

IF YOU BUILD IT:
The Common Ground of Architect and Writer

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If You Build It: The Common Ground of Architect and Writer

“We are sometimes eager to celebrate the influence of our surroundings,” Alain de Botton writes in *The Architecture of Happiness* (13). And while it’s true that architecture is commonly associated with beauty, with the grand impressions a structure makes, there is another element to those structures that is often overlooked, because it is easier to turn away than to face the disenchantment. “It is to prevent the possibility of permanent anguish that we can be led to shut our eyes to most of what is around us, for we are never far from damp stains and cracked ceilings, shattered cities and rusting dockyards” (de Botton 13).

The structures we encounter every day have more of an impact on us than we realize. At least I know that was once true for me, until, of course, I began to notice the insistence of some structures to be recognized, to have their history and relevance, right down to their stains and rusting places, recorded in my own essays. Houses. A tent. A shed. Stadiums. A sukkah. A grain elevator. And it wasn’t just their history and relevance that asked to be recorded, but their transience, too. What is it about constructed spaces that so draws me? And why am I drawn to so many different forms of architecture—even simply to the word itself, and its many meanings?

The prefix *archi-*, from the ancient Greek language, means “chief.” It denotes primary importance or authority. The root of the word, *tekon*, in Greek means a worker in wood, a carpenter, joiner, or builder. According to www.searchgodsword.org, that definition expands first to include any craftsman or workman then extends further to incorporate the poet and the maker of songs; a planner, contriver, plotter; an author.

For centuries, writers have been fascinated with architecture, starting with their own homes, which are often places of refuge—and peril—as well as the frequent subject and/or setting of their work.

Edgar Allan Poe had a long, idiosyncratic history with architecture, one that highlighted the incongruous relationship between the structures the writer inhabited and the structures inhabiting his stories. Despite the elaborate descriptions of Gothic architecture set as the background for almost all of his stories, when Poe described an ideal house in which to live it was a small house, and a comparatively simple one (Kane 160).

Gothic architecture, or rather the romantic conception of it, was particularly suited to the production of many of the effects for which Poe worked; and its influence predominates in the settings for his tales, especially those intended to produce sensations of melancholy or horror. (Kane 149)

The significance of Gothic architecture for Poe was not found in its original splendor but in the emotions produced by surveying its ruins. In dilapidation and decay, he found the best material for producing emotional effects: “ivy on crumbling walls, half-fallen towers and battlements, an air of decay among evidences of former grandeur, antiquity, mystery, and remoteness from common experience” (149).

Most often, he focused on the age of the buildings he described. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Poe wrote: “The dreadful silence of that old house.” In *The Fall of the House of Usher*: “Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity” (qtd. in Kane). The mention of age combined with the dilapidation produced the gloomy effect he

desired. This was far more important to him than rendering descriptions that were either architecturally correct or strikingly vivid. He stressed the details of the buildings that most suited his purposes for a particular story. “On the whole, the architecture which Poe presents is extremely vague. Its purpose is after all only that of a backdrop” (Kane 158).

In many ways, Poe broke from the conventional relationship writers had to architecture. He controlled the way in which he used it, rather than being controlled by any emotional connection to it. High towers or underground vaults produced the effect of uncertainty and fear and seclusion. Irregular shaped rooms added to the peculiar melancholy.

The use of windows provided a further medium for the achievement of definite effects in Poe’s stage-setting, somewhat analogous, indeed, to stage lighting. Their purpose, in his tales of imagination, was not to let in light, but rather to subdue and temper it to fit the mood of his story. (Kane 155)

It is significant, however, that despite his penchant for gloom and horror in his poems and tales, when he described his ideal house there were striking contrasts to be noted in his personal tastes. Colors were light; rooms were tranquil and simple in their design. “At times he may have sought escape from the wildness of his own imagination into some refuge of peace and quiet” (160).

Emily Dickinson, more than any other writer, has been intimately associated with the quiet life she led in her house, the Homestead in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she was born. According to the Emily Dickinson Museum website, her life inside that brick house was infused with a creative energy that produced almost 1,800 poems and a profusion of

vibrant letters (. Dickinson fashioned a radical interior life within the walls of that house. Jean Mudge, the first curator of the Dickinson Homestead, and the first scholar to link Dickinson's poetry to the domestic interior, emphasizes the poet's "self-incarceration at home" (Fuss 3). Many critics hypothesized that the poet "immured herself within the magic prison that paradoxically liberated her art" (3).

But for Dickinson, interiority was not only a matter of closed physical space. It was a complex conceptual problem continually revisited in her writing, her poetry relying heavily on spatial metaphors to convey its recurrent themes of joy, despair, death, time, immortality, and so on (Fuss 4).

