogitatio).” (Gadamer 424)

Structure led my design. Through a series of studies, I worked to resolve the two heavy handed structural influences present on my site: The nineteenth century plot lines (that organize both my site and the entire neighborhood) and the rhythm of facades on the mirror side of Walnut Street. I use the word rhythm in reference to Christian Norberg-Shulz’s use of it in *Genius Loci: Towards a phenomenology of Architecture*. For rhythm, he explains, is a possession of movement and consequently a pathway through which the quality of time is folded into the essence of place. Therefore the rhythm of streetscape in *Over-the-Rhine* is not just a pattern of construction, but is an element which informs the phenomenology of the neighborhood. (56)

Although the two rhythms of grid are from the same city plan, in the spirit of opposing siblings their rivalry is equaled by their alikeness. After teasing out how each brick was laid in the adjacent buildings (*Mirrored Walnut Street Drawing*), I began to perceive the rivalry of the two city grids not as a problem, but as an opportunity for dialogue. I decided to invite the grid of heavy, load bearing, brick party walls from across the street to continue onto my site. Additionally, the single remaining building on my site should, out of respect to the community and its history, also maintain its presence. The structural brick walls on which

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Ground Floor Plan
Over The Rhine Charter School

Ground Floor Plan

the timber beams lay for over a century would remain as a testament to the community. Finally, the historic plot lines would also be present on the site as orienting elements in order to maintain the important rhythm of the neighborhood. However, because the plot lines lacked any historical visual reference (other than their place on a map in the zoning office), their role was decidedly more improvised and modern. Incorporating the plot lines was about maintaining the rhythm that was essential to the neighborhood Genius Loci. This second more modern grid system would be fabricated of steel tubes filled with poured-in-place concrete: an representation of the masonry past informed by modern technology.

In addition to the rhythm that divided the ground plane, another rhythm is present in the neighborhood in the vertical articulations of floor planes. Because a majority of the buildings in Over-the-Rhine were originally mixed use (retail on the first floor and residential units on upper floors), the first floor has a floor to ceiling height five to ten feet taller than other floors. Typically, the first floor is twelve to twenty feet tall with large display windows (although most are currently boarded up by plywood sheets) and modest ornamental articulation of facade. The first floor is (or was once) dedicated to street traffic. Today, the city code requires 60-80% of the first floor facade to be transparent depending on building width (although, this code appears to go un-obliged). I decided to abide by the code and return the first floor of my building to the public pedestrian. Because I was maintaining the stepped masonry walls of the building that exists on my site, I decided to break the public facade from this height of approximately fourteen feet above grade.



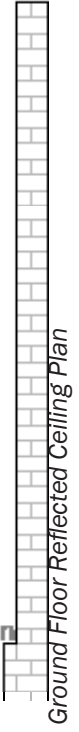
While the almost three feet wide brick bearing walls are the dominant structural element vertically, the historical facades of adjacent buildings have horizontal cornice lines which demarcate floor changes. I too wished to incorporate a modern day cornice into my facade to continue this orienting rhythm. A decorative cornice, however, conflicted with my Constructivist intentions. Because the spacing of my grid required a 45' free horizontal span, I decided to utilize modern steel members to mimic the cornice line. Instead of being purely decorative, the modern cornice (a two foot tall steel I beam) would act as both a lintel from which a ground floor storefront would hang as well as a beam to support first floor spaces. Mounting the bottom of the I beam at twenty feet above the ground plane allowed for the industrial nature of the steel to be exposed and free of fireproofing. The two lines (one beginning at fourteen feet and the other at twenty feet) of modern 'ornamentation' broke up the facade and mimicked the secondary lines of horizontality within the neighborhood street facade.

The layering of two city grids established irregular dimensioning and set a framework for interesting spaces in-between. I welcomed these in-between spaces into the design because I did not want to just design a structure, but design a space that would open a dialogue from which new life could flourish. It was in these spaces I wished for life to occur for as Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains, "To experience a structure is not to receive it into oneself passively: it is to live it, to take it up, assume it and discover its immanent significance." (301) I imagined, the gap between new and old and between public interior and public exterior would be bridged by communication. For it is in the dialogue of the in-between that the highest potential for investment of self is achieved.

