

My Black Mariah and the White Chapel in the Fields: A Dialectical Cartography

“One who looks outside, dreams; one who looks inside, awakes” (Carl Gustav Jung).

Introduction

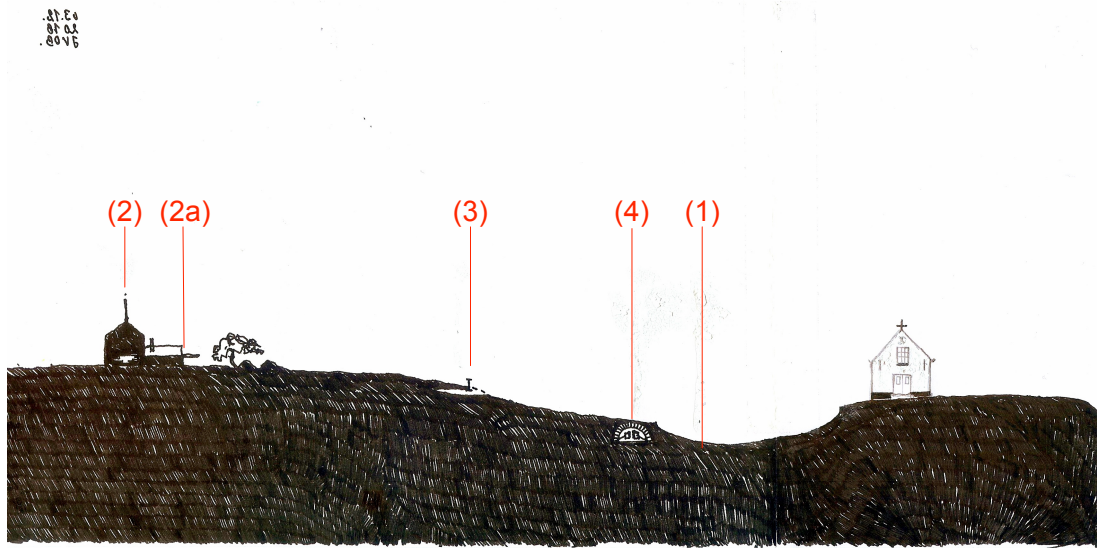


Fig.01: topographic section (2018)

I am making a new work as a series of drawings that are interconnected by a topographic section of the landscape where I live (fig.01), owing to a drawing and reflections I made previously (Van Den Berghe 2010). This topographic section indicates places I indelibly adopt deeper meanings to, in which I either found traces of human interventions or intervened myself—as an architect—through built and fictional architectures. These places indicate four stages that together seem to constitute a full cycle of life: (1) an excavation that has been a clay pit and an open air brickworks for the production of bricks for the houses in the village, including for (2) our own house (1898)(Fig.02). Then there are two fictional interventions: (3) a drawing (The Haystack Gallery: a shelter for my sheep), and (4) a burial crypt for my wife and me, close to the excavation where this history seems to start (1).

However, these places are an inconsistent set of separate micro narratives, drawings and reflections, remaining too anthological. I need to come to a *cohesive understanding*, meaning and depth in order to deeper inscribe myself—as an architect—into the palimpsest of histories of the place and the house, its traditions of lacemaking, gardening and drawing, finding how this culture of making becomes making culture. Searching for a connecting layer of meaning that carries these four places, and the ‘separate’ meanings I adopted to them, instigates this project. My assumption is that the stable presence of the landscape, in which I develop the design research case that I will subsequently describe, may be crucial as the unlocker in deciphering this anthological struggle.



Fig.02: Own House and Fashion Workshops

My Black Mariah

In *Solaris*, Tarkovsky slowly drowns us in a placeless 'out there', a compelling endlessness adrift (Tarkovsky 1971). He confronts us with our seeking after 'a within', a mythical place where our secret self can dwell. Consequently, this 'within' can only 'be' by the sake of an 'out there' with a strong and compelling presence. In the end, *Solaris* shows us a house surrounded by an endless sea of nothingness, that also seems to be 'everything'.

And I?

Not every place I enter has good vibes for dwelling, neither can I call every place 'a within'—'my within', *mon secret petit temple à moi*. Yet I seem to have spooed a dwelling for my secret self in My Black Mariah (Fig.1: 2a)(Fig.02), my new studio, named after Thomas Edison's Black Maria in West Orange, New Jersey (1892-93). But there are differences between Maria and Mariah.

Although Edison's Black Maria had a convertible roof in order to capture the profuse daylight that was needed for early film making, 'she' exclusively had to offer an introvert world for the production of movies. The convertible roof was not for looking out, it was for light to come in.

However, My Black Mariah has to meet two needs, i.e. both to provide an introvert 'within'—like 'her sister' in New Jersey—as a dwelling for my secret self, and to reconcile this 'within' with an 'out there' indispensable for this 'within' to 'be'. There can be no question of a place being a proper dwelling for my secret self if this place is not evidently enticing me into an introspective, meditative state of mind, an in-depth quest for the inner nucleus of truth that, however, is not absolute, hence it needs the universe, the 'out there' to relate to. It seems that both 'the within' and the 'out there' are calling me, and most probably their distinct but entangled presences chronically urge me to be an architect.