Long before Gaston Bachelard began exploring the lyrical recesses of the architectural dwelling, Dickinson was intimately involved in mapping her own *poetics of space* (Fuss 14). For her, interiors were public space and exteriors were private retreats (4). "The Outer-from the Inner/Derives its Magnitude/The Inner-paints the Outer" (Vendler 219). While Bachelard, in his book, *The Poetics of Space*, shows readers how their perceptions of houses work to shape their thoughts and memories, Dickinson, in her poetry, was actively involved in the twofold process of that shaping. By inhabiting and closely studying her home's interior space, she was both forging memories in her mind as well as fabricating the structure of poems on the page. Architectural rather than decorative references are what make up those spare poems. Hers is a vocabulary of plane, beam, and dome, of angle, slant, and degree, of plan, scale, and latitude (Fuss 13).

Elizabeth Bishop's treatment of architecture is in some ways like that of Dickinson, though she has been perhaps more expansive in her handling of this subject; for her, architecture is both lexicon and living thing. Instead of relying on spatial metaphors as

Dickinson did in her poems, Bishop tends to anthropomorphize the elements of architecture she chooses to write about. “The walls went on for years and years...the ceiling was tiresome to watch...the floorboards had a nice perspective...” (Quinn 61).

According to www.elizabethbishopns.org, one of the enduring themes of Bishop’s poems and stories is the idea and actuality of home (. Her childhood home in Great Village, Nova Scotia, marks the center of her real and imagined universe. She evoked this house many times in her poems and stories. But, as Twain’s home was for him a refuge offering solace and peace, Bishop’s home was stained by untimely tragedy and unrest. In this house, she witnessed the breakdown of her mother and was taken away to live with her paternal grandparents in Worcester, Massachusetts, where she had been born. This removal resulted in serious illness. Her grandparents’ house eventually appeared in her poem, “Sestina,” where it is described as “an inscrutable house.”

After living in Worcester with her grandparents then a maternal aunt, Bishop returned to Great Village and the house,. According to www.elizabethbishopns.org, she returned every year after, usually for long summer vacations, until she entered Vassar College in 1930. From the time spent in that house, she formed a layered memory, certain sites etched deeply into her imagination, finding their way into the lines of her letters and poems. The church across the street from her childhood home and the bridge over the Great Village River both appeared in her autobiographical prose poem, “In the Village.” During that time, Bishop also developed an idiosyncratic sense of space and shape and size. In that particular poem, “In the Village,” she wrote: “the finger-sized church steeple.” And in another piece entitled “Poem,” Axelrod notes how the entire Nova Scotia landscape is reduced to a picture the size of a dollar bill. While houses loomed

large in the work of Emily Dickinson, so large she “dared not enter” them again (Axelrod), Bishop systematically reduced the structures of her past. Driven perhaps by the instability of her emotional state, she miniaturized what may have threatened to control or unravel her.

According to www.edithwharton.org, Edith Wharton, too, understood the importance of place and refuge in her life as a writer. In 1902, she bought a 113-acre property and began to create an environment that would meet her needs as a gardener, hostess, and above all, writer. The Mount, as she named it (after her great-grandfather’s place), was, according to www.edithwharton.org, “an autobiographical house. Every aspect of the estate, including its gardens, architecture, and interior design, evoked the spirit of its creator.” Despite the autobiographical nature of this house, she did not become emotionally involved with the structure and space she occupied. Hers was a more technical relationship with architecture.

As noted on www.edithwharton.org, Wharton designed and built The Mount based on principles outlined in her influential book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), co-authored with architect Ogden Codman, Jr. In this book, she compared the laws of poetry to the character of architectural limitations. “A building,” she writes, “for whatever purpose erected, must be built in strict accordance with the requirements if that of that purpose; in other words, it must have a reason for being as it is and must be as it is for that reason” (Codman and Wharton 10). As readers, we can assume then that she regards poetry in the same way as a building, that a poem must be written with a purpose in mind and that its structure and language must be in accordance with its purpose or reason for being written.

For me, as I read book after book about architecture, this statement of Wharton's has been the most enlightening one yet in terms of establishing a link between architecture and writing. And Wharton continues:

Its decoration must harmonize with the structural limitations (which is by no means the same thing as saying that all decoration must be structural), and from this harmony of the general scheme of decoration with the building, and of the details of the decoration with each other, springs the rhythm that distinguishes architecture from mere construction. (10)

This statement could easily be rewritten to apply to the poem, or to the essay or short story, for that matter. For the purposes of my development of an aesthetic, here is that rewritten version: Its *language* must harmonize with the structural limitations (which is by no means the same thing as saying that all *language* must be structural), and from this harmony of the general scheme of *language* with the *poem/essay/story*, and of the *sound/meaning* of the *words* with each other, springs the rhythm that brings *the poem/essay/story* to life as art.