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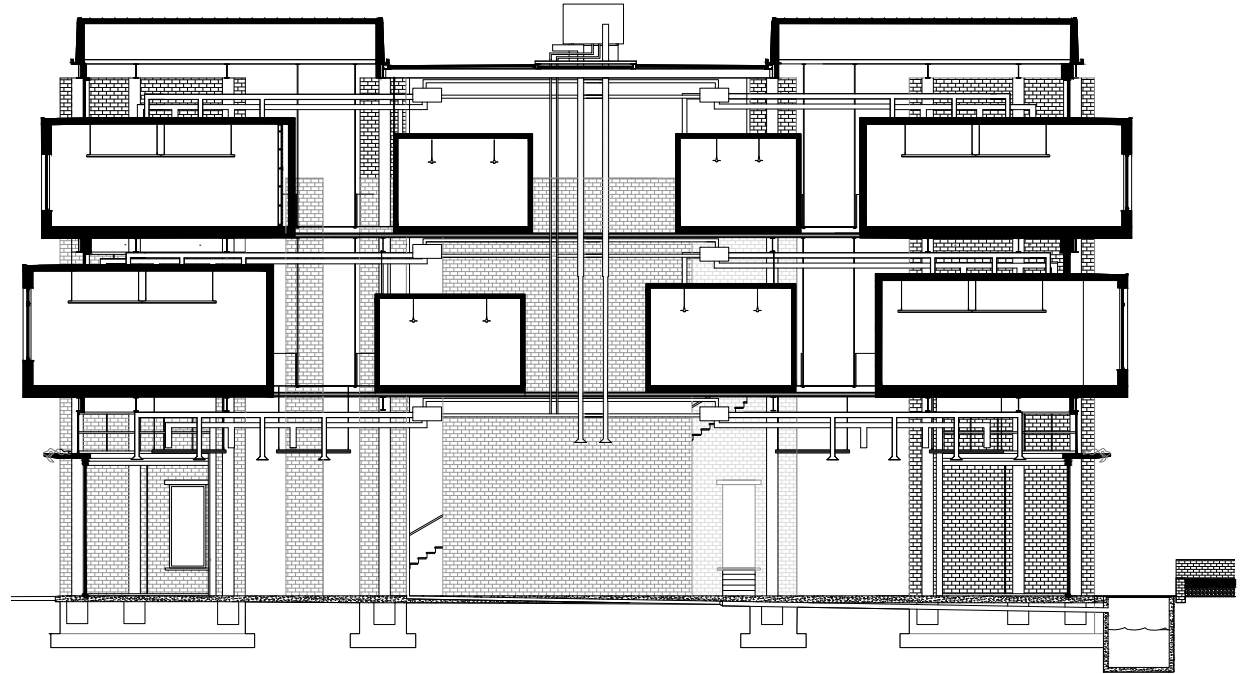
Second Floor Plan
Charter School



The first structural study composition informed the facade, the second informed the plan. Because my building would span across five individual plots, there would need to be breaks within the structural walls for circulation and visual connectivity. The eight foot tall cuts in the existing building facade became reasonable thresholds for circulation and were continued across my entire building's floor plan. The floor plan also began to be organized in a stratification of states of public interaction. I wished for the ground floor storefront to be open to the public, and therefore designed it as a system of doors that could fold open or closed per weather, program, hour, etc. This opening of floor plate invites the public into a interior and creates a sheltered public 'room' - or elongated threshold. Through the organization of structural piers in plan, various layers of intimacy were designed into the ground floor between street, sidewalk, public inside, private inside and private outside. The channel glass theater walls differentiate public inside from private inside on the south side of the building, while polished concrete floor patterns suggest the change on the north side.

