

Space, Environment and Meaning

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Introduction

How do we discern ‘space’? In the space that contains our lives and provides a setting for what we do, we know that it is not merely ‘some emptiness.’ Rather, it connects us to objects and persons in our environment; it separates us from destinations and people deemed too far away, too distant from us; it joins us to others who are closer at hand. As such, ‘space’ entreats us to traverse it, to make our way through it in order to make connections, to cross the vaster distances and to engage with people, converse with them, embrace them. It is an integral part of our lives’ architecture, in which we form both experience and memory. We thus give meaning to all the manifestations of this entity called ‘space,’ making it our environment.

I would like to offer some examples in literature, in which we can observe how space, environment and architectural structure can both interact with, and generate meaning through, the participants’ own senses and memory.

Shadow of the Wind

The story of “The Shadow of the Wind” takes place in the city of Barcelona. When the main character, Daniel, was young, he came into possession of a remarkable book (actually called *The Shadow of the Wind*) that he came to adore, and in subsequent years he sought out and located the mysterious author of the book, Julián. As a consequence, Daniel learned that Julián had suffered a tragic love affair years before, and Daniel was tasked, reluctantly but devotedly, to accompany Julián to the house, now abandoned, where once dwelled his beloved Penelope, with her over-bearing, over-protective family. The tragedy was that her family forbade Julián from continuing the affair, and refused to allow him to see Penelope any more. The family then moved away from Spain, and the heart-broken Julián lost all contact with her. Now, many years later, we see Julián and Daniel exploring the ruined, long-abandoned house, to try to discover what had happened to Penelope so long ago—to uncover her fate, or at the very least, to unearth some clue of

what had happened to her since he was cast out by her family. One also has the impression that he desires to recapture her essence through this exploration of the hallways and rooms in which they shared their deepest intimacies so many years before. In this scene, in a chapter called *Remembrance of the Lost*, the narrator describes a journey not only through space, but also through time and into Julián's own heart.

Here is the scene with Julián led by Daniel (his reluctant guide or, if you will, Dante's own Beatrice), exploring the house:

"There's nothing here, Julián," I murmured. "The family sold everything before leaving for Argentina."

Julián nodded weakly. We walked down the stairs again, and when we reached the ground floor, Julián made his way to the library. (416)

They regard the library as a dismal wreck, the shelves bare, the fireplace with heaps of rubble, and the walls "a deathly pale hue". Daniel is relieved at the absence of anyone and that 'nothing is there,' but at the same time he is frightened of whatever truth Julián may still discover.

Better this way, I thought. I was counting the seconds that separated us from the door. If I managed to get him away from there, we might still have a chance. I let Julián absorb the ruin of that place and purge his memories... "Julián, let's go home."

He looked at me pale-faced and nodded. (416)

Daniel takes him by the hand and leads him, like a child, away from the lurking danger. But Daniel feels Julián's hand slip away, and sees him standing, mesmerized by the incongruent sight of a bricked-up door at the end of a hallway. Julián moves to it trance-like, being pulled closer and closer. He reaches it, and a sudden frenzy overcomes him. He kicks and bangs on the wall, tears his hands as he struggles in a fury to pull out the mortared bricks, clearing a hole in the wall with bleeding fingers to enlarge the gap. On the other side of the wall, a dark, musty stairway is revealed leading to the

basement. Daniel pleads with Julián not to go down there, and when he looks into Julián's eyes and sees 'fear and despair' in them, he knows that he cannot keep Julián any longer from discovering the truth at last. . . Down Julián descends the stairs carrying a lighter, with the resigned Daniel commending his friend to his fate. Daniel describes what Julián sees in the great cellar room with its marble walls. Two graves are seen there, covered in cobwebs that 'fell apart like rotten silk with the flame of the lighter.' Daniel describes the gothic-like scene, where the dates on the tombs tell the tale:

The white marble was scored with black tears of dampness
that looked like blood dripping out of the clefts left by the
engraver's chisel. They lay side by side, like chained
maledictions:

PENELOPE ALDAYA	DAVID ALDAYA
1902-1919	1919

(418)

In the above selection from the story, it is the structure of Julián's past and interaction with his memory combined with the meaning of the house and its rooms, that convince Julián of the truth of what has transpired against his beloved Penelope, and the tragic, heartbreaking discovery of both the existence and the fate, simultaneously, of his dead son David. All of these have culminated in the disaster of revealed truth. The interchange takes place in the architectural structure and space of the house, as if the house itself has a character that can extract truth from these rooms, and can give Julián's memory a meaning for the present.