Wharton's thoughts could be applied as well to the larger structure of a collection of poems or essays or stories. As writers, we are often so consumed by the structure of an individual piece that we never step back to look at how it fits into the wider scope of a collection.

Wharton writes:

Thus all good architecture and good decoration (which, it must never be forgotten, *is only interior architecture*) must be based on rhythm and logic. A house, a room, must be planned as it is because it could not, in

reason, be otherwise; must be decorated as it is because no other decoration would harmonize as well with the plan. (10)

So, too, must a collection of poems or essays or stories be based on rhythm and logic. A collection must be organized as it is because it could not, in reason, be otherwise; must be ordered as it is because no other structure would harmonize as well with the plan.

Architecture not only serves as the subject matter and inspiration for writers; it can also provide a blueprint for analyzing the structure of the individual or collected work of many well-known authors. I will examine that idea as it applies specifically to the essay collections of four writers. I may digress occasionally to look at the structure of an individual essay, but I will do so only to show how that individual essay illuminates and reflects the structure of the collection as a whole.

According to www.dictionary.com, several of the many definitions for the word structure are: 1) Something built or constructed; 2) A complex system considered from the point of view of the whole rather than of any single part; 3) Anything composed of parts arranged together in some way; an organization; 4) The relationship or organization of the component parts of a work of art or literature.

All of these definitions could be used interchangeably when referring to either a building or a book of collected essays. The word architecture can also be applied to both of these unifying or coherent forms or structures. Those two facts alone were interesting to me, but it was in exploring those parallels in meaning that I discovered so many other significant connections. Function. Form. Harmony. Motif. Angle. Line. Perspective. Shape. Color. Style.

So, it became a logical next step for me to begin pairing architects with contemporary writers, a particular architectural form with the shape of a given writer's particular collection of essays. And, in so doing, I began to delve further into the various other significant connections I'd discovered along the way. I thought of the first compelling pair as I began reading about the Swiss-born architect, Peter Zumthor. I was struck by his emphasis on atmosphere as it relates to and informs architecture. Atmosphere, which Zumthor defines as "an aesthetic category" (7), instantly brought to mind Judith Kitchen's collection, *Distance and Direction*. Her focus is on landscape, near and far, past and present, and it serves to link the individual pieces in her collection.

The skeletal structure of each—Zumthor's buildings and Kitchen's book of essays—is paradoxically *atmosphere*, the interesting mood and impression of the places we visit and revisit and remember. "There is an exchange, a give-and-take, between Peter Zumthor's buildings and their surroundings. An attentiveness. An enrichment"(7). The essays in Judith Kitchen's collection are "essays of place—of distance and direction and the way memory works through and within landscape"(Kitchen 14).

Zumthor's process of creating the atmospheres of the houses he designs is one that closely echoes Kitchen's process of writing her essays and shaping them into a collection. Both his buildings and her book, *Distance and Direction*, become bodies of architecture. While Zumthor's materials are tangible, weighted, "the material presence of things" (Zumthor 21), Kitchen's are the words and sentences and paragraphs she arranges on the page, the essays she juxtaposes beside one another in a single collection. "There are a thousand different possibilities in one material alone"(23), Zumthor writes. He repeatedly rejects the need for architectural flourishes, instead applying stark, simple lines to his

designs, strictly making use of natural materials such as wood and concrete, steel and glass. “I work a little bit like a sculptor,” he says. “When I start, my first idea for a building is with the material. I believe architecture is about that. It’s not about paper; it’s not about forms. It’s about space and material” ([Polegrin n.p.](#)).

Similarly, Kitchen resists the temptation to be wordy, choosing instead to winnow her prose down to its most lyric essentials. And, much like an artist, she has chosen to use color repeatedly throughout her collection, often as both title and unifying theme. For instance, in her essay titled “Green,” she introduces that particular color—“One green eye with a V of brown . . .”(Kitchen 31)—but surrounds it with many other colors on the page. “The circus train in the far left corner rounds the bend, trailing its lavenders and reds, its curious displays that call out with the luster of distance” (32).

In drawing on the many possibilities of a single material, whether it is concrete or color, wood or word, both the architect and the writer have managed to uphold a minimalist approach to a body of architecture while sustaining a boundless sense of its purpose and appeal.