Maintaining the rhythm of the street scape was an important attribute to the character of my building. The contextualization of the building to both site and community conditions sets a tone of revere and humility. In addition to the orienting elements of proportion and cadence, I sought to maintain and highlight the existing building on my site. The three story building, painted a light lilac, quietly stands alone amongst the tall weeds and trash that inhabit its surrounding lots. As the building's records fail to show it was owned by a prestigious family or hosted a famous jazz musician, the structure is ineligible for local historic preservation protection. I argue, however, that the importance of each building lay

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Over The Rhine Charter School Section II

Section II

not in the fickle allocation of societal prestige, but in its ability to transcend generations of use and tell a story of historical value. Therefore I chose to celebrate the existing stepped brick bearing walls by having them frame the main entry and main staircase of my school. By stepping the new floor slab away from their connection to the ground, a subtle appreciation of the wall and its solemnity of the past is conveyed. Additionally, as students ascend the main staircase they journey across the wall and may feel the romantic tactile quality of century old brick. It is my intention that by highlighting the beauty of the old and partially decayed building wall that a new appreciation for the historical buildings of the neighborhood may grow.

Just as a neighborhood has an essence of being, so do materials. A century old brick wall has a depth of character that is felt through the weathered nicks in its face, wearing of its paint and hand troweled mortar joints. Similarly, there is an essence to all other materials that a designer must utilize in the telling of their story. For my building I assigned a hierarchy of materials to different areas in my building and evoke individual senses of place. The personification of several areas creates a series of smaller spaces and increases the dynamicism of experience. To better orient visitors, the hierarchy was chosen from a set palette of materials found in the neighborhood. The materials chosen were: masonry, wood, steel and glass. Masonry was primary in the overall structure as well as in the main areas of circulation. Traveling up and down the main staircases, visitors were moved along the length of a solid load bearing masonry wall. Classrooms and offices on the second and third floor were composed entirely of wood in order to evoke warmth, comfort and seclusion. Steel tube columns and fire stairs sheathed in metal paneling are a recognition



Over The Rhine Charter School
Section I
Section I

of the injection of modern machined solutions into a neighborhood. Metals surround and protect areas of utility. The glass doors, theater walls and laminated upper floor walkways are also injections of modern fabrications on an old material. As glass storefronts were used on the retail level in the 19th century to draw in shoppers, glass is again used to draw attention toward objects of interest (interior programs, people walking, the sky, etc.). The diverse use of modern glass (absence of joints, sophisticated framing systems and colored laminates) injects a recognition of newness within the context of the old neighborhood material palette.

The second and third floors are assembled through two structural methods: The exterior classrooms rest on the large two foot tall exterior lintels and interior girders while the interior offices and service spaces are strung from tie rods that connect to beams overhead. Although classrooms, offices and service spaces maintain the same floor elevation, the mechanicals of their structural forces are opposite creating a more grounded perimeter and more elevated core spaces. The laminated glass walkways are also hung from structure above and are held off from other forms (classrooms, offices, service spaces) by a six inch gap. This gap delineates spaces and holds each room independent from the next. The 'floating' walkway also enables a degree of transparency between the floor planes.