As an architect, I want to do what I believe is right. What is right?

Why do I ask myself this question? Because I am immersed in research that liberates me from the current economic and thematic conformisms of practice. Also, I am in the maelstrom of my constant re-invention as a professor of architecture. Entering this new ground as a researcher-architect-professor requires the finding and situating of new but meaningful anchors, both in 'my within', and in the universe around it, and the establishing of meaningful connections between both. This has an urgency that calls for a thoroughgoing interrogation of my secret self in relation to the universe 'out there'.

Whence this urgency? Because at the age of almost 59 my time is running out, and all the versions of my life I imagined when I was a young architect have been consumed or failed by now. Possibly, only one more version is left. In order to confront this urgency and to get 'a momentum' this research needs a proper research case, i.e. the designing of a better working place for myself: a room with a window. I will first describe the criteria for the room and the window, and subsequently I will elaborate on the physical and mental dynamics that are triggered by both.

The room

We live in a house with two fashion workshops. Together they enclose a courtyard with a pond. Strangely, it has taken me 25 years of living there before I began to understand the house and its surroundings. Only recently I discovered a proper place for 'the within' at the back of my wife's fashion workshop, founded in the 1920's for lace making. Subsequently it became a small knitting factory, and finally turned into a prototyping studio for Belgian fashion designers, which basically goes through full scale pattern drawing and modelling of fashion pieces in paper and fabric. The house with a facade that has "a René Magritte-like normalcy"¹ faces the street with abundant traffic that causes noise disturbance, the mundane world I want to withdraw from². In 'my within' I am planning to sit with my back to the street, physically and symbolically, hence facing the landscape as a representation of the world, the universe in front of me. I need silence and seclusion to encounter my secret self and how it relates to the universe. Most probably, these have been the qualities that made me discover this far end of the fashion workshop as a proper place to create 'my within'.

The paradox of the window

Now here comes the difficult part of the process. I stated that 'a within' can only 'be' by the sake of an 'out there' with a strong and compelling presence. Above, I have described the conditions of seclusion as requested for 'my within'. Out of these requests we might also 'try' a mere symbolic presence of the 'out there' as a mindset a priori adopted, in order to preserve the condition of 'the within' as a complete enclosure. But here the research makes clear that such a symbolic presence of an 'out there' would be far from sufficient for the design of my new 'within', my working place, because relating both to my secret self and the universe needs a tangible 'out there' to be very 'near', visually, spatially, materially, and as bodily as my own desiring body.

I'm starting from the assumption that, for a designing architect, a window is determinative for the way one looks 'out there', into the landscape, in a meditative attitude that comes with the urge for introspection. Hence this new window will also be constitutive for 'the within'.

Observation from the inside

With these imperatives made explicit I took a chair and sat for hours at the far end in the fashion workshop, where 'my within' should come, in order to imagine my new working place, trying to penetrate its brick thickness of the wall—where there is no window yet—with my eyes and my imagination. I began to embody the size of my desired 'within', and how the exact height and the size of my working desk should relate to and even become the window frame, its detailing, structure and materiality. And, very importantly, how all this should affect 'my view from within out there', precisely based on my eye level through which my secret self bodily imbeds in 'my within', and through the window, into the 'out there'.

Observation from the outside

Then, I also spent hours sitting outside, with my back against the facade of My Black Mariah, where the new window should come. I related this outer view to the previously imagined view from within and to my drawing process, and I sent feedback loops of the envisaged 'within', the working desk and the framing of the sight outwards from 'my within'! In order to secure these observations, I started to draw a large vertical section on scale 1/10, in which I situated my eye level and sightlines in order to more precisely shape the relation between 'the within' and 'the out there'.

I began to trace the landscape in a way that resonates with Romantic landscape painting and its notions of foreground, middle ground and background-horizon-sky. Bart Verschaffel argues that "*a landscape always represents the world ... Further, in the tradition of landscape for the Romantics the vagueness resting on the horizon comes to the fore and creates an 'atmosphere' that touches a lonely soul and transforms an image of the world into an intimate encounter*" (Verschaffel 2012).

The foreground is very important in the bodily reality of this landscape that touches my body at my stretched feet. It will house the filter pond that will rise up to the same level as my new working desk

¹ As Leon van Schaik called it, when he visited the house in 2013.

² At least for now. Contrary to this current attitude, that seems to come with my becoming of age, I proudly presented part of this facade—the letterbox—at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2016 in the Belgian pavilion, as a strong architectural statement to indicate my proud presence in the community of my village.

and offers a *chiaroscuro* through the dramatically articulated brickwork. Moreover, the southern daylight, and the eventual moonlight, will fall onto the water surface and vividly rebound into ‘my within’ through the strategically positioned window. Fruit trees of my ancient orchard stand very near. Closer, the material details of my working desk, that become the window details of this outlook, are strongly framing this vivid scene that grasps the eye of the beholder. The foreground is a microscopic scenery.