A Moveable Feast

The places where Ernest Hemingway wrote are nearly as renowned as the stories he constructed there. A part of a letter to a friend in 1950 appears at the beginning of *A Moveable Feast*, his semi-autobiographical work that sketched his years living and working in Paris: "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast."

Of his most well-known haunts, it is the café that we usually associate

with an image of the author at work in his early years. Following is an excerpt of the chapter entitled "Birth of a New School," where he is sitting in a café, alone, and hard at work on a story. One must keep in mind that he is writing about a locale and a character's actions that are from removed from where he is sitting and writing—in a café, in Paris.

Some days it went so well that you could make the country so that you could walk into it through the timber to come out into the clearing and work up onto the high ground and see the hills beyond the arm of the lake. A pencil-lead might break off in the conical nose of the pencil sharpener and you would use the small blade of the pen knife to clear it or else sharpen the pencil carefully with the sharp blade and then slip your arm through the sweat-salted leather of your pack strap to lift the pack again, get the other arm through and feel the weight settle on your back and feel the pine needles under your moccasins as you started down for the lake. (89)

His writing of both the events of his character as he hikes through the forest and his writing of the actual writing is a seamless construction, a flow of actions that both the character in the story and the author follow within the same time while in different places. His exchange of place and perhaps time, happening as a shift in mid-sentence, provide us with an eerie glimpse into his moment of writing. One might feel as a voyeur, looking over his shoulder as we watch his hand at work across the pages of his notebook, looking into his thoughts as the character makes his way across the hills, down to the lake. Hemingway's persona as a writer, as well as an observer, is affected by the structure of his environment, which gives rise to his conception of another place and character. Yet the point of the chapter lies in a rude interruption by an unwanted, and in fact loathed, acquaintance of Hemingway's. With his disturbance, the intruder destroys the fabric of Hemingway's time and place.

Then you would hear someone say, "Hi, Hem. What are you trying to do? Write in a café?"

Your luck had run out and you shut the notebook. This was the worst thing that could happen. (91)

The delicate threads, to paraphrase Daniel in *The Shadow of the Wind*, fall away and disappear like gossamer, but then trampled by the staccato, percussive sound of the word ‘shut’. In another part of the book, he writes about how in the early years of poverty when he was often hungry, he would carefully plan his route as he made his way back home from the hotel room where he worked. This was so he would not be confronted by the sights and smells of the enticing Parisian bakeries and restaurants.

You got very hungry when you did not eat enough in Paris because all the bakery shops had such good things in the windows and people ate outside at tables on the sidewalk so that you saw and smelled the food. (69)

His route took him through streets and back alleys, eventually coming out at the Luxembourg museum,

“where all the paintings were sharpened and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cézanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry. I used to wonder if he were hungry too when he painted; but I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat. It was one of those unsound but illuminating thoughts you have when you have been sleepless or hungry. Later I thought Cézanne was probably hungry in a different way.” (69)

He continues out of the Luxembourg gardens, down various streets where “there were still no restaurants, only the quiet square with its benches and trees,” seeing pigeons, statues of lions, churches with shops selling religious objects, and then, clearly frustrated at reaching such a dead end, but summoning up a sort of tactic, as in warfare, to assuage his enemy, he writes:

“From this square you could go no further toward the river without passing shops selling fruits, vegetables, wines, or bakery and pastry shops. By choosing your way carefully you could work to your right around the grey and white stone church and see rue de l’Odeon and turn up toward Sylvia Beach’s bookshop...” (70)

We can see the strategy he needs so as to skirt the challenges to his hunger, and how Hemingway, as a writer, encompasses objects, the architectural space of squares and buildings, streets, and the happy eaters he avoids, to construct a situation where he must manage the environment in order to “win” at the end of his trek. Of course, the idea of victory—avoiding any challenges to his attempts at diminishing the hunger pangs in his stomach—makes for a humorous confrontation. The fact that he seeks solace from his hunger in a bookstore makes this look at his early days all the more poignant. In fact, when he does reach the bookshop, Sylvia Beach hands him an envelope with some money from a magazine that has just bought one of his stories. (The next scene is a detailed narrative of the author eating lunch!)

The interchanges above take place in the architectural structures and space of the cityscape, or in the *persona* of the city of Paris itself, as if these cafés, squares, streets and structures have a character that can provide a further truth and texture to his stories.

Last Year at Marienbad

The film *Last Year at Marienbad* (directed by Alain Resnais, script by Alain Robbe-Grillet) offers an interesting example of how the architectural structure and interior design of a Baroque-style hotel can play a dynamic role in the sensory meanings and memories of two people.