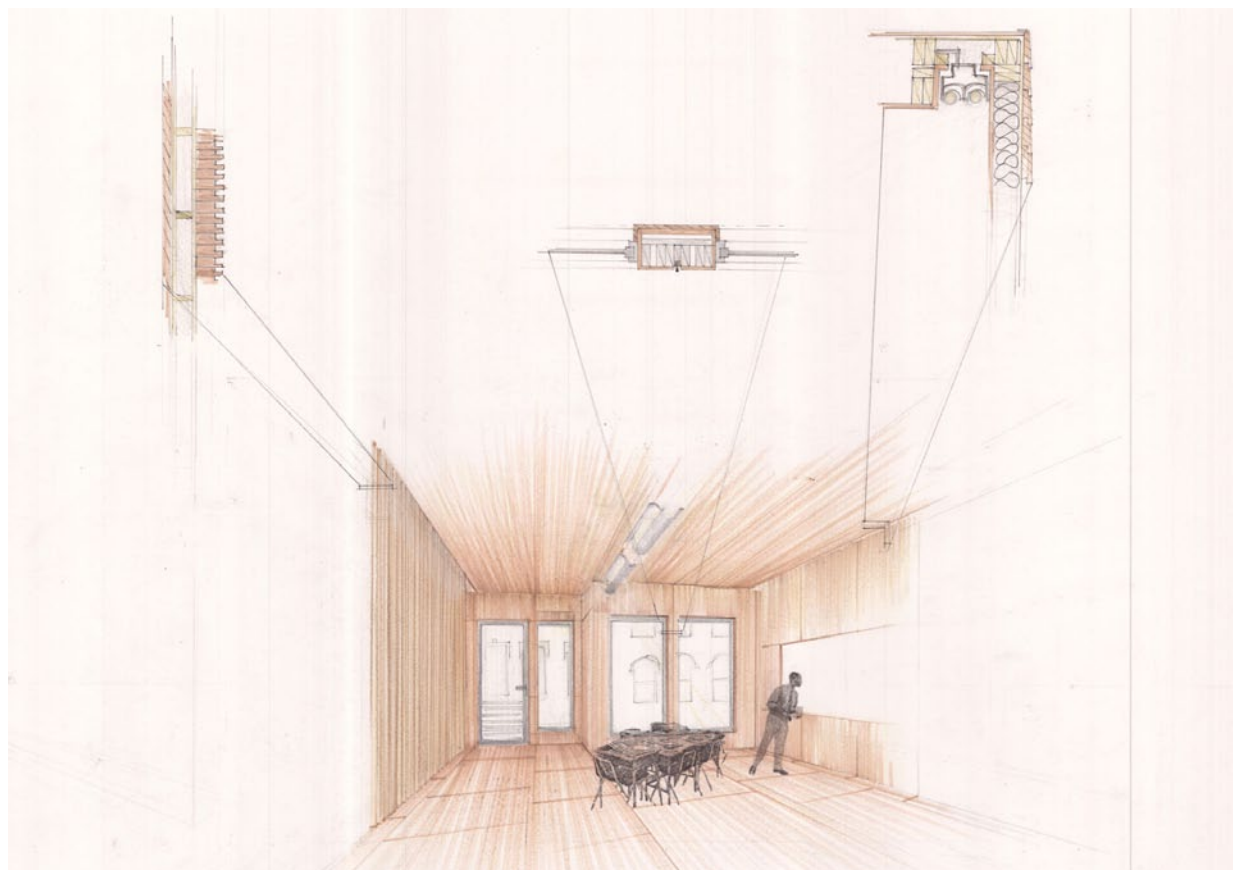
Each classroom is entirely sheathed in wood. Standard plywood boards were organized to minimize cut pieces and maximize wholeness. The plywood board is oriented toward the exterior window wall and spaced with an inch thick cork strip for pinning up of material. Two ply wood panels are removed at the 'front' of the classroom for a recessed white

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Classroom rendering with details

board. Soffits are used around the perimeter for ambient light, while pendants are hung from the center of the room for direct light. In each room a thick wall of rabbited solid wood 1 x 3s stand vertically and invite visitors into the room. This highly tactile and intricate wall creates interest and acts as a tactile sculpture of depth in each room. Each classroom is its own building, entirely weatherproofed and insulated. To create a play in-depth of facade, each classroom steps away from and toward the building. This reveal shelters and shadows portion of the sidewalk, further experimenting with the notion of inside and outside.

Additionally, each classroom, office and service space is fed from a unique system of exposed HVAC ductwork, plumbing and electrical/IT conduit. The intricacies of the systems are exposed for visitors to observe. This design aesthetic demonstrates both the complex reality of building as well as the notion that the school should both house and host opportunities for learning. The second and third floor laminated glass walkways are absent at routine intervals to allow for the various services to feed vertically. Below each walkway, tributaries of ductwork, piping and conduit jet out from the wall-less shaft to feed each room from above.

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Interior Ground Floor computer rendering

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...thoughts on the speech
...th. 108.
...Finally induced by the w
...re-established term. The
...the lateral faces as "square" thro
...which I imagine
...the liquidation of real time. Am
...in reabsorbing the former
...power of the
...half over the form. Pres
...of it. I begin to understand
...t may have managed to be—wi
...things envelop each other
...they are behind me, like
...what a "ground" of the
...without having any "verbal
...either
...tion of another's box.
...to the unreflective
...What remains to me of the
...formation and sound.
...my assertion
...it is no clear
...to arise. Previously th
...the d
...received through use in
...few words—self-referential
...handed as a language
...it is impossible to distinguish
...evidence. The belief is
...The belief is
...The belief is
...every language conversa
...into the listener's mind. A
...of rely on them, be
...as this the presen
...197



West room at Penultimate

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ARTWORK

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