Peter Zumthor is fascinated by “the way architecture takes a bit of the globe and constructs a tiny box of it. And suddenly there’s an interior and an exterior”(45). So, too, does Judith Kitchen’s prose take a bit of the world and capture a snapshot of it, her lens opening and closing to include only the details central to the telling of her story. “I drive past the house where I grew up just to see what color they’ve painted the shutters,” Kitchen writes. “Who could bear to walk inside, go up the wide stairs, turn left into my old room with its built-in drawers and the tiny windows tucked under the eaves?” (Kitchen 119).

“One can be inside or outside,” Zumthor continues. “...thresholds, crossings, the tiny loop-hole door, the almost imperceptible transition between the inside and the outside, an incredible sense of place...”(47). So, too, are Kitchen’s essays an exploration of place, both inside and outside, called “landscapes in all directions” by Maxine Kumin on the book jacket, never veering from the subject of place as well as time. Both architecture and writing are spatial arts; both involve movement, distance and direction. But both are also temporal in nature. For Zumthor, that means his “experience of it is not limited to a single second; that means thinking about the way people move in a building”(41). For Kitchen, it is about “where the past and the future collide in increasingly complicated ripples to include the concentric circles of the present” (14).

It is important to Zumthor that his structures be experienced as a kind of voyage of discovery. “As an architect,” he writes, “I have to make sure it isn’t like being in a labyrinth, however, if that’s not what I want. So I’ll introduce the odd bit of orientation, exceptions that prove the rule...direction, seduction, letting go, granting freedom”(43). Kitchen offers her readers a comparable sense of orientation, almost acting at times like a tour guide. “And from Doolin—a town strung out along the coast of County Clare in a mile of cottages and pubs—it’s not too far to the Burren with its sweep of bare limestone pavement...” (74). Her readers travel with her, trusting where she takes them. Naomi Shihab Nye says on Kitchen’s book jacket that “[w]hether a trail spins out in widening spirals or penetrates deep layers of memory, readers are nourished by the journey. . . .” “It should all seem very natural”, Zumthor reasons (45).

In further seeking to achieve a natural effect through his design, Zumthor always tries to create buildings where interior form, or the empty interior, is not the same as outdoor

form. In other words, “where you don’t just take a ground plan and draw lines and say: these are the walls, twelve centimeters thick, and that division means inside and outside, but where you have this feeling of the interior as a hidden mass you don’t recognize” (51). In the case of Zumthor’s buildings, achieving this effect has to do with proximity and distance, with the size and mass of objects as they compare with other objects or with the people sharing that same space. It has to do with “the thick door and the thin one. The thin wall and the thick” (51). Kitchen’s essays also introduce the concepts of proximity and distance. In one in particular, aptly entitled “Distance,” she writes: “It’s the space between us, which isn’t very much, the width of a table. A fairly small table. Or maybe it’s the space between where I thought we were and where we are, the boat drifting farther and farther from shore so that the water seems to widen. . . .” (Kitchen 55). In her collection of essays, she not only writes about distance as it can be physically measured, but also looks at proximity and distance as each relates to the margins of one’s memory—another, less tangible, interior space. “My father’s eyes, ice in the center. Steel, or something more durable than steel. . . Blue you could hear over the phone. Shards of sound. Train whistles fading into black” (15).

“Interiors,” Zumthor writes, “are like large instruments, collecting sound, amplifying it, transmitting it elsewhere” (29). In the previous example from Kitchen’s essay, “Blue,” about her father, that interior is her mind, the space where she stores the distant memories of the past. And she has transmitted those collected (sights and) sounds onto the page. In Zumthor’s case, “that has to do with the shape peculiar to each room and with the surfaces of the materials they contain, and the way those materials have been applied” (29).

These same ideas of scale and sound can also be applied to the structural decisions of length and lyricism within Kitchen's collection. When Zumthor refers to "the shape peculiar to each room," I cannot help but think of the shape peculiar to the elements of Kitchen's essays, both individually and as a whole. Within each essay, sentence structure dictates the pace and the sound of the piece. And within the collection, there are some shorter essays, some longer—some lyrical, some more discursive—some personal stories, some natural histories, some elegies. And each has been chosen by the writer to be a part of this same collection, to sit beside one another in some meaningful, coherent way.