The film begins with a series of slow, graceful pans and tracking of the camera as it glides across ornate walls, window frames and ceilings of the interior of this plush resort. The narrator, who appears as the man X in subsequent scenes, tells us as we watch these slow sweeps:

Once again—I walk on, once again, down these corridors, through these halls, these galleries, in this structure—of another century, this enormous, luxurious, baroque, lugubrious hotel—where corridors succeed endless corridors—silent deserted corridors overloaded with a dim, cold ornamentation of woodwork, stucco, moldings, marble, black mirrors... (18)

At once we are confronted with details about *X*'s time sense and a glimpse into what factors of location—the endless corridors and black mirrors—may be structuring his memory and sense of place. It presents us with a rhythm of imagery, just as we see it revealed on the screen as he speaks. Hallways and windows are shown, wall after wall move past us, ceilings and chandeliers float by, all as if we are gliding underwater, gazing at a marvelous undersea palace. The camera and editing become hypnotic as does *X*'s monotonic voice and cadence.

Soon we see people within these architectural spaces, standing almost as statues, barely related to each other. But two people do 'emerge' from the near-frozen scene: *X*, and the woman referred to in the script as *A*. Indeed, the *X* and *A* allusion to some sort of equation or geometry is not lost on us as the interplay between them and with their environment develops throughout the film.

The premise of the film is that the man *X* believes that he and the woman *A* had had an affair at the same hotel the previous year. *X* is convinced of his memory of last year at Marienbad; the woman *A* is convinced of hers, that they had never met before and the affair, therefore, never happened. The interchange takes place in the architectural structure and space of Marienbad, as if the hotel itself has a character that can extract truth from these people, and give their relationship a meaning, as *X* attempts to convince *A* of his memories.

Resnais and Robbe-Grillet constructed the film with a dream-like quality of time and environment. There are a number of flashbacks and shifting of time sense as we move from place to place within the hotel environs. Several conversations, and parts of conversations, are repeated.

Throughout the film, then, this interplay between these two people takes place among the over-styled interiors of the hotel at Marienbad and outside, in its ornamental gardens. As if these two people are game pieces in a chess set, their movements are characterized by the confines of where they are: the rigidity of the squared walls, the border lines of corridors and picture windows, the constricted forms of the topiary trees and stone garden walls, all establish the rules for the characters' play of juxtaposition, and make it a dynamic complexity of baroque design of place as they attempt to transgress each other's memory.

The Library of Babel is a short story written by the Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges. He sets the tone of the story's premise with the opening lines:

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite, number of hexagonal galleries...
From any hexagon the upper and lower stories are visible, interminably. (79)

Here we have an imagined architecture comprised of an innumerable number of rooms containing books, connected to other rooms of more books, linked by an interminable number of corridors, all leading to all rooms, all containing books. The implication being, of course, that with the inference that no two books are the same (other than translations of books into the myriad of human languages), the library contains all human knowledge ever recorded or even postulated. An unfathomably immense structure, as immeasurable as the idea of *universe*.

The space Borges has constructed for us is given its identity by being a repository for all human knowledge, understanding, thought. The space and the architecture that fills it have no other purpose than to provide storage of, and accessibility to, these books. When Borges wrote this story in 1941, it was a time when we could begin to conceive of a network of information, whereof we could share what we know, and ask questions that could be put to others no matter where they happened to be.

The paradigm for Borges' mega-connective system, now, has become for us

the Internet, a vast bastion of information that connects millions of ‘rooms’ of information together, via a vast network of innumerable corridors throughout the world. In this new structure that has formed, for most of us, ‘the universe (which others call the Library)’, we see ourselves discerning our space as the setting in which we do what we do, inasmuch as this architecture of the Internet has become where much of our space and time gain meaning for our present. It is our café in Paris where we write our stories, it is the vast, surreal Marienbad (or wherever) hotel with its rooms and corridors in which we seek mutual understanding and shared experience; it is also the abandoned mansion where we discover the fates of those around us. Light in hand, we descend the dark stairway because, however daunting the prospect might be of what we will discover, the space calls us to cross it, to make our way through it in order to make those connections with others, with our memories, with ourselves. We shall not be separated, divided, even if it takes ubiquitous creations such as the Internet and the cell phone to give us a new version of our collective consciousness.

Our overreaching need to connect with others—*that* is the integral part of our lives’ architecture, in which we form both experience and memory. And meaning.

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