Fig.03: the White Chapel.

Then, my eye seems to waltz swiftly over the middle ground, magnetically attracted as it is by the background of the scene, formed by the horizon and the skies. There, slowly scanning the skyline of the landscape, I try to identify objects and meaning in the far distance and my eye gets hooked onto a white edifice that brightly captures the morning light onto its front facade. It is the Weeping Chapel (Fig.03), also named the Chapel of Our Lady’s Seven Pangs, built in 1781 but apparently going back to the 15th or 16th Century as a sacred place³. It is a deeply rooted cultural relic that, together with the astonishing topography, embodies our natural and cultural resources, that I want to become part of through adding this piece of architecture—‘my within’—as ‘added value’. The chapel is the only edifice that can be seen in this vast space from where I observe, which is the place of my new working desk. I become aware of a freshly discovered line of meaning that connects My Black Mariah with The White Chapel in the fields.

My Black Mariah is now pushing me to walk this line towards The White Chapel, ‘who’ is calling me. It has been Ludwig Wittgenstein who explained that “*I am trying to conduct you on tours in a certain country. I will try to show that the philosophical difficulties which arise in mathematics as elsewhere arise because we find ourselves in a strange town and do not know our way. So we must learn the topography by going from one place in the town to another, and from there to another, and so on*” (Wittgenstein 1939).

At first, I strictly stick to this line, my eye glued onto the White Chapel, My Black Mariah behind me. Then, I decide to stop once in a while, in order to look back at My Black Mariah, to observe and understand her from another angle, to know how the landscape—this universe—‘sees’ her. At regular intervals I decide to turn 90 degrees, staying with my two feet on this line, My Black Mariah on my left, the White Chapel on my right. Standing there, I begin to mentally construct the topographic section

³ Historians are still puzzled about the exact time of origin.

(Fig.01) in my mind, situated onto the connecting line between My Black Mariah and the White Chapel, in order to precisely anatomise the whole scenery, beginning to inscribe the four places (Fig.01), searching for a connecting layer that connects the 'separate' meanings I adopted to them. I begin to draw this section upon my return in my studio.

The anthological nothingness I wanted to decipher from the outset of this research is gradually becoming 'something' with a meaning that I bodily absorb and deeply understand. Establishing this line (section) of meaning between My Black Mariah and the White Chapel appears to be the unlocker of the unresolved anthology of 'separate' places.

Having finally arrived at the White Chapel, a cloudless night has fallen, and the full Moon sheds a pale light onto the white body of the chapel that coaxes into the ridges of the hill. I walk around the curve of the apse, where the moonlit wall gradually turns into shade. Above me I see how the iron tension bar that keeps the outbound forces of the roof is held together with only one bolt and one nut. This nodal point seems to tie all the elements of my anthology together in one point—the vanishing point of my insight perspective. The formation of meaning has come to a closure that I deeply understand. Behind the chapel, the topography drops dramatically and disappears into a dark depth where the universe seems to have birth, and the established connection line between My Black Mariah and the White Chapel vanishes. In the night a walk back to My Black Mariah. Gazing at the misbehaviour of the Moon. Endlessly, into the endless. Tarkovsky.

Conclusion

This research is about the re-writing of habitual definitions of a place, about the extension of habitual cartographies, that comes gradually into being through a dialectical process between two places with a deep meaning that generate two ways of looking —dialectical cartography—of which both are needed in order to reach a holistic 'view' over the anthological problematic as described at the outset of this paper. Metaphorically, I introduce these two ways of looking as:

(Mode 1) "I am a window to observe one place". This 'looking from stasis'—through and while sitting in 'my within' at my desk and window—happens first. Then, when saturation occurs I feel the urge to come in motion, by walking into the landscape. Stasis, apparently, gives rise to flux, and this is the moment when

(Mode 2) occurs: "I am becoming the window for all the places I observe". This 'looking from flux'—through and while walking into the landscape—happens after I could establish the line of meaning between My Black Mariah and the White Chapel in my preceding moment of stasis. Then, I feel the urge to come to a standstill again, in order to anatomise the connecting line of meaning by turning this line into a topographic section which I investigate frontally, hence to anatomise and fathom the parts of the anthology, station by station. Flux, apparently, then gives rise to stasis again.

In this case, the walk is a loop that starts from stasis (in 'my within') turning into flux, that reaches out for the White Chapel, turns around its circular apse, gazing at the nodal point of bolt and nut, in order to return and go back to 'my within', to end up in a state of stasis again. And only now I can fully embark on the further drawing of my room and my window that is constitutive for 'my within', an elaborate device for 'seeing'. And after that, I will visit the four places, architecturally.

References

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