Zumthor considers the idea of any structure as it relates to its surroundings: "the idea of creating a building, or big complex of buildings, or even a small one, and that it becomes part of its surroundings"(63). So, too, has Kitchen created a big complex of essays and each, in some way, has become part of its surrounding essays. Her process, the idea of choosing a form or a structure for her collection of essays, seems similar to Zumthor's:

"...all these things that need deciding—all those thousands of occasions where an architect is put on the spot and has to make the right decision—I'd be happy if all that was resolved by use...And I'm not alone among architects in feeling that—in fact, it's an ancient tradition, in literature too, in writing, and in art." (69)

By *use*, I assume Zumthor means *function*, and I would also go so far as to say that for writers the more appropriate word would be *purpose*. Kitchen has chosen these particular essays for this collection not because they fit into a prescribed form—a chronology or even a single theme—but rather because readers can inhabit them as a

dwelling with many rooms, as a place where memory is mutable, where thoughts on the page are as unrestricted as the process of thinking within one's mind, and "because they have become the thing that they actually set out to be...And it (architecture) is at its most beautiful when things have come into their own, when they are coherent. That is when everything refers to everything else and it is impossible to remove a single thing without destroying the whole" (69).

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The term minimalism is used to describe movements in various forms of art and design. The work of artists known as minimalists is stripped down to its most fundamental or essential features. Similarly, literary minimalism is characterized by an economy with words. Peter Zumthor and Judith Kitchen could certainly be considered minimalists in their work, much like the architect, Mies van der Rohe, and the nonfiction writer, Abigail Thomas. But unlike Zumthor and Kitchen, van der Rohe and Thomas have shifted their focus somewhat from the feeling or tone of the atmosphere around them more toward immediacy of the materials available to them and the possible connections to be made with those materials. Practicality compels each of them.

It was Louis Sullivan, widely considered America's first truly modern architect, who said: "form ever follows function." Mies van der Rohe, a German-American architect and one of the early modernists, adopted this principle, along with that of Austrian architect, Adolf Loos, who proclaimed: "architectural ornament was criminal." It is interesting to consider these two principles as they relate to the work of Mies van der Rohe. But it is also remarkable to see how these same principles are embodied in contemporary nonfiction literature.

One particular writer whose work seems to build upon the same theories is Abigail Thomas. Like the essays in Kitchen's *Distance and Direction*, the essays in Thomas's collection, *Safekeeping*, do not abide by a fixed form in terms of their ordering. Thomas does not use chronology as an organizing principle. Instead, as cited from a review in *Bomb* on the bookflap, Thomas has chosen to give "an honest shape to the fluidity of memory."

Like the open flexible spaces of van der Rohe's buildings, Thomas's essays explore connections rather than strictly adhering to the rigid structure of a timeline. The architect's buildings, the steel columns and large expanses of glass, directly connect the interior space to the natural landscape, while the writer's essays connect the interior of her mind, the layers of her memory, to the reader. In the case of the architect, it is the idea of private space opening up into the infinite realm of public space; in the case of the writer, personal experience opens up to encompass the universal.

According to Wikipedia, modernism in architecture began as a disciplined effort to allow the shape and organization of a building to be determined only by functional requirements, instead of by traditional aesthetic concepts. Similarly, Abigail Thomas has made the conscious choice to allow the shape and organization of her collection of essays to be determined by the material of her life. "I think the material dictates the structure," she says. "The material tells you what it wants to be. I don't mess with it" (Walker 67). While I have been comparing Thomas with van der Rohe, highlighting the similarities between the two, it is easy to see how the writer's process can also be likened to that of Peter Zumthor. "When I start," Zumthor says, "my first idea for a building is with the material." That is undoubtedly the common thread among the minimalists I have

discussed thus far. Both architects and writers alike begin not with a preconceived notion of an end product, but with pieces that insist upon being put together. The springboard for each of them is the thrilling chaos of infinite possibility rather than a precise plan.

Thomas's primary function or purpose is simply to write, to make sense of images and conversations that come back to her from the past. The material resulting from this process then decides the shape of both the essays individually as well as the essays as a collection. In Thomas's case, it is a nonlinear structure for both. "If the structure is similar to the way my memory and my mind work, if the structure holds together however tremblingly, I keep it. I can't change it without destroying it" (66).

Although for Mies van der Rohe traditional aesthetic concepts did not dictate the design of his buildings, this is not to say he ignored such concerns. While he did reject the idea of ornamentation, denouncing the overly stylistic nature of the Gothic period, he still sought beauty and warmth in the use of natural materials and found splendor in the utilization of geometric shapes and strong lines. According to www.designboom.com, Mies was drawn toward the design of "pristine, simplified forms, with detailing which was logical as well as romantic." He did not sacrifice aesthetic appeal but rather sought to achieve it while simultaneously preserving the simpler style of Modernism. His famous quote, "Less is more," is still frequently referenced in many fields today—none more so than literature.

So, too, does Abigail Thomas remain concerned with the artistic integrity of her work despite her own literary version of Mies van der Rohe's *less is more*. Nonlinear writing requires more effort on the part of the reader, so the language must be both lyrical and compelling. "Reading nonlinear writing is a little like being a nonswimmer in choppy

surf” (Walker 64). You need to have faith that the reader will eventually feel comfortable staying with you, no matter how complex or risky the course. “And the writing needs to be good, really good,” Thomas says. “There’s an extra pressure on the writing in the absence of an obvious story” (Walker 64). While all of Thomas’ essays are brief and the collection as a whole is not lengthy, she still creates a patient, slow-paced beauty in the language, in the weight and deliberate selection of each individual word.

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There are no doubt plenty of architects and writers who in their design and prose apply the principle of *less is more*. Postmodernist architect, Robert Venturi, however, believed “less is a bore.” In his book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, he writes:

I prefer ‘both-and’ to ‘either-or,’ black and white, and sometimes gray, to black or white. A valid architecture evokes many levels of meaning and combinations of focus; its space and its elements become readable and workable in several ways at once. (23)

The examples that he presents of *both-and* in architecture include the ceilings of Sir John Soane’s secular chambers that are “both rectangular and curvilinear, and domed and vaulted” (Venturi 36). He also refers to pre-cast concrete construction as “continuous yet fragmentary, flowing in profile yet surfaced with joints” (36-37). Venturi examines many structures by looking at their parts, but he is clearly more interested in the problem of the whole, of form, of new ways to embrace but transform familiar forms.

While architects such as Zumthor and van der Rohe are known for applying the principle of *form follows function* to their work, others, such as Venturi, believe strongly

in the idea of form coming first, of a preconceived shape preceding any choice of materials or any prescribed function. This, of course, applies to literature as well. In a recent interview with John Poch, H.L. Hix says: “For me the book is a more fundamental unit than the individual poem...I loved books that tried to be more than a heap of random sweepings.”

Hix continues:

So for me the ‘architecture’ of the book precedes the writing of the individual poems. It’s not even that I write a few poems and early on develop a sense for a possible shape, which then gets filled out with more poems: the shape comes first, and only then the poems. The shape of the book usually changes radically over the course of its development, but there’s always an ‘architecture,’ a ‘project,’ at the start of things.

In essay collections, form can manifest itself in different shapes, some based on chronology, others based on maps or webs or the geometry of actual shapes. Kitchen and Thomas, the writers I mentioned previously, were concerned less with the idea of shape than they were with the act of shaping. They began with the desire to conceive of or create something and, with the notion of infinite possibility, they began to build their essays one word, one sentence, one paragraph, at a time. But for other writers it is only from a predetermined shape that an essay can even begin to emerge.

In the Introduction to Vivian Gornick’s *Fierce Attachments*, Jonathan Lethem quotes the author from the pages of this memoir:

In the second year of my marriage the rectangular space made its first appearance inside me. I was writing an essay, a piece of graduate-student

criticism that had flowered without warning into thought, radiant shapely thought. The sentences began pushing up in me, struggling to get out, each one moving swiftly to add itself to the one that preceded it. I realized suddenly that an image had taken control of me: I saw its shape and its outline clearly. The sentences were trying to fill in the shape. The image was the wholeness of my thought. In that instant I felt myself open wide. My insides cleared out into a rectangle, all clean air and uncluttered space...In the middle of the rectangle only my image, waiting patiently to clarify itself...(vii-viii)

Lethem points out how later in the book, “Gornick seems to mourn the inability of the rectangle to thrive, expand, encompass more of her life. The paradox is double: by the evidence of the book in your hands, the very book that describes the resistance and frustration, Gornick’s rectangle has done precisely that, grown to encompass not only her life but, for the duration of the book, her reader’s” (viii).

The structure of the book quite literally assumes the shape of a rectangle. A rectangle is cyclic: all corners lie on a single circle. In the case of Gornick’s story, it is her life coming full circle, the corners where past and present meet all touching upon the circumference of the same closed curve. And a rectangle has reflectional symmetry: one half is the reflection of the other half. The two strands of Gornick’s narrative, the past and the present, incorporate the ongoing dialogue of two women, mother and daughter, both evocatively becoming mirror images of one another.

The structure of Gornick’s memoir does not separate these strands into individual essays nor chapters nor parts. White space on the page is the only indication of the shift.

Otherwise, the narrative weaves back and forth. Gornick, in stark contrast to Kitchen and Thomas, prefers lengthy sentences and paragraphs to more sparse, lyrical prose.

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In continuing to explore the idea of structure beyond the minimalist approach, it is interesting to consider the work of architect Michael Graves, known as one of the “New York Five.” Graves focuses his interest on the relationship of buildings to landscape, opening up even more the notion of shape to include the area outside its perimeter. His work introduces the idea of metaphor in architecture, the contrast between open space and the making of rooms, and the relationship of the human figure to architectural form. According to <http://architect.architecture.sk>, “Figurative architecture reinstates the traditional language of architecture that, unlike the abstractions of much of the Modern Movement, is based on man’s social, psychic, and physical occupation of the environment.”

In her collection of essays, *Refuge*, Terry Tempest Williams also concerns herself with the relationship of man to the natural world. She has, in fact, merged the natural world and the natural process of loss and grieving in each individual essay, and she has assembled these essays into a single shape: “a spiral covered and uncovered and covered again” (Williams 314). And that shape transforms as the focus of her narrative shifts: “The world is in motion. We are in motion. We have all lost loved ones. We have all danced with grief and we will one day dance with death. We embody the spiral, moving inward and outward with the loss of fear, a love transcendent, and the courage to create new maps” (314).

From the moment Williams began writing these essays, they assumed the shape of that spiral, enlarging, intensifying, taking in all that refused to be left out:

Transformation. The spiral. Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty. The Spiral Jetty is where I house my faith, faith that is Earthwork exists without my having to see it, faith in the oscillations of a rising and receding lake where the spiral is covered and then momentarily exposed, the expanding and contracting systems of energy that stimulate us, stretch us and allow us to grow. (313)

“The spiral becomes this expansion and contraction of energy...It is an outward motion in its evolutionary reach and an inward motion in its emotional drain. A spiral moves in both directions—clockwise and counterclockwise” (313-314).

Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge* records “the search for a human place in nature's large design”, as Louise Erdrich says on the book's cover. While Michael Graves continues to explore his unique approach to architecture, one that, according to <http://architect.architecture.sk>, creates “special relationships between the worlds of man and nature.”

Both this writer and this architect respond in many ways to all that exists around them, beyond the pages of an essay or the outer walls of a building. Each mimics, incorporates, challenges, changes, and excludes. It is a constant effort to balance the range of experiences and encounters, all while sustaining an ongoing awareness of what it is that helps to achieve that balance or what it is that pushes against it.

Much like Terry Tempest Williams, Graves contemplates the notion of the spiral as it emanates from a central point, getting progressively farther away as it revolves around

that point. In particular, he considers all that becomes integrated into the spiral as it continues expanding outward. In one particular project, for the Whitney Museum of Art in New York, he was asked to design new gallery space and a theater, both to be added to an already existing structure, the Breuer Building. Stylistically, the Breuer building, a modern monument finished in dark gray unpolished granite, was already in distinct contrast to the surrounding context of smaller scale and more elaborate facades. So, the design challenge for Michael Graves was, therefore, to consider the context and structure of what already existed within the expansion of the imaginary spiral. In the end, his solution involved the idea of borrowing from different styles, of incorporating and integrating, of forming something new while respecting what came before.

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This challenge of the ever-expanding-and contracting spiral presents itself to writers quite often. When Abigail Thomas said she could not change a structure without destroying it, she also said: “It would be like taking a baseball bat to a bunch of birds flying in formation—there might still be birds, but no pattern, and no sense of direction” (Walker 66). So, not only must she consider the birds, or the individual essays, she must also consider the formation of the flock, or the shape of the collection and how each individual essay informs that shape.

In *Ordering the Storm: How to Put Together a Book of Poems*, about structuring poetry collections, Bonnie Jacobson writes, “Arranging your poems can feel like herding birds.” Like Thomas, she is speaking to the idea of a structure or a collection as a whole being more than the sum of its parts. “*More than the sum of its parts,*” Jacobson continues. “I think that’s what arranging a book of poems comes down to: creating a

mega-poem that in some way comments on all the others, or at least takes the poet and the reader a distance from where both began” (Grimm 5).

It’s a bit like the old riddle: Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

While specific choices of materials and already determined functions are preconceived for some architects, others prefer to finalize form then go about choosing the materials which best suit their existing design. Some writers gather together a number of individual essays, perhaps several having been previously published as stand-alone pieces, while other writers sit down at their desk with the idea or shape of a collection already in mind, adding new essays in as needed to provide transitional material or to fill in gaps.

The difference, however, for poets is that the option of a book of Selected Poems or Collected Poems exists. In the case of these *books*, rather than *collections*, “time is the great anthologizer. Time will select and collect” (17), and often these book titles end up including the specific years that the writer/publisher has chosen to bring together. This is unheard of, or at least very unlikely, for the nonfiction writer.

The *collection*, therefore, to be distinguished from the *book*, is what I am discussing here. And as far as shaping an essay collection is concerned, there does not seem to be one way that is better than another, just like there doesn’t seem to be an answer to that riddle—which came first, the chicken or the egg? For some, it was the egg that then hatched and became the chicken. For others, it was the chicken that then laid another egg, and another, and another. And maybe for some it was both chicken and egg simultaneously sitting in the coop waiting to become breakfast or lunch or dinner. What I am trying to say is that the course of action involved in building or shaping anything at

all is an individual process. There are principles and theories and movements recorded throughout history, but in the end it is up to the essayist or the poet or the architect to decide which comes first.

Either way, it is the responsibility of the artist to be certain that the structure or shape he or she has chosen can properly convey and support *both* the function and the aesthetic form. And, in reading so many essay collections over the last few years, it has become apparent to me that the most effective way to succeed in doing this is for the writer to provide a thread that connects them to one another. That thread can be as subtle as the consistent rendering of the voice throughout the collection or as obvious as the repetition of an image or a larger theme, or even the inclusion of titles, subtitles or sections.

The writer cannot simply assume that readers will understand why a particular group of essays belong together or make sense in a collection. Some writers opt to offer an explanation in the preface to their collection. Of the four essay collections I have previously mentioned, *Distance and Direction* is the only one in which the writer seeks to offer any blueprint in the way of guiding for the reader. “These are essays of place,” Kitchen writes in the preface, “of distance and direction and the way memory works through and within landscape... These are the places to which we return, and the ones to which we can never return—where the past and the future collide in increasingly complicated ripples to include the concentric circles of the present” (n.p.). This seems, though, more like a thoughtful clarification on the part of the writer rather than a directive. She remains lyrical even in her preface, the spare nature of her prose leaving some ambiguity for the reader to clarify along the way.

In *Fierce Attachments*, it is Jonathan Lethem rather than Vivian Gornick who offers the reader a sort of explanation in the introduction he has written for the book's newest edition. But his words seem more of a celebration of the book, an illumination, rather than a how-to set of instructions for Gornick's readers.

In the preface to her collection, Barbara Kingsolver writes: "The essays are meant to be read in order, since some connect with and depend on their predecessors"(xiv). And in the introduction to Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle*, she writes: "The pieces in this collection are printed in the order of their writing." To me, both of these examples seem like more than just a subtle hint or gentle guidance. But are they necessary?

In the preface to the first edition of *An Inland Voyage*, Robert Louis Stevenson writes:

To equip so small a book with a preface is, I am half afraid, to sin against proportion. But a preface is more than an author can resist, for it is the reward of his labors. When the foundation stone is laid, the architect appears with his plans, and struts for an hour before the public eye. So with the writer in his preface: he may have never a word to say, but he must show himself for a moment in the portico, hat in hand, and with urbane demeanor. (C.P.C., *The New York Times*)

I am not entirely sure how I feel about the option of including a preface, about the idea of guiding the reader at all, no matter how gently or stringently or whimsically it is done. While in some cases I think it offers just the right amount of clarity up front, there are other times when I think that kind of explanation or direction reveals too much to the reader too soon. I think of it in terms of an architect's blueprint for designing or

remodeling a house. The architect definitely needs a blueprint as a plan, in order to know how the construction will progress. But the homeowner also needs to see this plan, to know ahead how the project will take shape, to look before they leap. Should a reader be granted this same advantage?

But what if the preface takes away the element of surprise that is often best earned by the reader? Perhaps it is in figuring out the connections and discovering ways in which those connections leap off the page into the context of one's own life that compels the reader to return again and again to those pages. Conveying a significant universal meaning that readers can relate to in some way is a goal for many nonfiction writers. To tell a reader how to read a text may risk preventing her from discovering that significance on her own. I suppose, as with everything made from nothing, the architect of that brand new something must strive to seek the best balance possible.

“The desire for symmetry, for balance, for rhythm in form as well as in sound, is one of the most inveterate of human instincts” (Wharton 33). It is in seeking balance, from the sentence level to the larger collection level, that writers most often discover the surprising repetitions that transform parts into a whole. Sometimes this happens organically and the writer is not even aware of these repetitions. Other times, an effort must be made in order to bring it all together, to enhance the cadence and the flow. In this case, as writers revise, they look for opportunities to repeat certain sounds or patterns of sound, and ideally they try to find places where words or images can be repeated in order to create a more unified and pleasing aesthetic. “This will satisfy the eye,” Wharton writes, “which in matters of symmetry demands, not absolute similarity of detail, but merely correspondence of outline and dimensions” (36).

Writers can benefit from an understanding of Wharton's belief and, by seeking to achieve symmetry and balance in their writing, they will invite readers more readily to inhabit an essay or collection, settling into its narrative as one might occupy a room or house.

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